Oftentimes referred to as “the morning star of the Reformation,” John Wyclif has received much attention in recent years as revisionists seek to understand his role in late medieval theology. Originally a dissertation, Levy’s work focuses, in particular, on Wyclif’s theology, “specifically his eucharistic theology and its intersection with his understanding of Scripture” (11). The result is a helpful guide through the interstices of medieval metaphysics at the end of which the author ultimately concludes that “Wyclif would have proved himself the greater man had he championed the cause of academic freedom, rather than promoting his own position as the standard of orthodoxy to the exclusion of transubstantiation” (326).

Levy is convinced that Wyclif’s interpretation of the larger tradition is Christocentric and is inevitably tied to both Scripture and the Eucharist as the natural points of reference with the Living Word. This thesis is carefully and meticulously developed first by setting Wyclif in his historical context in the medieval university (ch. 1) and in the metaphysical debates of his day (ch. 2). In the former, Levy sketches out the acceptable parameters of speculation and the various condemnations issued by ecclesiastical authorities. Throughout, there existed the constant threat of heresy, which, it was understood, was to receive its primary challenge from the schools. Wyclif, as a metaphysical realist, found
himself enmeshed in the debates of his time as “a biblical exegete, a political theoretician, a reformer; but as a late medieval schoolman he was also a logician and metaphysician. Above all else he was a theologian” (61). His worldview suggested stability and order and was, above all else “anchored in God the Word as its source and sustaining power” (60).

Having provided a wide-angle lens for interpretation, Levy proceeds to the heart of his analysis: Wyclif’s understanding of Scripture and the Eucharist (chs. 3–6). In each case, he provides a wider framework (chs. 3 and 5) before developing his subject’s own point of view (chs. 4 and 6). Medieval thinkers were particularly concerned with questions of authorship and authority, and the study of Holy Scripture was the special province of those given the title magister sacrae paginae. Wyclif followed in a long line of theologians (such as Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas) who sought to reconcile apparently contradictory texts through the employment of reason and tradition, yet found himself particularly troubled by the ways members of the Arts faculty applied certain logical-grammatical methods to the Scriptures. Wyclif’s insistence on evaluating all doctrine in the light of Scripture was predicated, not just on the words themselves, but also on the belief that, “Scripture is ‘who’ not a ‘what.’ Scripture is Christ” (87). Where he differed with some of his contemporaries was not in his respect for tradition but in whether those texts were to be reduced to a set of particular formulations—particularly when he saw those scholastic understandings in contradiction with the Christ who stands at its heart.

This brings Levy to the larger issue of Wyclif’s eucharistic theology, which, once again, must be set in its larger historical context. For Wyclif and his contemporaries, this is above all else a scriptural question. What did Christ mean when he said, “Hoc est corpus meum”? Levy maintains that though there was much heated discussion in Wyclif’s day, the reality of Christ’s presence was never in doubt—only how that presence was possible. This issue, which was front and center for the schoolmen from the ninth through the sixteenth centuries, is thoroughly outlined by Levy from Radbertus and Ratramnus through Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. The inherent debate over the nature of the Eucharist occurred because of its sacramental nature and the necessity of discerning between signs and things. Levy concludes that from the eleventh century through to Lateran IV there was a gradual narrowing of the parameters of eucharistic orthodoxy such that, by the time Wyclif arrived at Oxford in the middle of the fourteenth century, these parameters “had been narrowed to a degree unknown even a century before” (215).

Levy’s primary contribution to the discussion (and fully a third of the book) is to be found in chapter 6, which takes up the specific question of Wyclif’s eucharistic theology.
Levy’s approach in this chapter is both historical and systematic—attempting to follow somewhat chronologically the developments during Wyclif’s lifetime as well as take up central issues. Throughout, Wyclif is portrayed as among the “suspicous” who turned to Augustinian metaphysical realism. His rejection of transubstantiation was rooted in his belief that it makes of Christ a deceiver and negates the substantial presence of the bread. What was at stake for him was nothing less than a rejection of the standard basic operating principles of the universe for the sole sake of dogma. At its core, the doctrine is based on a contradiction of the Divine Nature that risks unhinging all of creation and setting humanity at odds with both the creation and the Creator. As such, it undercuts the Creator’s authority and the very promise of salvation. Such a metaphysical impossibility involves deception and the destruction of the Divine Nature—possibilities that Wyclif is not able to abide.

Wyclif’s critique, then, stems from his metaphysical philosophical commitments that will not allow for such deception (Levy calls it “a pernicious lie” [322]) and ultimately lead him to conclude that transubstantiation is not only impossible but is “thoroughly unscriptural, has no basis in sacred tradition, and is positively dangerous to the souls who believe it” (322). However, Levy maintains that Wyclif’s “true and real” figurative speech is a precursor neither of Zwinglian memorialism nor of Calvinistic elevation. The thirteenth century allowed for some latitude in interpretation, but Wyclif made the same mistake as his adversaries by accusing them of breaking with the tradition and insisting on his own as normative. The results were predictable: “The late medieval Church ultimately had no place for John Wyclif” (326).

The strength of Levy’s work is in his ability to contextualize Wyclif’s arguments—something that can prove daunting to a modern reader. Wyclif emerges in Levy’s book as a sympathetic intellect concerned to see eucharistic theology as part of a much larger and complex system rooted in God the Father’s creative and God the Son’s redemptive work. Levy proves of particular help in linking together Wyclif’s hermeneutics and his theology. As Levy suggests in his introduction, “he (Wyclif) reckoned the entire task of theology to be one of biblical exegesis” (16). As such, the appeal of Wyclif as a Reformation precursor makes more sense while, at the same time, remaining a warning to interpreters lest they posit him somewhat anachronistically as a sixteenth-century reformer.

This is not a book for the faint of heart. The arguments are complex and the author does what he can to simplify terms and disputes that are less familiar to nonmedieval specialists. Nevertheless, for scholars of the period under discussion, Levy has developed an argument that brings together crucial elements in Wyclif’s theology and helps one to
understand how this English scholastic could have been so feared in his own day and beloved by those of another.