Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism, the product of a 2007 conference at Princeton University of the same name, is a welcome addition to the growing library on monotheism and conceptions of deity in the biblical and ancient Near Eastern worlds. In it, a group of well-known scholars from diverse fields address from different angles the concept of monotheism.

Pongratz-Leisten, the editor of the volume and convener of the conference, opens with an expansive introduction of some forty pages, “A New Agenda for the Study of the Rise of Monotheism,” which serves more as a prolegomenon to the subject as a whole than an introduction to this specific volume. She conceives of the ancient Near East as “an intellectual community that, despite linguistic, regional, and local distinctions, displays features of cultural cohesion, drawing upon a common reservoir of religious practices, tropes, ideas, and cultural strategies and institutions generated by intense and repeated demographic shifts throughout its history” (3–4). With this general framework in mind, Pongratz-Leisten turns her attention to the question of revolutionary monotheism, which she proposes should be examined through the wider lens of the interconnected ancient Near Eastern world, both in tribal and urban settings. In addition, Pongratz-Leisten states
her preference for microevolution over macroevolution and thus a gradual movement toward monotheism instead of a sudden revolution.

Baines’s substantial contribution, “Presenting and Discussing Deities in New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period Egypt,” traces the persistent and pervasive Egyptian polytheism, in response to scholarly claims that Egyptian beliefs directly influenced the rise of biblical monotheism. At the outset, while he acknowledges that some developments in Egyptian religion could have contributed to monotheism, he argues that “anyone in antiquity who did not have access to a small number of exceptional texts, together with their surrounding oral discourse, would surely have seen Egyptian culture and society as intensely polytheistic” (42). He begins his survey with the Restoration Stela of Tutankhamun, which served as an explicitly polytheistic response to the short-lived reforms of Akhenaten, followed by an examination of the Amarna episode itself, in which he tentatively suggests that adherents of Akhenaten’s new dogma continued to believe in the existence of other deities whom they “ignored and anathematized” (65). In other words, the religion of Akhenaten was monolatrous rather than monotheistic. One might even suggest that Amarna religion was a competition between gods and their proponents, especially Amun and the Aten, rather than a competition between monotheism and polytheism. The elite subsequently demonstrated their repugnance of monolatry by reemphasizing divine diversity, which was never again contested. Rather than challenging divine multiplicity, hymns of the Ramesseide period focus on developing “ever more elaborate” praise for various individual deities (68). Since Egypt was “profoundly polytheistic” and the closest antecedent, the Amarna episode, is far removed chronologically from the rise of monotheism, Baines concludes that “the oft-made proposal of an Egyptian contribution to biblical monotheism” may be questioned, if not outright rejected (88).

Rubio then examines “Gods and Scholars: Mapping the Pantheon in Early Mesopotamia,” which may be more aptly titled “Mapping the Panthea” in light of his conclusion that panthea differed especially according to genre and authorial intent and identity. For example, three panthea are attested at Fara: (1) the scholarly pantheon of god lists and literary texts; (2) the cultic pantheon of offering lists and cultic texts; and (3) the pantheon of theophoric names, which represent “mainstream tendencies of the official cult and the individual preferences of popular religion” (107). Rubio concludes that Early Dynastic god lists were scholarly constructs, aware of yet largely detached from personal religion and the public cult, in which many deities were included merely to “fill the interstices of sacred narratives and to shape divine genealogies within the confines of a world made of clay” (109–10). The various panthea thus index the diversity and creative energy of scribal processing and the creation of religious discourse.
Rochberg’s “The Heavens and the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia: The View from a Polytheistic Cosmology” covers similar ground as her earlier work (‘‘The Stars Their Likenesses’: Perspectives on the Relation Between Celestial Bodies and Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in What Is a God? Anthropomorphic and Non-anthropomorphic Aspects of Deity in Ancient Mesopotamia [ed. B. N. Porter; Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute 2; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009], 41–91) though in a less comprehensive manner. She contends that the ancient Mesopotamian view of the relation between the divine and heaven never approached monotheism in the form of a divine cosmos (Assmann’s cosmotheism). Rather than devoting her energies to refuting such a proposal, she primarily addresses the relationship between the gods and the stars, which may be extrapolated from a variety of sources, including hymns, prayers, omen and divination texts as well as astronomical texts. This relationship may be classified broadly in two ways: (1) the gods may be referred to as celestial bodies, such that the stars are visible embodiments of the divine; and (2) celestial bodies may be referred to as gods, as personified objects that manifest divine agency and give deities perceptible form. She suggests that, although the two modes of reference may seem somewhat irreconcilable, they may be understood as two different modes of discourse, “either god-talk or star-talk” (123). In addition, other texts present celestial bodies as distinct from the deities who controlled them from their distant heavenly perches.

Pongratz-Leisten’s second contribution, “Divine Agency and Astralization of the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia,” discusses the notion of personhood in Mesopotamia, the nature of the divine, and divine agency before devoting significant attention to the astralization and solarization of the gods. She argues, in a way reminiscent of Emma Brunner-Traut’s discussion of Egypt (Frühhformen des Erkennens: Am Beispiel Alttägyptens [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990]), that a person was conceived as a “multifaceted assemblage of parts” that could in specific contexts act as independent centers of activity (139). Regarding the classifications of divinity, in addition to the primary anthropomorphic deity, various secondary agents also had “god-like qualities” (142). She then applies the “tendency to impute human attributes … to inanimate entities” (145), evinced by recent research in evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, and cognitive religion, to the divine realm to explain “why agency can be exercised by supernatural beings that are imagined … in inanimate, invisible, and polymorphic terms, such as statues or other symbolic representations of the divine, body parts of divinities or celestial bodies alike” (146). Pongratz-Leisten differentiates between primary agents, the deities themselves, and secondary agents, such as cult images that presence the otherwise absent deity. She then examines in greater depth the specific and distinct solarization and astralization of deities. Pongratz-Leisten’s innovative and important understanding of divine agency invites further probing. Rather than simply distinguishing between primary
and secondary agents, one may be better served placing the divine agents along a continuum, since the designators “primary” and “secondary” at times mandate an excessive divide between the categories (e.g., between the god and statue), while conflating the wide range of agents in the second category (e.g., although both are “secondary” agents, the enlivened statue is the god in the human sphere, while a divine weapon serves as a more distant way to presence the deity).

Machinist follows with an especially comprehensive contribution, “How Gods Die, Biblically and Otherwise: A Problem of Cosmic Restructuring,” examining divine death and its contribution to monotheism through the lens of Ps 82, for which he provides a translation, textual criticism, and an interpretation. Machinist argues that from the beginning Elohim (with El and Elyon as epithets) acts as the head of the divine council (contra Smith in the following essay). By contrast, the elohim form the other members of the council, who are sentenced to death for their dereliction of duty, which in context refers to their demotion from the divine council and to a mortal state. Elohim thereby disbands the divine council and assumes “sovereign and solitary rule of the earth and its nations” (225). Machinist then situates the psalm amid other biblical texts describing God’s rule over Israel in the context of the wider world, which may be subdivided into three categories that fall along a spectrum: (1) each nation has a god, and Israel’s is YHWH; (2) “God is the head of the pantheon and has allotted governance of all peoples to other gods” (227); and (3) God is the supreme and exclusive sovereign. Psalm 82 falls between the second and third categories because, although the council remains, its dissolution is anticipated. Machinist contends that, more than simply replacing the council, God absorbs its members and their capacities, such that they in distinction to their ancient Near Eastern counterparts lose their divinity. In addition, the language is future-oriented, such that Elohim’s sole sovereignty remains an “unfinished product that must be initiated repeatedly” (235).

Smith’s “God in Translation: Cross-Cultural Recognition of Divinity in Ancient Israel” assesses Assmann’s claim that the Hebrew Bible rejects divine translatability, in which “deities are equated or identified, or at a minimum, recognized as valid or ‘real’ across political units” (242). In particular, Smith presents evidence of translatability in monarchic Israel, culled from Judg 7 and 11 and 2 Kgs 3 (although the latter is debatable), which allowed for the validity of other national gods. Other texts (Ps 82 and Deut 32:8–9) attest to such translatability in the process of rejecting it. According to Smith, such a rejection is especially characterized by three features: (1) the equation of El and YHWH; (2) the foundational myth that early Israel only had a single deity; (3) nontranslatability was an internal development that served “as an ideological bulwark against the looming cultural impact of Mesopotamian power” (268). More specifically, Israel co-opted the Mesopotamian presentation of the “empire-god” and adapted it to suit their “particular
monotheistic expressions” (268). Finally, Smith contends that Assmann’s “Mosaic distinction,” which rejects every other deity out of hand, is more appropriate to the late biblical and postbiblical reception of the Bible than the Bible itself.

Schmid’s “The Quest for ‘God’: Monotheistic Arguments in the Priestly Texts of the Hebrew Bible” begins with a survey of largely German scholarship on the issue of revolutionary monotheism before analyzing what he calls the “Priestly Code” (P). In accord with his Habilitation, Erzväter und Exodus: Untersuchungen zur doppelten Begründung der Ursprünge Israels innerhalb der Geschichtsbücher des Alten Testaments (WMANT 81; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999; ET: Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel’s Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible [trans. J. Nogalski; Siphrut 3; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2010]), and other articles, Schmid contends that P connects the main themes of the Pentateuch. In particular, P equates the otherwise disparate YHWH, El Shaddai, and Elohim. The use of Elohim is especially informative as it functions as a proper noun, thereby suggesting that the category Elohim (“gods”) contains a single member Elohim or God, who as the lone representative can be named Elohim without confusion. Schmid goes on to posit that P adopts an inclusive monotheism in which other gods known by various names such as Zeus and Ahura Mazda are in reality simply God. For Schmid, this perspective contrasts with that of Second Isaiah, which adopts a strictly exclusive monotheism, in which the category Elohim theoretically allows for other deities, yet YHWH is its only legitimate member. In line with this interpretation, he suggests that P developed in the early Persian period in a situation in which the world functioned as divinely intended, “ruled by the one God and administered by the Great King of the Persians” (288). Although possible, Schmid’s inclusive monotheism allows for an alternative possibility. The Priestly portrait and Deutero-Isaiah instead may share a common goal, the exclusive sovereignty of YHWH, albeit with different means of pursuing it. Instead of overtly rejecting the other gods and claiming their powers as one’s own, P seems to reject them through omission, while simultaneously, like Deutero-Isaiah, rendering them unnecessary by absorbing their potencies. The deities whom P cannot ignore (e.g., Elohim and El Shaddai) must instead be explicitly assimilated.

Collins’s “King and Messiah as Son of God” brings the discussion forward to the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In view of the lively debate about how monotheistic Jews could come to worship Jesus in addition to the Father, Collins addresses an otherwise largely overlooked aspect of it, the divine status of the king and messiah. Collins’s survey moves through the Hebrew Bible, Hellenistic ruler cults, the Septuagint, Dead Sea Scrolls, and other extrabiblical Jewish literature such as 4 Ezra. He concludes that, although the presentation of the king and messiah fluctuated over time and across texts, his association with (somewhat) divine intermediary beings is clearly attested. Thus, while Christianity would make stronger claims for Jesus, “these claims would hardly have been conceivable
without the Jewish tradition that the messiah, like the old kings of Jerusalem, was son of God” (315).

Skjærvø concludes the volume with “Zarathustra: A Revolutionary Monotheist?” In it he problematizes previous Western reconstructions of the person of Zarathustra, which read into the text Western monotheistic sensibilities. Instead, he claims that Zarathustra, if he existed, was no revolutionary reformer nor was there any discernible reform and thus no revolutionary monotheism in ancient Iran. Zoroastrianism itself was likely dualistic in terms of cosmogony and cosmology and remained to some extent polytheistic throughout its history. Today, however, it has become as monotheistic as Christianity with Ahura Mazda’s absorption of many former deities into his person or their reinterpretation as symbols. While not monotheistic, Young Avestan and Old Persian Zoroastrianism may be classified as henotheistic.

On the whole and in its various parts, Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism is an excellent and provocative work. Its many sophisticated and nuanced presentations are worthy of careful scrutiny and will surely push forward the discussion on ancient Near Eastern religion and biblical monotheism.