Jehoiachin, the second to last Davidic king of Judah, came to the throne at the tender age of just eighteen years. After reigning barely three months, the teenage king surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE and was taken into exile in Babylon, where he remained imprisoned until his unexpected “release” by Evil Merodach (aka Amel Marduk) in 561 BCE. Jehoiachin is roundly condemned by the author of Kings as having done evil in the sight of Yahweh (2 Kgs 24:9). Jeremiah depicts him as the signet ring that Yahweh tears from his finger and discards (Jer 22:24–30). As a result of these two texts, Jehoiachin tends to get rather bad press, and his legacy is generally given short shrift by scholars and theologians. Yet Matthew H. Patton seeks to rehabilitate Jehoachin’s legacy—and not a moment too soon! Patton rightly recognizes in Jehoiachin a lynchpin figure who, on the one hand, represents the prophetic condemnation of Judah’s Davidic dynasty and, on the other, is the emblem of its restoration beyond exile.

The book is Patton’s doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Daniel Block, which he submitted to Wheaton College in 2014. Over the course of nine chapters and three appendices, Patton seeks to paint a picture of Jehoiachin’s significance across the Protestant Christian canon. He lays out the data of individual books of the Old Testament, builds on this with a presentation of the New Testament data, and, finally, derives a statement of Jehoiachin’s theological importance within a broader biblical theology.
After introducing the topic (ch. 1), Patton gives a short summary of the historical background pertinent to the study of Jehoiachin (ch. 2). Some may think this study unnecessary if Patton’s purpose is about deriving a biblical theology from the final form of the biblical texts. However, it demonstrates Patton’s well-founded conviction that the biblical texts about Jehoiachin are dealing not only with a literary character but also with a real-world figure of some importance to the history of Judah. Accordingly, he examines the Babylonian accounts of Jehoiachin’s capitulation in 597 BCE and his emergence from prison in 561 BCE. This is supplemented by a consideration of Babylonian foreign policy, the life of Judeans in exile, and the role of the gabîrâ (Queen Mother)—an important point given that Jehoiachin’s mother, Nehushta, was exiled along with him. He concludes that Jehoiachin’s release and “high seat” at the table of Evil Merodach are surprising and perplexing for their lack of justification. Patton’s survey here is short but sweet. However, it misses a consideration of Nergal Sharezer’s overthrow of Evil Merodach and what this might have meant for Jehoiachin.

Chapters 3–6 turn to the texts about Jehoiachin in the Hebrew Bible. In his examination of 2 Kings (ch. 3), Patton argues that the initial negative appraisal of Jehoiachin (2 Kgs 24:8–17) gives way to a more temperate perspective (2 Kgs 25:27–30). In this conclusion, there is not much that has not been said by others. However, two points of Patton’s study are noteworthy. First, he argues compellingly that the author of Kings does not see Jehoiachin’s release as the beginning of restoration but as the transition from complete exile to ameliorated exile. The end of exile and the beginning of restoration are envisioned as lying beyond Jehoiachin, making him a lynchpin between the old monarchy and a potentially new one. However, for the Primary History this monarchy must be a Davidic monarchy, and it is Jehoiachin and his line, rather than Zedekiah, who are pivotal in this purpose. Second, Patton draws interesting literary parallels between various characters of the Primary History that shed light on how the presentation of Jehoiachin becomes positive. Although some of these have been noted by others, Patton combines them to produce a convincing argument that the Primary History sees Jehoiachin as embodying judgment but also preserving hope for the future. For example, a comparison of Judean kings and Ishmael ben Netaniah shows how the motif of rebellion against foreign powers can be considered positive in the case of Hezekiah but negative in all cases after Manasseh. This makes Jehoiachin’s surrender to a foreign power stand out starkly from the negative examples that surround him, thus tempering the depiction of his “evil” ways. Jehoiachin also parallels Mephibosheth, the surviving member of a previously ruling dynasty who becomes a pensioner at the table of another king. The parallel upholds the notion both of divine judgment but also divine favor and the survival of the old dynasty through its submission to the new order. By tracing these parallels, Patton
shows that the Primary History does not have a singularly negative view of Jehoiachin, but neither does it totally redeem him.

Chapter 4 details Jeremiah’s treatment of Jehoiachin, showing that it is not so completely dismissive of him as has been previously thought. Jeremiah certainly condemns Jehoiachin, but as a member of a condemned institution (the Davidic dynasty) rather than because of personal corruption. When compared to the overwhelming denunciation of Jehoiakim, Zedekiah, and Ishmael, the negative judgment of Jehoiachin is quite mild. Furthermore, despite being portrayed as Yahweh’s discarded signet ring, Jeremiah still holds out hope for Jehoiachin. He is sentenced to being “childless” in the sense that he is not succeeded on the throne by his son (Jer 22:24–30), but the wording of this prophecy does not preclude its future repeal and the reinstatement of Jehoiachin’s descendants to power. Patton demonstrates that Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry of uprooting and planting is crucial to this. Jehoiachin is uprooted, but Jeremiah also sees Jehoiachin’s line as the one that will be replanted. By surrendering to Nebuchadnezzar, Jehoiachin followed Jeremiah’s advice to the kings of Judah to recognize Babylonian hegemony. In contrast to Zedekiah, who is depicted as a bad fig (Jer 24:8–10), Jehoiachin and his fellow exiles are good figs (24:4–7)—not because they are inherently good but because they are the recipients of Yahweh’s good intentions for the future. Thus Zedekiah is brought low and lives out his days in prison (Jer 52:11), but Jehoiachin is brought out of prison and given a seat of honor with Evil Merodach (52:31–34). His death in exile is the final act of judgment on Judah before restoration of a Davidic monarchy may begin.

Patton’s investigation of Ezekiel (ch. 5) is also enlightening, showing how Jehoiachin is portrayed as a lowly king. This has both negative and positive connotations. Ezekiel depicts hubris as the stereotypical sin of kings, and for this they are humiliated. In this regard, Zedekiah is the paradigm of pride, through his rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar, and he is brought low because of it. Jehoiachin is the “sprig” at the top of the cedar that is removed and planted in the city of traders (Ezek 17:1–4), so he, too, is brought low. However, Ezekiel views Jehoiachin as the one from whom the “lowly one” will come—an eschatological David whom Yahweh will exalt in a fabulous resurrection of the nation. Jehoiachin is pivotal, therefore, in God’s judgment and restoration of Judah. Ezekiel’s dating formula, which uses the exile of Jehoiachin as its standard (Ezek 1:2), is emblematic of this.

In chapter 6 Patton deals with relevant Persian period scriptures, which he enumerates as Chronicles, Haggai, and Zechariah. Patton highlights how the Chronicler views Jehoiachin as the ancestor of the Davidic dynasty’s surviving heirs. He alsocatalogues how Haggai represents the repealing of judgment in Jeremiah. His treatment of Zechariah is, however, less satisfying. He rightly focuses on the figure of Zerubbabel as the descendant of
Jehoiachin, but argues (as many do) that Zechariah invests the future hope of Judah in a figure who lay beyond Zerubbabel. This comes largely from Patton’s conclusion that Zech 6:9–15 advocates a future in which an eschatological priest and an eschatological king will rule together. However, this overlooks the more likely scenario that Joshua was crowned as “Acting Shoot” in Zerubbabel’s absence, probably because the Persians had arrested Zerubbabel for perceived insurrection. However, Zechariah fully expected the return of Zerubbabel (Zech 4:8), and this seems to have occurred after Cyrus’s permission for the temple construction was recovered in Ecbatana (Ezra 5:17–6:15; cf. Zech 9:9–12). The crowning of Joshua was a way that the temple construction could continue without Zerubbabel’s physical presence, while still preserving the pride of place for the Davidic dynasty when he returned. Since Zerubbabel did not become the king of an independent Judah, the eschatological view of the Shoot eventually prevailed, but this must be seen within the context of the larger and later Book of the Twelve, rather than the ministry of Zechariah per se.

Chapter 7 departs from the Hebrew Bible by considering Jehoiachin in “Second Temple texts.” Patton confirms the similarity between the LXX and the Hebrew Bible’s portrait of Jehoiachin, despite some textual difficulties. He also touches on the texts of 1 Baruch, 2 Baruch, Josephus, the Targums, and rabbinic literature, which all show a more positive view of Jehoiachin as a model of repentance and humility. These texts help give a more complete picture of Jehoiachin’s legacy, though their nomenclature as Second Temple texts is odd.

Chapter 8 moves to the New Testament. Here the most significant focus is on Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. In this, Patton shows that the reference to Bathsheba (Matt 1:6) differs from that of the three other women listed. This makes her function as a pivot between the high point of David’s reign and the plummet of the Judean nation into sin and the judgment of exile. Jehoiachin (Jechoniah) is exiled with “his brothers” (Matt 1:11), whom Patton identifies as the sons of Josiah and the Davidic dynasty more broadly. Jehoiachin thus embodies divine judgment on the nation and on the kings of Judah, but he is also singled out as the one through whom future hope will be realized. Jesus is then depicted as the worthy descendant of David and Jehoiachin but one who, like Jehoiachin, will also suffer humiliation. In this way, Jesus recapitulates the experience of the Jewish nation.

Patton draws all these threads together into a theological synthesis in chapter 9. Here he is forthright in his commitment to a view of the canon as divinely inspired Christian scripture, yet even those who are not committed to seeing the canon as divinely inspired can agree with many of his conclusions here. To his credit, his study maintains the distinctiveness of each book’s portrait of Jehoiachin, including the inner developments that are evident. He does not attempt to flatten out the testimony of each book, let alone...
of the entire canon. On the contrary, his attention to theological developments is highly commendable and ensures his synthesis is not monochrome but has texture and credibility.

Patton argues that the composite theological picture of Jehoiachin that emerges from all the biblical data is of a king who experiences exile as the necessity of divine judgment upon the nation of Judah. However, his condemnation is not total, for his dynastic line is identified as the one in which the future of the nation lies. He receives a taste of divine restoration in his rehabilitation from prison, but he does not enjoy that full restoration himself. This produces a pattern of suffering under foreign oppression as the necessary precursor to corporate restoration. Patton uses this pattern to identify Jehoiachin as a “type” who foreshadows Jesus as the suffering Messiah. Yet Patton also sees critical differences between Jehoiachin and Jesus. Whereas Jehoiachin is portrayed as morally guilty, at least to some extent, Jesus is portrayed as totally innocent. Patton argues that this means Jehoiachin cannot, therefore, be a sacrifice for the sake of the people, whereas Jesus’s innocence does qualify him for this. This difference is confirmed by Jehoiachin’s death and Jesus’s resurrection from death. Thus, according to Patton, Jehoiachin provides a measure for understanding the work of Christ, who is similar to him but also greater.

Patton’s theological evaluation is brief in comparison to the larger study of the biblical data about Jehoiachin. His biblical theology is commendable for the way it treats the data with sensitivity and simplicity. However, this simplicity is both a strength and a weakness. Like good research, it has clarity and raises further questions, but one would have thought some of the theological issues required more coverage.

For example, if Jesus is in some way recapitulating Jehoiachin’s experience and fulfilling the promises of restoration and Davidic monarchy, what does this entail for the Jewish nation? How should we understand the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE within this theological schema? What does Jesus’s Davidic rule look like, and how does this flow from the typology presented in Patton’s analysis?

Patton also sees the moral difference between Jehoiachin and Jesus as precluding Jehoiachin from being a sacrificial figure. However, Patton acknowledges Jehoiachin as a corporate figure in some sense, whose fate embodies the nation. Are there no sacrificial aspects to his character, then, despite moral deficiencies? In this regard, Patton’s discounting of Isa 53 is quite telling. In fact, the exclusion of Isa 40–66 from consideration in chapter 6 is probably the major disappointment of the book. To be fair, in chapter 9 he offers a justification for why he excludes Isa 53 from his discussion. He gives a brief critique of Michael Goulder’s attempt to draw a connection between the Suffering Servant and Jehoiachin and outlines the leading points in the consensus that eschews such a connection. He also attempts to demonstrate how the Suffering Servant can be brought
alongside the figure of Jehoiachin in a kind of theological conversation. However, given the meticulous care with which Patton examines the other biblical data, the summary dismissal of Isaianic material from the main discussion is regrettable. The depiction of the Davidic dynasty as a theological given in Isaiah should be reason enough for a reappraisal of the data, especially in light of the period to which this portion of Isaiah speaks and Patton’s overall purpose. It seems Patton may be locked into a singular view of atonement deriving from New Testament theology that prevents the reader from seeing anyone other than Jesus Christ as the referent of the Suffering Servant in Isa 53. Although Patton breaks free from it for most of his study, he seems bound by it at this point. Despite the considerable weaknesses in Goulder’s arguments, one cannot so easily discount the possibility that Jehoiachin lies behind the Suffering Servant of Isa 53. Consideration of the Suffering Servant’s divine condemnation, in addition to his “innocence,” his corporate significance in a specifically exilic situation, and notions of judgment, death, and survival, might have provided Patton with yet more data to bolster his biblical theology. Historical analysis into the overthrow of Evil Merodach by Nergal Sharezer in chapter 1 and what this entailed for Jehoiachin might also have been fruitful in this regard.

Nonetheless, despite this gaping omission, the rest of Patton’s work is an important contribution to the study of the significance of Jehoiachin in biblical theology. The presentation of the biblical data (except for Isaiah) is first rate and demonstrates that Jehoiachin was not just a diminutive figure of Judah’s decline but also the one prophetically marked out as the carrier of divine promises of the nation’s future restoration.