John Barton’s expertise and extensive work in the area of Old Testament ethics within the broader discipline of Old Testament theology has been well known and received. This book brings together nine previous articles conveniently in one volume that spans thirty years of his best critical thinking. In the preface, he clarifies that no “full-scale updating of these pieces” was undertaken to prepare them for this publication. Inclusive language and up-to-date bibliographies are two modifications that enrich especially the older material. The introduction and conclusion are newly written. Barton himself characterizes this collection as a “history of my thinking on this subject.” In some sense, Understanding Old Testament Ethics sets a foundation or down payment for a future monograph that will represent his distilled and current thinking, as suggested both in the preface and at the end of his conclusion, particularly “a full-length volume on prophetic ethics which remains to be written.”

The sequence has two parts: (1) Morality and Justice in the Hebrew Bible, and (2) Explorations in the Prophets. Barton’s introduction, “The Moral Vision of the Old Testament,” effectively sets up his ongoing admiration and engagement with Eckart Otto’s Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments (1994), whose analysis focuses specifically on law and wisdom as the building blocks of Israel’s moral teaching, excluding narrative and prophetic literature. Barton’s critique of Otto allows him to
articulate a moral vision that emerges from Old Testament narrative before turning to the
prophets. Thus, the rest of the introduction suggests that biblical narrative concentrates on
moral issues outside the purview of the legal and sapiential literature and presents ethical
insights embedded within narrative elements, such as character and plot development. Barton
reminds readers that the moral vision of the Old Testament is much more complicated and complex than usually allowed. The narrative sections of the Old Testament reveal the intricacies of human motivation and behavior that may sidestep or supersede the legal precepts or wisdom sayings in unpredictable ways.

Part 1 opens with a chapter from which the title of the book is taken. Barton questions the
concept of an “Ethics of the Old Testament” alongside objections to Hempel’s 1938 attempt and Eichrodt’s “Theology of the Old Testament,” on the grounds that these titles “beg the question how much of a unity of approach is to be found in the Old Testament—whether it has a ‘core’ or a unifying principle” (16). Barton intends to overcome these methodological difficulties by a more pluralistic approach that takes into account social diversity, popular morality, and historical development. Moreover, Barton argues for more “attention to the synchronic existence of different social groups in Israel, each potentially capable of holding to a somewhat different set of moral norms.” Plotting the ethical map may result in incomplete information, however, and one cannot stretch the evidence to cover the gaps. The Old Testament narrative material has peculiar difficulties regarding the establishment of authorial ethical intent and presupposition. On the other hand, according to Barton, this literature yields three distinct ethical concerns: (1) obedience to God’s revealed will; (2) conformity to a pattern of natural order; and (3) the imitation of God. Although Barton concludes with these three points in this first essay, they establish a platform from which the rest of his work builds.

Indeed, the second essay is titled “Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the Old Testament”
(1979). After demonstrating a specific meaning for “natural law” as both inherent to human nature and self-evident in the nature of the created world, Barton discusses the presence of a natural-law approach to ethics in particular parts of the Old Testament, especially in the prophets. In his conclusion he emphasizes the lack of a unified, coherent Old Testament ethic and the predominance of moral principles built into the order and structures of humans (ethics as obedience to God’s expressed will) and the larger created order, chiefly within the prophets and Pentateuch.

Chapter 3, “The Basis of Ethics in the Hebrew Bible,” though published in 1995 picks up
where the previous two essays end. In fact, Barton refers to his first article explicitly as the beginning point from which he will make some helpful “changes of emphasis.” The new elements of his argument include a suggestion that Old Testament ethicists be
willing to engage philosophical questions and reject beliefs that assume the questions have been answered definitively before personally asking and answering them again.

The final two essays in part 1 demonstrate how to reduce the gulf between biblical ethical thinking and moral philosophy. Taking his cues and title from Martha Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990), Barton explores the implications of “imaginative fiction providing us with companions who will prepare our minds and hearts to cope with life.” Both he and Nussbaum are interested in narrative’s potential to offer “us sharply delineated characters whose complexity and fragility are properly realized.” This stands in contrast to the characters of scripture serving as noble role models for moral imitation and moves away from the “reductionism and thinness of cool philosophical prose.” The preservation of the text’s ethical complexity and social-historical diversity remains of central concern for Barton’s approach. These twin objectives also control his discussion of virtue in the Bible, as he maintains that “the Hebrew Bible does not operate with any idea that one can grow in virtue but sees virtue as something one either has or lacks” (67). Moreover, the Bible is disinterested in moral progress and ethical formation. Its concern, rather, is conversion where God is the standard to which all human behavior must conform. Consequently, according to Barton, virtue ethics are absent from biblical teaching.

Part 2, “Explorations in the Prophets,” is quite limited in terms of the Old Testament prophetic literature, as it focuses only on Amos, Isaiah, and Daniel, an oddly selective grouping that is only narrowly attentive to sections within each. These unexplained choices illustrate Barton’s insistence that Old Testament ethics remain complex and diverse rather than systematized, generalized, and coherent. A simple introduction is needed at the beginning of part 2 clarifying his choices.

The entirety of Barton’s 1980 study, “Amos’s Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1:3–2:5,” is reproduced along with additional bibliography. Barton deductively lists ethical norms presupposed by the prophet: (1) Amos was not innovative; the prophet simply states popular universal expectations that Yahweh would judge the nations according to common moral obligations; (2) Amos has no underlying rationale or supposition about moral standards for the nations that grows out of covenantal Yahwism or the universal rule of God or the order of nature; (3) Amos is rational in his approach. Finally, Barton argues that the rhetoric of these chapters is consistent with the prophet’s method in the rest of the book, indicating that the series of indictments intentionally ends with the address against Israel. He concludes that the prophet was aware of international codes universally governing the nations and Israel apart from the more specific Mosaic covenant. Reaction to Barton’s treatment has been mixed. The assumption that Amos was familiar with international treaties and law cannot be sustained. While the internal
rhetorical function of Amos 1–2 is well supported, its rhetorical purpose for the whole of Amos, and within the Book of the Twelve, is not addressed.

Chapters 7 and 8, “Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem” and “Ethics within the Isaianic Tradition,” are each excellent examples of Barton reaching ethical conclusions from carefully reasoned exegesis. Barton is certainly consistent in asserting that “Isaiah presents the most complex case of . . . mixing . . . levels and categories in his comments on the behavior and attitudes he criticizes, and it is abundantly clear that no list-like statement of his ethical concerns will do them justice” (133). Barton does list, however, three general areas that represent Isaianic moral classifications: (1) specific criminal acts; (2) sinful attitudes (pride); and (3) basis of morality and sin. He then extends these three distinctive areas to the whole of Isaiah. Unfortunately, Barton makes no explicit attempt to relate distinctively Isaianic theology to these moral categories (Yahweh as the Holy One of Israel or connecting Isaiah’s inaugural vision of Yahweh with the prophet’s moral vision). The meager additions to the bibliography of relevant works on ethics in Isaiah is disappointing.

“Theological Ethics in Daniel” is brief and misplaced. As Barton himself acknowledges, Daniel is apocalyptic literature, not prophetic. In this book, however, as the final chapter within a section on ethical explorations in the prophets it is wrongly situated. The theme of resolute absolute submission to the will of God, already found in several of Barton’s essays, connects it to the others.

This elder statesman’s concluding chapter on “The Future of Old Testament Ethics” has the potential to set the course and stimulate new insights. In three sections Barton first reviews contributions by Otto and Gordon Wenham. He sites Wenham precisely because his approach is similar to his own corrective to Otto. Barton’s assessment, as expected, is quite appreciative. In the final section Barton asks the question, “Where should the study of Old Testament ethics go next?” In a few pages he suggests that (1) it should follow Otto’s lead to be a descriptive, sociohistorical approach rather than systematic and synchronic; (2) it should focus on narrative and prophetic literature; and (3) it should result in a full-scale treatment of prophetic ethics, taking the essays in this volume as an exemplary foundation.