In this volume, originally a dissertation at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati under Nili S. Fox, who also penned a foreword (the second reader was Samuel Greengus), Kenneth Way offers a comprehensive, systematic, and sophisticated analysis of the donkey in “the biblical world,” which he defines as the Bronze and Iron Ages (2). It is the biblical world that is finally definitive as Way’s wide-angle approach to the donkey in the ancient Near East eventually focuses tightly on ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible.

The first chapter provides the focus, reviews the history of scholarship, and defines the scope and methodology of the study (1–26). Chapter 2 is a lengthy treatment of the donkey in ancient Near Eastern texts, including Egyptian, Northwest Semitic, Hittite, Akkadian, and Sumerian sources (27–102), which is followed by chapter 3 on the donkey in Near Eastern archaeology (103–59). This chapter is limited to deliberate donkey burials and is organized by sites in Egypt, Israel-Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Armed with these data, Way next investigates the donkey in biblical literature (ch. 4; 160–97), before offering a short synthesis of the entire study in chapter 5 (198–204). The book is rounded out by an appendix on equid terminology (205–7), an extensive bibliography (208–59), and an index of authors and scripture (260–72). Unfortunately, no figures, line drawings, site plans, or plates are included, despite the extensive discussion of material culture.
Way’s volume is well written throughout and very user-friendly. Each chapter begins with a detailed outline (more detailed than the one found in the table of contents), and each section/subsection is numbered, which facilitates easy and quick cross-referencing. Way makes excellent use of introductions and summaries, though one encounters a good bit of repetition here and there (a price worth paying for the virtue of ease-of-use). Chapter 1 is a model chapter in terms of clarity and utility, worthy of emulation by writers of theses, dissertations, and monographs.

Way states his purpose early on: “The purpose of this study is to explicate the role of donkeys in the symbolism and ceremonies of the biblical world” (2). While this “requires an analysis of relevant archaeological and textual materials from the ancient Near East as well as a fresh look at the biblical passages that may (or may not) depict donkeys in a similar manner,” Way’s ultimate concern is with what he calls the “special status” of donkeys “in the beliefs and rituals of the ancient Near East and especially Canaan-Israel” (2). By this “special status” he means the “ceremonial and symbolic significance” of the donkey, which “encompasses social and religious thoughts and practices that are reflected in ancient texts and material culture relating to the donkey” (2). The “special status” of the donkey is a phrase Way uses repeatedly, but it is often left vaguely defined (Could a similar predication be made of, say, the bull, the lion, and/or other animals as well, in which case the donkey’s status would not be so special after all?), but he specifies that “ceremonial possibilities” for the donkey “include matters of sacrifice, treaty ratification, consumption, death, burial, ‘scapegoat’ rituals, and foundation deposits,” while “[s]ymbolic possibilities … include matters of characterization, association, function, behavior, or iconographic depiction” (2).

The author was kind enough to mention my own work on the lion in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East in an appreciative fashion (e.g., 18, 204), and, since our two studies bear some strong resemblance to each other in terms of method and execution, the critical remarks I offer below must be prefaced by noting that they apply equally well to my own monograph. This is to say that Way’s study of the donkey and mine on the lion seem to share some strengths and some weaknesses, both of which can shade into the other a decent bit (a strength that can become a weakness and vice versa).

First, I note that even Way’s comprehensive approach must be selective (e.g., 28 on the ancient Near Eastern texts). That is simply the way of the (biblical) world, due to the extent of the corpus and size of the datasets. Despite the necessary selectivity, I was impressed with Way’s scope and control of the materials. Beyond their necessary selectivity, a second problem with comprehensive approaches is their attempt to be, well, comprehensive, especially in concluding sections. In his summary of the ancient Near Eastern textual sources, for example, Way provides a list of no less than twenty-one...
conclusions. Some of these seem rather obvious (donkeys are slow, for example, or smell bad), while others are surprising (donkeys have a large appetite, and donkeys are lustful, promiscuous, or licentious). In the attempt to offer a comprehensive list of conclusions, the analytic insight seems somewhat diffused. The typology is full but perhaps less explanatory for all that. That point granted, it is better to have a fulsome presentation such as Way has offered us than one that is overly narrow or idiosyncratic and that leaves important data unaccounted for in the process.

Way’s conclusions regarding the archaeological data are more limited in number: he lists five, each of which highlights the “very special status” of the donkey in ceremonies concerning life and death (150). These include (1) donkey burials associated with human graves; (2) donkey burials unrelated to human graves; (3) donkey burials beneath walls; (4) donkey burials in a fill above a temple complex; and (5) donkey burials in a special tomb beside a temple (150–58). These conclusions are, as one might expect, of a different sort than those offered for the texts. They are less interpretations than categorizations of the finds and find-spots. Further, as Way notes, the five categories are “not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some of the categories can easily overlap” (159). Once again, then, the conclusions here are fulsome but not definitive—although they provide the ground for other, more definitive interpretations that may follow.

The largest question one might raise about Way’s comparative chapters is their pertinence, especially their direct pertinence, to the Hebrew Bible material. Most donkey burials in Israel-Palestine, for example, are from MBA (116), with the most important site, that of Tel Haror, dating from 1800/1750–1550 BCE (130). Way is convincing when he says that many of the biblical references to donkeys “even recall (positively or negatively) the beliefs or practices that are present in ancient Near Eastern texts and archaeology” (161), but I wonder how this recall works. Is the use of the donkey widely shared in the “cognitive environment” of the ancient Near East and ancient Israel/Palestine? Or is the recall more specific than that, in which case I would like to hear more about the mechanisms providing that influence or shaping that memory.

Way’s chapter on the Hebrew Bible, like the others, is as comprehensive as possible but also necessarily selective. He notes that the Hebrew Bible shares ten of the twenty-one conclusions drawn from the ancient Near Eastern textual data (170–73). Way then proceeds to study five passages in some detail: Shechem traditions (Gen 33:18–34:31; Josh 24:32; Judg 8:33–9:57), the redemption of the firstborn (Exod 13:13; 34:20), Balaam’s jenny (Num 22:22–35), the man of God from Judah (1 Kgs 13), and Jeremiah’s reference to a donkey burial (Jer 22:19). Some of Way’s conclusions echo points made earlier in the work (e.g., the rebuttal of Albright et al.’s interpretation of the sons of Hamor as alluding to ceremonial practices attested at Mari), and he sometimes punts by admitting the
possibility of “more than one nuance” or “simultaneous function” (176), rather than coming down on a definitive interpretation. This type of move is safe and sober, at the very least—if not also wise—but after such extensive coverage and competent control of the data, I sometimes wanted Way to say more or pronounce authoritatively. Way more than proves his point that the biblical texts evidence a “special relationship” between the donkey and humanity, but I wanted a bit more detail than that, especially after his careful and thorough analysis. He is, after all, the authority on donkeys!

This may be the point at which Way’s study is most similar to weaknesses evident in my earlier study of lion imagery. As Joel M. LeMon has shown (Yahweh’s Winged Form in the Psalms: Exploring Congruent Iconography and Texts [OBO 242; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010]), building on the work of Othmar Keel on iconographical fragmentation (“Iconography and the Bible," ABD 3:357–74), studies like mine on the lion can fall prey to the problem of literary fragmentation: the analysis of references outside of the larger literary tableau that is crucial for their proper interpretation. Let me add quickly that Way’s volume is superior to mine in this regard, since he analyzes five of the more than one hundred passages mentioning the donkey in the Hebrew Bible in some detail. But, as noted above, I sometimes longed for even more discussion and a movement beyond binary categories such as “positive” or “negative” portrayals (e.g., 188, 191, 199). Among other things, this leads me to hope that Way might offer further, more extended analyses of at least some of these biblical texts in the future. I note in this regard that his interpretation of the story of Balaam’s jenny is very insightful, although it also seems to depend on Way’s literary sensitivity as an exegete as much as it does on the comparative materials he amassed in chapters 2–3.

These musings aside, Way’s study “stands alone in providing a comprehensive examination of the ceremonial and symbolic evidence of donkeys from ancient Near Eastern texts … the archaeological record … and the Hebrew Bible” (26). We are all in his debt as a result. Way’s extremely thorough and informative book should be the starting point, at the least—and it may be the end point as well: a final one-stop shop—for any and all researchers who ever deal with donkeys in the biblical world or their mention in the Hebrew Bible.