What might philosophical interpretation of the Old Testament be? Unlike the recent work of Philip Davies or Yoram Hazony, Sekine’s concern is not to interpret the Old Testament as itself arguably a work of ancient philosophy. Rather, the emphasis is on the mode of interpretation, what the interpreter does with the text: the approach of “philosophical interpretation” is thus analogous to, say, “psychological interpretation” or “postcolonial interpretation.”

In Sekine’s account, there are perhaps six prime characteristic features of philosophical interpretation. First, a basis for the philosophical project lies in the hermeneutical work of Gadamer and Ricoeur, which focuses on the interaction between the horizon of the biblical text and that of the interpreter and brings scholars out of their ivory towers (a repeated image) to engage with the world around. Second, philosophical interpretation presupposes the work of “objective, historical hermeneutics as much as possible” so that it does not fall into “arbitrary eisegesis” (13). Third, philosophical interpretation resists a textual literalism that fixes on the surface-level meaning of the text and instead seeks to decode the reality to which the biblical text points, thereby to harness its true significance for the contemporary world. Fourth, the decoding of the content of the biblical text,
especially in relation to “God,” requires at least some conceptual resources drawn from philosophy. Fifth, philosophical interpretation raises questions of value in relation to the biblical text without presupposing faith; this is to enable engagement with the universalistic dimensions of the Old Testament and thereby to speak to “the vast majority of modern people who do not presuppose faith” (218). Sixth, philosophical interpretation enables the interpreter to critique the content of both the biblical text and of traditional religious interpretation in a way that believers are generally reluctant to do.

This is an interesting, and potentially valuable, program. So how does it work in practice? The short answer, on the basis of this book, is “in many and varied ways.” The book is a collection of eight essays (the first seven of which are taken from a 2008 monograph by Sekine in Japanese). The essays are structured in four parts. I will briefly outline before I analyze.

Part 1, “The Old Testament and Philosophy,” leads with a long keynote essay, “Philosophical Interpretations of the Sacrifice of Isaac: Inquiring into the True Significance of the Akedah.” After a brief consideration of approaches to Gen 22 by Kant, Buber, Levinas, Derrida, and Miyamoto, and noting also the work of Westermann and von Rad, Sekine turns to Kitaro Nishida as a philosopher who offers conceptual resources adequate to articulate the true nature of that of which Gen 22 speaks: a self-negating God, with an absolutely contradictory self-identity, who includes evil within himself, is able to save Abraham, a man of wavering faith, “from within” (59). Then a short essay, “The Paradox of Suffering: Comparing Second Isaiah and Socrates,” offers an appreciative account, via Second Isaiah and Plato’s Socrates, of the overcoming of egoism in Christianity and Buddhism. The third essay, “Reconstructing Old Testament Monotheism: A Dialogue between Old Testament Studies and Philosophy,” considers typical contemporary difficulties with monotheism, critiques monotheism as a category, and draws again on Nishida and also on resources within the Old Testament itself, especially the Suffering Servant in Second Isaiah. Sekine thereby offers an account of the transcending of self-serving egoism that enables a reconstruction of the true essence of monotheism.

metal particles, as “nothing other than ‘the work of love’ that works universally among people” (143), then discusses problems in the contemporary world in this light.

Part 3, “The Prophets and Soteriology,” starts with “A Genealogy of Prophetic Salvation: Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Jeremiah,” which is essentially a discussion of translation issues in the 2004 Iwanami Translation of the Old Testament, where Sekine was responsible for Isaiah and Jeremiah. Sekine shows how some of his translation decisions relate to his understanding of two distinct forms of prophetic soteriology that he finds to have been developing in these prophetic books. Then “The Prophets and Deuteronomism: The Book of Jeremiah” develops the preliminaries of the previous chapter into a full-blown account of two differing theologies in the book of Jeremiah. Building on Thiel’s two-volume work on the Deuteronomistic redaction of Jeremiah, Sekine distinguishes between the “authentic” voice of Jeremiah himself, who speaks in a living way, and the “counterfeit” and “forged” theology of the Deuteronomistic Historian, who represents the dogmatism of conventional theology. The value judgment of Sekine’s philosophical approach is to prefer the former to the latter.

Part 4, “Old Testament Studies in Japan,” consists solely of one essay of that title, which is obviously somewhat different in kind. However, in surveying Japanese Old Testament scholarship since 1933, Sekine seeks to highlight and reflect on issues of approach, philosophical and otherwise, as they have characterized Japanese scholarship.

How might this philosophical interpretation of the Old Testament be appraised? In many ways Sekine’s approach is stimulating. He offers fresh vistas and makes known some of the resources of Japanese thinkers and biblical scholars who tend to be little known in Western Europe. Nonetheless, I found that a number of reservations accumulated as I read.

First, Sekine’s primary Old Testament interlocutors are German, and he makes only limited use of Anglo-American scholarship. In itself, of course, this need not be a problem! But I felt in places that it became a problem through a lack of engagement with bibliographic resources and scholarly movements that could have made a difference to Sekine’s discussion. For example, in his discussion of Gen 22 Sekine makes no reference to the work of Jon Levenson, either his 1993 monograph, Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, or his 1998 essay, “Abusing Abraham: Traditions, Religious Histories, and Modern Misinterpretations” (Judaism 47:259–77). Whether it be a matter of the appropriate conceptuality for understanding God’s initial command to Abraham or of the relation of the narrative to the Jerusalem temple or of the question as to how best to read Abraham and his state of mind, the nonengagement with Levenson’s seminal work detracts from the quality of the argument. Alternatively, Sekine wants to interpret the
Akedah narrative with verses 15–18 included, so he mounts a substantial, and on its own terms fairly persuasive, argument against the common historical-critical contention that the verses are secondary. But why could he not simply appeal to recent literary approaches (Robert Alter is also absent), narrative theology, or the principle that a literary whole may be more than the sum of its parts and on that basis proceed to offer a reading of the narrative as a whole, whether or not it may be composite in compositional terms? It is one thing not to turn one’s back on the insights of modern historical-critical scholarship. It is another thing to determine which insights need to feature in relation to the purpose for which one is reading the text. Of course, the issues of which movements and literature in contemporary scholarship one should draw upon, in an age when too much is being published, challenge all scholars today, so this criticism of Sekine may be more a reflection on the problematic nature of the field as a whole.

Second, some of Sekine’s philosophical interpretation moves too quickly for me. I felt in need of more conceptual analysis, more definition of what his preferred terms, not least those drawn from Nishida, do and do not mean. Nishida’s account of God in panentheistic terms is commended (we should “reconceive God as a panentheistic absolute nothing” [108]), with limited clarification of what this means, not least in relation to philosophical and theological critiques of panentheism. Moreover, when in the discussion of Gen 22, after some remarks about the problems of God being absolute and being relative, I came to the stated conclusion that “the absolute being embraces within himself relative beings who negate himself, and he is relative to them. That is the meaning of atonement in the Old and New Testaments” (69), I confess I found myself unable to make meaningful sense of what I was reading. Moreover, it did not increase my confidence in Nishida as a prime resource to read that “Nishida contests the objective-logical (taishō ronri-teki) understanding of God found in traditional Western Christianity, which ‘sees God externally’ ‘as an object’. This understanding reduces God to a relative object that is relative to relative humans, and he ceases to be an absolute existence” (107). As a comment on many post-Enlightenment accounts of God, this may be fair enough. But if it is taken as a comment on what genuinely constitutes “traditional Western Christianity,” which must be Christianity prior to the Enlightenment, which includes the fathers and the medievals, this is as mistaken as it could be.

Third, when the nature and purpose of Sekine’s sharp distinction between “authentic” Jeremiah and the “counterfeit” Deuteronomistic Historian becomes clear in the philosophical reflections that conclude his discussion, I found the language and categories curiously resonant. Sekine says: “Upon reading through the book of Jeremiah, many interpreters wonder how to understand the differences between sections that give off a faint whiff of dogmatism and sections that speak directly to our hearts. The more readers share this concern, the more likely it is that philosophical interpretation will be viewed as
a valid approach”; only through the redactional analysis “can we encounter the original spirit found throughout the text and open up a way to hear the subtle pulse and breathing of the spirit of this prophet who transcended ossified dogma” (207–8). The resonance was with Julius Wellhausen. Here at least I found myself wondering what distinguishes new-style philosophical interpretation from old-style liberal Protestantism.

In short, a suggestive but mixed book. I would like to see philosophical interpretation flourish, as its concern to make a difference to the life of people in the world of today is important. Nonetheless, if the philosophical categories commended by Sekine for thinking about God are to be meaningful, they surely need to be tested via engagement with recent work in the philosophy of religion, not least the recent reappropriation of conceptualities from Aquinas and other medieval philosophical theologians by scholars such as David Burrell, Fergus Kerr, Herbert McCabe, and Denys Turner. A thoroughly worked-out account of how such work might constructively relate to biblical interpretation in a contemporary context would be a major undertaking, but without further work toward this, philosophical interpretation may still be some way short of being able to establish itself as a significant contemporary option.