In the not-so-distant past, it was a common and largely justifiable complaint that the second letter collection within the New Testament, the General Epistles, included the orphaned children of New Testament scholarship. The appearance of several dissertations and monographs on these documents in recent years has begun to address this lacuna. For a sign of the health of this fresh interest we need look no further than to the publication of this revision of an important dissertation submitted at the University of Chicago in 1998. This well-crafted study is marked by clarity of argumentation, salutary attention to detail, and exegetical acumen. That almost three hundred pages could be devoted to a single phrase in the Letter of James, “the implanted logos that is able to save your souls” (1:21), is perhaps evidence enough that this is a study concerned especially with historical background, but this should not cause us to overlook the care Jackson-McCabe has taken in attempting to weave his findings concerning “the implanted logos” into the cloth of the letter read as a whole. Stated briefly, arguing against almost the whole of the history of interpretation, Jackson-McCabe has it that James’s use of the phrase “the implanted word” derives from a Stoic theory of human reason, even if that theory has undergone adaptation within the historical and theological horizons of Jewish and Christian tradition. “The soteriology of the Letter of James, in short, has been woven
from strands of tradition that derive from Jewish, Christian and Greek philosophical discourse” (27).

Chapter 1 is given over to a history of research in which Jackson-McCabe documents the often superficial dismissal of the potential of Stoic influence in James’s use of “the implanted word especially on account of the assumption that implanted [and] word” must be understood as specifically Christian terms for “new birth” and “kerygma,” respectively. Refusing such “essentialism” within Christian thought of the era, the author notes that what little literary evidence we have outside of James for the usage of “the implanted word” manifestly evidences Stoic influence. This leads, in chapters 2 and 3, to a substantial exploration of the relevant evidence—among early Stoic writers as well as in later Hellenistic-Jewish and Christian materials: Philo, 4 Maccabees, the Apostolic Constitutions, Justin Martyr, Methodius, and very early interpretation of Jas 1:21—all of which demonstrates (1) that “the implanted word” refers to a divinely given human reason shared by all humanity from birth by which they form dispositions concerning such basic ethical categories as “good” and “bad” and (2) that diverse Jewish and Christian adaptations of the Stoic theory of human reason provide a model for how the phrase might have been fashioned in James’s own usage.

What happens when this notion is brought onto the stage of the Letter of James? Working exegetically with the epistle, Jackson-McCabe argues in chapter 4 that, for James, Torah comprises a written expression of “the implanted logos” shared by all humans and that, at the parousia of Jesus Christ, the divine author of Torah will execute eschatological judgment in accord with this logos. Accordingly, the author of James is indebted to Stoicism at two points: the equation of “the implanted logos” with a perfect law and the notion that this logos is shared by all humanity. Conversely, James departs from Stoic influence in his views that this logos has an external, verbal form (Torah) and that Torah is rightly performed when interpreted in a particular way. In a sense, chapter 5 functions as a test of this thesis, as Jackson-McCabe demonstrates that this reading of “the implanted logos” stands at
the crossroads of a coherent reading of the Letter of James as a whole, not least with respect to James’s opposition to “desire” and “the pleasures,” his attention to speech ethics, and his concern with “doing the word.” A short conclusion draws together the various arguments of the individual chapters and suggests that the perspective developed in the study as a whole locates the letter as a pseudonymous work of the late first or early second century important not least for its testimony to a form of the Christian movement in which soteriology was tied not to rebirth through the kerygma but to Torah-observance.

Jackson-McCabe has thus worked on two fronts at once—building an intricate, positive case for Stoic influence on the language and thought patterns of Jas 1:21 while denying that such influence presumes that James’s usage is something other than Christian. Instead, James is representative of one of the various ways in which Christian thinkers worked at the interface of various worldviews in its articulation of Christian faith. This brief surfaces at the end of the book where the author contends that James has drafted his perspective on the “perfect law of freedom,” which is a virtual stand-in for “the implanted logos,” as a Christian alternative to Paul. Unfortunately, Jackson-McCabe’s conclusion on this last point appears more as an afterthought and must remain little more than a suggestion.

In spite of the care with which Jackson-McCabe has constructed his argument, his readers may not be ready to put aside the history of interpretation so quickly. Though one may be convinced that James’s readers have too easily dismissed Stoic roots for James’s language in 1:21, those readers may not have been far off the mark in thus denying the significant influence of Stoic philosophy on James. Interestingly, the models by which we are urged to measure the influence of Stoicism on James make far more transparent than James has done their dependence on Stoic conceptualizations. Whether James received the language of “the implanted logos” more or less directly from Stoicism, and thus with Stoic ideas about natural reason more or less in tow, is not clear. Of perhaps greater concern is the degree to which Jackson-McCabe has focused on only one part of the phrase in focus, “the
implanted logos that is able to save your souls.” Why have Stoic notions of “salvation” and the Stoic perspective on the human person (i.e., the “soul” in Stoicism) not come in for scrutiny? What might study on these issues, and their correlation with “the implanted logos,” reveal about the significance of “implanted logos” in James’s discourse? That is, if the whole phrase were more pointedly the focus of examination, would we find more or less support for Stoic influence?

To push further, Jackson-McCabe’s reading leaves us with a remarkably underdeveloped soteriology, and he only hints at its ramifications for James’s understanding of God. I am not sure how important soteriology is for Jackson-McCabe’s interpretation of James, though given the specifically soteriological effect of “the implanted logos” I am sure that it deserves far more development than it has received here. On the other hand, I am sure that James’s theology (in the narrow sense) is crucial for Jackson-McCabe’s thesis and would therefore have hoped to hear far more on this issue. In short, questions remain about the net effect on our reading of James’s message if we were to follow the argument of this book, and this raises important questions about the degree to which James has, in the end, entertained or come under the influence of Stoic philosophy.