In this short book, Noegel and Rendsburg treat four issues relating to the study of the Song of Songs: (1) the “Israeli” dialect of the book’s Hebrew; (2) alliteration as a compositional factor; (3) the use of variation in the poetry of the book as a literary device; and (4) the book’s genre. The volume is organized accordingly into four main chapters, with an excursus, a conclusion, an English translation of Song of Songs, a bibliography, and several indices.

The first chapter, which analyzes the “Israeli” dialect of Song of Songs, essentially builds on the theory that Rendsburg has previously put forward regarding the regional dialects of Hebrew. It is no surprise, therefore, that Rendsburg identifies what many scholars see as “late” linguistic features rather than evidence of geographically specific dialectal features. For example, the phonological shift from proto-Semitic /t/ to /t/ occurs readily in Aramaic, while in Hebrew it shifts to /š/. Thus, when we find a Hebrew text in which the Aramaic shift occurs, most scholars are quick to describe this as an Aramaism and, accordingly, a feature of Late Biblical Hebrew (or even Mishnaic Hebrew). An example within Song of Songs is seen in the word תריתך (cypresses [1:17]), which in “Standard” or “Early Biblical Hebrew” would be rendered בתרותיך. Noegel and Rendsburg, however, argue that this is not indicative of some relatively late influence of Aramaic upon Hebrew but rather a
feature native to “Israeli” Hebrew (i.e., non-Judean Hebrew). The phonological shift is, therefore, an isogloss shared by both Aramaic and Israeli Hebrew. The authors bring forth a number of other such phonological data, in addition to morphological, syntactical, and lexical data. Their analysis leads them to conclude that there is no necessity for a late dating of the Song of Songs. The apparently “late” features are not indicative of chronology but rather regional particularity. As such, Noegel and Rendsburg see the Song of Songs as a literary work written in northern Israel. In the conclusion, they also date the book specifically to the era between Jeroboam I and Omri (918–876 B.C.E.), primarily on the basis of the parallelism between Tirzah and Jerusalem (Song 6:4), the capital cities of Israel and Judah, respectively.

While the analysis that Noegel and Rendsburg offer has an internal consistency that gives their theory the mark of possibility and even plausibility, there is a notable chink in the armor. This chink comes from a weakness within Rendburg’s previous theory of dialectal geography within Hebrew. The parameters used to identify the regional location of a specific linguistic feature is often limited to the content of the work in which the feature occurs. Thus, because the Song of Songs deals with a number of “northern” locations (e.g., Sharon, Tirzah, Damascus), the work’s linguistic peculiarities are identified as necessarily “northern.” The weakness with this is that there is no a priori reason for why such content could not have been composed in the south in, say, Jerusalem. It must be admitted that this is certainly not the only characteristic for determining the location of a dialect within the volume, but it does feature prominently in the analysis. The conclusions about regional dialect, therefore, are certainly possible but by no means necessary.

This weakness is further exposed by the recent theory of Ian Young, Robert Rezetko, and Martin Ehrensvärd (Linguistic Dating of Biblical Texts [2 vols.; London: Equinox, 2008]), who argue that the old model of diachronic development from “Early” to “Late” Biblical Hebrew is fraught with problems. They argue quite convincingly that “Early” and “Late” Biblical Hebrew are actually contemporaneous styles of Hebrew. This may initially seem to aid the case of Noegel and Rendsburg in arguing against a necessarily late date for Song of Songs with its characteristic “Late” Biblical Hebrew features. However, Young, Rezetko, and Ehrensvärd do not limit the linguistic distinctives of the Song (or other biblical books for that matter) to geographical parameters. Instead, they correctly recognize that they may be indicative of stylistic differences. On this broader basis, there is certainly no need to date Song of Songs late, but neither is there a need to place it specifically in northern Israel. On a purely linguistic basis, it is just as possible that the Song was composed in Judah. As such, the conclusion that Noegel and Rendsburg reach appears to be overly narrow.
In addition, the basis for dating the book to 918–876 B.C.E. is quite weak. Leaving aside the historical issues pertaining to the monarchies of Israel and Judah, the mention of Tirzah and Jerusalem in parallelism (Song 6:4) can only really provide a *terminus ante quem* for the book. There is nothing else that demands we date the book specifically to this period. Noegel and Rendsburg readily see the need then to deal with the occurrence of the Persian loanword פְּרָדָס (4:13) and Greek loanword אַפְרִיון (3:9), which would seem to suggest a late dating for the book. They argue that, while these words could have entered Hebrew in a preexilic context (no firm evidence for this is provided), they probably entered in a postexilic context. Yet, they maintain, this does not thereby nullify an early date for the Song. Rather, they argue that a later redactor inserted these loanwords into the text at a later date because they provided enhancement to the text. This argument is impossible to substantiate without specific manuscript evidence. As such, it is an assertion without actual basis. Ironically, Noegel and Rendsburg admit that the instance of פְּרָדָס (4:13) fits the pattern of alliteration remarkably well—a pattern that they analyze in some depth in chapter 2. Yet despite this, they are adamant that this “does not necessarily mean that פְּרָדָס was original to the text” (182). It is far more convincing, given the strength of their analysis of alliteration in the Song, that פְּרָדָס was indeed original to the text. This then has obvious repercussions for the date of the book.

After chapter 1, there is a brief excursus discussing six linguistic features of difference between the MT of Song of Songs and 4Q Cantb. These features, such as unassimilated ס and Aramaic phonology, are often seen as late Aramaisms. Young, however, has argued that it is just as plausible for a redactor to have tried “updating” the text to sound more archaic. As such, it is possible that 4Q Cantb represents the more original text and the MT is a later archaizing text. Noegel and Rendsburg acquiesce to Young’s logic at this point. They differ, however, in arguing not for an archaizing tendency but rather a movement toward a northern “Israelian” dialect. Once again, the logic of their argument is possible but difficult to substantiate with certainty.

We turn now to the second chapter, in which the authors analyze the alliteration used throughout the Song. They define alliteration as “the collocation of the same or similar consonants in two or more words in close proximity to each other” (64). Working with this clear definition, they give some brief illustrations from cognate literature, before launching into a fairly detailed analysis of alliteration throughout the verses of the Song. This chapter is impressive in the way it demonstrates the poetics of alliteration, particularly in the way it governs word choice. For example, they show that the poet chose the unusual qataltol form שָׂחַחַת (“dark, black”) at 1:6 probably because of its alliterative resonance with the verb נָהְרָא (“they were angered”) in the same verse. The repetition of חֵר provides an aesthetic quality to the text that is pleasing to the ear and draws thoughts together organically. Noegel and Rendsburg work systematically through
the Song, analyzing fifty-nine examples of alliteration. By the end of their analysis, one can see quite clearly how alliteration shapes word choice and enhances the aural nature of the Song.

In chapter 3 Noegel and Rendsburg analyze the phenomenon of variation. They do this by highlighting the subtle variations found in parallel passages throughout the Song, such as the refrain in 2:7; 3:5; 5:8; and 8:4. For the purposes of their analysis, they coin a new term, “polyprosopon,” defined as the effect of repeated lines signaling “many faces” that ancient listeners would have grasped. While the analysis of the refrains and other repeated lines throughout the Song does not clearly demonstrate the effect of “polyprosopon,” one cannot completely discount it as a possibility either. Exactly what effect variation has on listeners is perhaps too subjective in nature to reach any definitive conclusions. Nonetheless, Noegel and Rendsburg refer to studies that have demonstrated that even illiterate audiences can pick up on variations of repeated lines within a work, even when those repeated lines are at considerable distance from each other in that work. This datum suggests that variation at the very least keeps audiences engaged.

In the fourth chapter, Noegel and Rendsburg consider the genre of the Song. Here they seek to augment previous studies that have drawn attention to the similarities between the Song and Arabic wasf poems. In particular they observe similarities to two other Arabic genres. The first of these is tašbib. This type of poetry praises the charms of a woman, often in erotic fashion, but with such ambiguity that the praise might also be taken as provocative insult of the woman, which also stains the character of her husband or other male kinsmen. Ambiguity is the weapon of this genre, for the insult is designed not to be picked up by those to whom it is directed, allowing the poet to get away with effective defamation within a shame-based culture. The second genre is hijâʾ, defined as lampooning or invective, usually in lewd or crass terms. Both these types of literature are admittedly late, with tašbib dating to the medieval era. However, as in the case of wasf poems, this should not prevent the generic comparison with Song of Songs from taking place, since genres do not need to be limited to exclusive contexts. According to Noegel and Rendsburg, the Song shares many themes, images, and motifs with these two Arabic genres.

Through comparison with these two genres, Noegel and Rendsburg suggest that the erotic discourse in the Song has twin purposes. In addition to praising the woman in a way that positively highlights sexual love, the poet is also aiming to insult Solomon. This aim, they contend, represents a decidedly “northern” political view that objected to Solomon’s treatment of the northern tribes. The Song, therefore, is not merely a love poem; it is also a pointed political statement. This political intent is perhaps clearest when the word אֶלֶּה (“to love”) is treated with its more political connotation, “to ally with.”
Noegel and Rendsburg’s suggestion here is quite intriguing. It may help to make some sense of what might be understood as comic or exaggeratedly flattering imagery (see 4:4). Indeed, given the artistry of the Song as a whole, it would not be surprising if this were indeed a feature of the work. The only real issue that I have with the theory is the significance that Noegel and Rendsburg attach to it. They use the genre comparison as evidence for an early date of the Song. The problem with this is that they are still confined to a date after the death of Solomon because of the significance they attach to the parallelism of Tirzah and Jerusalem (6:4; see above). Yet if we follow the basic biblical storyline, which Noegel and Rendsburg seem to do, the northern tribes had already broken away from Jerusalem’s control by this era. One wonders, therefore, why a northern poet would need to resort to veiled insults aimed at an already dead monarch whose dynasty no longer holds sway over the poet’s country. Even in the discussion of how the genre works, Noegel and Rendsburg highlight how poets use the genres of tašbib or hijā’ to insult superiors who are still alive. It is this that makes the use of ambiguity inherent in tašbib so desirable, for it provides the necessary cover to get away with the insult. Surely, then, if the Song is an ancient example of tašbib, we should propose a date during the reign of Solomon himself. Yet, in light of the mention of Tirzah and Jerusalem together in 6:4, reflecting a situation that postdates Solomon, this is not a viable option. It seems, therefore, best to tone down the political significance we attach to the double entendre of tašbib. Rather than see it as a political statement, we should rather see it as an artistic or even theological ploy: a jibe at the tradition that sees Solomon as the paragon of wisdom. No specific time frame is necessary for such a purpose. In addition to this, one must contend with the debate as to how exactly the character of Solomon fits into the Song. Is he the male lover? Is he a second contender for the Shulamite alongside a shepherd boy? Is he merely a distant, shadowy figure with little interest in the erotic trysts of two young lovers?

The last major feature of this book is an English translation of the Song. Noegel and Rendsburg aim to approximate some of the devices of the Hebrew poetry through their choice of English words and phrasing. For example, they aim to use common English words for common Hebrew words and rare English words for rare Hebrew words (e.g., the rare word בָּסָן [1:12] is translated by the less common word “divan”). Obviously, this is not always possible. Nonetheless, the translation reads very well and is supplemented by notes that bring to the reader’s attention some of the issues analyzed earlier in the book.

All in all, while this book makes some assertions that cannot be readily substantiated, it provides some good food for thought on the language and poetic qualities of the Song of Songs. Students of the Song will find it a worthwhile read.