This monograph is the latest contribution to the stimulating series, Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible. Tova Forti joins names such as Bernard Levinson and Katharine Dell, among others, in exploring specific topics of interest arising from the Hebrew Bible. The series is exceptional, and this volume continues the tradition with an examination of animal imagery in the Psalter. While this is the focus, Forti also incorporates the portrayal of animals in texts outside the Psalter within her purview. The introduction sets the scene for the study by identifying pertinent issues that impact the way in which animal imagery is employed in the text. The four issues, which I will briefly summarize below, aid the reader in appreciating where Forti has delimited the study without necessarily restricting what she is presenting to texts within the Psalter. In this way, she demonstrates a kind of case study, the principles of which could be used when considering animal imagery in other sections of the Hebrew Bible.

The four issues that set the foundation for this study are: (1) the Psalms as liturgy; (2) imagery, metaphor, and simile; (3) synopsis of research on metaphors in the Psalms; and (4) the focus of the investigation and methodology. Beginning with the idea of the Psalms as liturgy is a helpful reminder that we are dealing with literature that became inextricably connected with Israel’s worship, particularly in the Second Temple period. While acknowledging the complexities and vagaries of historical provenance and context, Forti’s
point reminds us of the evolving intersection between lived experience and the expression of worship. This intersection is demonstrated in texts containing animal imagery that are examined in detail in later chapters. Forti’s proposal, in these initial observations, is an interesting one. She states,

The analysis of two distinctive structural phenomena—refrains and secondary interpolation—herein sheds light on the formation process the Psalms underwent, helping to reveal their compositional/editorial transformation into liturgical pieces. (2)

While focusing on animal imagery here, the pervasive nature of imagery generally within biblical literature is also acknowledged, with metaphor singled out as a particularly significant device. Although not wanting to define metaphor too rigidly, Forti helpfully emphasizes the importance of understanding its use within sociological and cultural frames. This approach undergirds her exploration of animal metaphors in later sections. In order to provide the necessary background for readers less familiar with the theory around the form and function of metaphors, the third part of the introduction offers a brief synopsis of research pertinent to the use of metaphors (as suggested by the subtitle). Forti draws particularly on Katherine Dell’s work in this area, highlighting the use of animal metaphors in describing human conduct, animal behavior, and God’s relationship to creation (6). Notwithstanding Dell’s work, among others, the omission here, identified by Forti, is appreciating the efficacy of using animal imagery to influence psalmodic structure. Hence the focus of this study.

Finally, the introductory section outlines Forti’s methodology to investigate the identified gap in the research. Although her focus is primarily on animal imagery, “acting as a framing and organizing device” (9) within discrete psalms, Forti also proposes that exploring “the poetics of the animal kingdom aids in elucidating the effect metaphors exerted on psalmodic theology” (9). Placing these two issues side by side is important, as it underlines the potential for framing and structuring of the text to influence theological considerations. The inclusion of animal imagery within the text is further bifurcated into what Forti argues are refrains present in the initial text and “secondary interpolations” (9). These have complementary but different functions within the text in the process of liturgization.

Chapter 1 considers several examples of faunal imagery from various psalms used as refrains. Forti states that “this chapter discusses the way in which animal imagery and the symbolic role it plays intensify the psalm’s lyrical atmosphere, expressing or reflecting upon its central theme” (11) The approach to each psalm is similar, being presented in a logical and concise form. First, the literary characteristics of the psalm under examination
are outlined, followed by a brief discussion of the cultural/sociological background of the faunal imagery, then the significance of the imagery and its function as a refrain. This approach builds a rhythm to the analysis throughout the rest of the study that helps to orient readers while identifying some perhaps unexpected and surprising results.

The first psalm under examination if Ps 49, which contains two refrains. Forti identifies this as a wisdom psalm while acknowledging the lack of consensus in regard to what constitutes the genre. Notwithstanding this, Forti connects the content of Ps 49 with Proverbs, suggesting that the psalm “evoke[s] the prologue in Proverbs 1:5–6” (15). She argues that the imagery of animals in this psalm performs a rhetorical function that helps frame the psalm as wisdom literature. Forti compellingly concludes that “animals thus serve as models of instruction” (20). In this connection, the use of animal imagery in Job is also noted. Forti identifies animals as a metonym for God’s wisdom.

Examples are also cited of animals being used in polemical discourse, as a metonym for human ignorance, and being similarly constituted in sharing the “life breath” (24). Forti makes a specific connection between the “life breath” reference in Qoh 3:18–22 and the refrain here in Ps 49. She cleverly juxtaposes the psalmist’s hope for better treatment of humans by God with Qoheleth’s decidedly morose conclusion that sees no difference between human and animal fates. Another important connection here could have been made with Gen 1’s description of animals as living creatures. In conclusion, this refrain used twice in the psalm is viewed as “a poetical accent” (27) that articulates the delicate balance between recognizing the vulnerability of human beings, especially in distress, alongside the capacity to cry out for divine intervention and deliverance.

The focus then shifts to an examination of animal imagery found in Pss 59 and 118. In these cases, the imagery offers a view of the psalmists’ adversaries, a rhetorical force quite different from the previous example in Ps 49. Again employing the term metonymy, Forti argues that “the opponent in the song of lament serves as a metonymy for hostility, oppression, and affliction, symbolizing the godless in general” (29). Animal images are then used to add rhetorical force to adversarial entities. In doing this, the psalmist utilizes animal images in a way that reflects how these animals were viewed in the sociocultural setting of the ancient world. Hence, in Ps 59 the images of hunting dogs coheres with the activity of some wild dogs. However, Forti also emphasizes that, while “in ancient Near Eastern literature, canines are represented as submissive … in biblical literature, they appear almost exclusively in a negative light” (35–36). The refrain identified in verses 7 and 15 helps to contrast the assuredness of a God who protects in face of the enemy’s threats.
While Ps 22 also contains a reference to dogs, the reference to bulls and lions shifts the metaphorical rhetoric in a slightly different direction. Here the emphasis is on the strength that the adversary has and exerts toward the psalmist. Forti states, “The images of fierce animals are interwoven throughout Psalm 22 as a literary device that enhances the drama of the scene depicted” (49). Prior to these images being employed in the psalm, the psalmist uses the self-referent image of worm, which stands in direct contrast to the powerful images of lion and bull. In this way the images reinforce not just the perceptions the psalmist has of self and the enemy but also of the nature of the relationship between them. Finally, the imagery of bees in Ps 118 is also identified as another faunal representation of the psalmist’s enemies.

The second chapter explores the proposal of secondary interpolation. Forti argues that this kind of material “is frequently inserted at a secondary compositional stage” (62). In order to illustrate, Prov 1 is used as a beginning point. Following on from this Forti presents a close reading of the animal imagery found in Ps 84 and 33. The focus here is on images of birdlife, horses, and donkeys. The usage of animal imagery in these secondary interpolations is linked to the examples of the previous chapter in that they reinforce particular aspects of the psalmist’s character. However, the interpolations also help to frame the psalm as it evolves into a liturgical text. Although this section is more speculative, Forti helpfully presents evidence for secondary interpolation in a way that ought to stimulate more exploration in this area. Such an exploration would be warranted.

In conclusion, the concepts of psalmodic refrains and secondary interpolations are reiterated with reference to selected occurrences within the Psalter. In summary, Forti argues that through psalmodic refrains “the intensification of imagery by verbatim repetition at intervals throughout the psalms shapes the poetic structure” (90). Secondary interpolations, on the other hand, contribute to the shaping of the psalm into the text we now have. Finally, a connection is reiterated between wisdom literature and these interpolations, with Forti suggesting that “faunal imagery serves as a didactic means for exploring the more obvious truths of human behavior” (91). This statement is of critical importance as one considers how these ancient texts might relate to a modern audience.

Notwithstanding the brevity of the study, Forti has presented a stimulating discussion on a topic that can be easily overlooked. Animal imagery, while not infrequently used in the Psalms, can be ignored or treated superficially. This study reminds us of the significance of such imagery and the multiple effects it has on both the structuring of the text and the concepts being presented in the text.