The Cambridge Companion to the Bible, now in its second edition, “provides in-depth information and analysis on the canonical writings of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, as well as the apocryphal works produced by Jewish and Christian writers” (iv). For the reader, the book “seeks to provide basic knowledge of the cultural contexts in which the biblical books were produced, including the history, languages, and religious beliefs and philosophical insights of the writers, the people they wrote about, and the audiences for whom they wrote.” In order to accomplish this, the Companion focuses solely on background material—document and source histories, archaeological discoveries, and sociohistorical contexts—and tries to stay above the interpretive fray so that the work may be useful to readers from any or no tradition (2). The book also presents its information to the reader in a conspicuously anthropocentric style in order to avoid deciding what, if anything, related to the Bible has divine origins.

Unlike many other Bible reference books, the Companion is organized not by biblical book order but by chronological periods roughly linked to biblical genres. The authors follow a running-narrative rather than encyclopedic style and write in fluid prose, making it very accessible to lay readers. Numerous pictures of artifacts, texts, and geographies dot each section of the book, along with plenty of charts, illustrations, maps, and even some full-color plates. There is a great deal of interaction with the Dead Sea Scrolls, extracanonical texts, and other ancient Near Eastern literature, with few anachronistic readings. The second edition provides a modest update from the first edition: it includes
information on the newest archaeological discoveries; new work on secondary literature; new photographs, maps, color plates, and sidebars; and a refreshing of the whole text. Bruce Chilton has taken over the lead editor role for the second edition.

The *Companion* contains four sections: an introduction; the world of the Hebrew Bible; the intersection of Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures; and the advent of Christian communities. The book makes regular use of sidebars to keep the work from feeling protracted; the sidebars are not regurgitations from the main text but are interesting topical blurbs rewarding to read in their own right. Sidebars appear for expected topics such as Philo of Alexandria and the historical Jesus, somewhat predictable topics such as Ps 151 and Stoicism, and unexpected topics such as Sieges and Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue. Interestingly, the work contains no footnotes or endnotes over its 700+ pages. Finally, each section of the work ends with a useful and well-balanced bibliographical essay.

The first part of the *Companion*, written by Howard Clark Kee, introduces the reader to the purpose and scope of the book and launches it with a reflection on “The Concept of God’s People.” In this section, Kee explains the contextual evolution of the writings that would become (or be considered) to be the Bible and locates this context ethnically and geographically.

Eric Meyers and John Rogerson co-wrote the second part, “The World of the Hebrew Bible.” It contains seven sections that are roughly analogous with the sectional and generic organization of the Hebrew Bible. The first two sections explore the background surrounding the Pentateuch and the “historical” books primarily through archaeology and historical reconstruction. In the third section, the authors switch gears to focus on text and form over historical background in order to cover the prophetic works. The final three sections, on Israelite worship, wisdom, and apocalyptic views, introduce these subjects with background material and then transition to textual forms and sociopolitical milieu, with these two forming the majority of the discussion.

The third part of the *Companion*, “Jewish Responses to Greek and Roman Cultures, 322 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.” covers the encounter of Jewish theology and identity with Greek and Roman culture and ideology. Written by the late Anthony Saldarini and revised by Amy-Jill Levine, the first sections explain the Hellenization of Palestine, the political turmoil surrounding Jewish nationalism, and the appointment of Roman provincial rulers (especially Herod). The final two sections describe Jewish struggles after the beginning of the Common Era.

Howard Clark Kee composed the final part of the book, “The Formation of Christian Communities,” with most of the sections detailing Jesus, Paul, and early Christianity in
light of their common Jewish roots. The final section introduces the study of the early church, especially in view of subapostolic texts.

Given the purpose, style, and scope of the volume, there are trade-offs that come with such an undertaking. Overall, the prose is excellent, making the book easy to read and accessible to most readers. Considering its size, the decision to forego footnotes or endnotes definitely makes the work look and feel much more manageable than a book of its size with notes included—yet it does limit the book for extended research. There is a great deal more interaction with and discussion of the Jewish roots of early Christianity than in the average guide to the Bible. As such, Q is “the mishnah of Jesus” rather than an oral über-source (498). Save for a few areas, many readers will find the book “minimalistic” (to use the authors’ term). Surprisingly, the book takes risks in that it contains a number of assertions that do not reflect consensus or acknowledge (or explain) current discussion on the issue: for example, Jesus is depicted as a boyhood apprentice of John the Baptist (500) who borrowed his master’s views on purity and who led a prophetic political “strike” in a struggle over purity with Caiaphas (482). Likewise, we read that the author of the Fourth Gospel was directly reliant on the Isis cult for the logos idea (9–10, 627), and the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas represent a parallel mystical tradition in early Christianity (499). Most pages seem to contain these research riddles, stimulating for academicians but potentially confusing to many of the book’s intended audience.

The greatest trade-off is the attempt at a very “neutral” style—writing sociohistorically, without sectarian influence, with no interpretive apparatus (2). At every turn the reader is reminded that he or she can know nothing of the divine in this investigation; one can only say what may or may not have been perceived by others. Meyers and Rogerson (unintentionally?) articulate the viewpoint of the Companion: “When scholars write history today, even biblical or religious history, they try to explain what happened in human terms; for example, they explore the subject from social, economic, and political standpoints. Even historians who believe in God leave the divine out of their attempts to understand the past, for the simple reason it is impossible to verify the mind or the workings of God in the same way one can verify historical facts” (111). Yet in a book of such magnitude, of such importance, is it possible, or useful, for a 700+ page companion to the Bible to intentionally omit (and work around) the divine from discussion on almost every page? The result is a well-written narrative full of contextualized information that at times does not seem to say much—or at least dodges the bigger questions.

Overall, the second edition of The Cambridge Companion to the Bible is an excellent sociohistorical overview and reference, but only if one reads carefully, perceptively, and with a willingness to engage the authors’ ideas with further research and do the difficult
but necessary and rewarding work of interpretation. Highly recommended for research libraries and as a secondary text for undergraduate Bible courses.