This volume is an English translation of the 2005 contribution to the Biblische Enzyklopädie series *Israel in der Perserzeit*, the fourth such translation offered by the Society of Biblical Literature. Other than the occasional subsequent English translations of German citations, the book does not appear to have been updated from the original publication. It follows the format of the previous Biblische Enzyklopädie volumes, structured in four sections: “The Biblical Portrait of the Period”; “The Known History”; “Biblical Literature of the Period”; “Theological Contribution.”

Gerstenberger has taken the unenviable task of summarizing and presenting current research on the Persian period, an era for which one would struggle to find even minimum consensus on anything except for maybe its importance. Each section is prefaced with a useful sample bibliography, containing more German scholarship than often included in English-language bibliographies. Moreover, he has attempted to take the Achaemenid Empire seriously within his analyses, frequently prefacing his discussion of typical issues in the biblical literature with a discussion of similar Persian topics.

The tome’s 535 pages belie the opening statement (3) that only 5.39 percent of the Hebrew Bible is directly related to the Persian period. Gerstenberger’s subsequent claim
that “practically all of the canonical writings (except for Ecclesiastes and Daniel), whether intentionally or unintentionally, express something about the situation of the Judaic communities in the Persian period” (35) better represents his approach. As such, most of the present Hebrew Bible is discussed within the course of the volume for its contribution to the Persian period, under the headings “Original Writings” (142–273) and “Revisions of Older Writings” (274–426).

Section 1 begins with a discussion of Ezra-Nehemiah, arguing for its concern with the reconstitution of the community and temple rather than with history. Gerstenberger follows this with the memory of the Persians in Hellenistic texts (Daniel, Esther, and Josephus), concluding that the main biblical portrait of the period is one of strengthening Judaean identity.

In the first part of section 2 Gerstenberger discusses the history of the empire under the rubrics of “Literary Traditions,” “Artifacts and Architecture,” “Imperial Structures,” “The Course of History,” “Religion in Ancient Persia,” and “Everyday Life and Culture.” In this discussion Gerstenberger notes a variety of sources from the Avesta and the Persepolis Tablets to the Greek historians. He includes translations of the Cyrus Cylinder and XPh (48, 51) and a table of events (60–61) that is, unfortunately, not aligned by dates, making misleading impressions of synchronicity. In the next part Gerstenberger moves to Yehud. He discusses the relationship of Yehud and Samaria, favoring Alt’s hypothesis that Yehud was originally part of Samaria; he briefly describes Jerusalem’s “rise as holy city” and discusses the persons of Nehemiah, Ezra, Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and the elders. In the latter section Gerstenberger dismisses the historicity of the so-called Nehemiah Memoir and thus Nehemiah’s position as cupbearer (91), the existence of Ezra (95), and any knowledge of Sheshbazzar or Zerubbabel (100). Gerstenberger concludes his discussion of Yehud under the rubrics of “social and community structures,” “economy,” “technology and culture,” and “folk religion and temple.” Within these rubrics are discussed the size of the community, family structure, the centralization of the cult, urbanization, use of incense, nontemple ritual, festivals, and psalms; he also includes a discussion of debt in the ancient Near East. The second section ends with the Babylonian and Egyptian diasporas. He mentions the appearance of Yahwistic names in Babylonia but bases the depiction of the Babylonian groups on biblical portrayals. For Egypt, the discussion is based on Elephantine. He includes translations of a marriage contract (B28) and correspondence over the temple (AP 30/31 and AP 35). He concludes by evaluating the Elephantine community’s relationship with Jerusalem, taking it as evidence that scriptural authority was being accepted within Yehud and Babylonia but not yet within other communities.
Section 3 discusses biblical literature directly, divided into texts Gerstenberger considers Persian-period creations and those edited in the Persian period. Included within this section are five excurses on various topics. The majority of the former category would receive wide assent (Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, P, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Trito-Isaiah). However, Gerstenberger’s inclusion of the psalms, poetry, and wisdom writings within this category is perhaps more controversial. He also suggests that almost all prophecy is purely postexilic (197) and appends a discussion of the Megilloth (Esther, Qoheleth, Ruth, Song of Songs, Lamentations, 270–74), even though noting some of them are Hellenistic. Prominent in these analyses are the themes of pilgrimage, appearance of sacred texts, and hints that Gerstenberger finds evocative of the era. The second part describes the remainder of the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomist, the compilation of the Latter Prophets, the Writings, and Torah). Gerstenberger’s analysis highlights theologies that he finds to be reflective of the Persian period (and thus justifies their discussion here): what he calls “the community of Yahweh and its theology” (308), the appearance of increased liturgical use, and eschatology.

The end of section 3 thus leads directly into the final section and its discussion of theology. Gerstenberger opens with “Babylonian and Persian Spirituality,” in which he characterizes Persian religion as essentially based on personal choice and contrasts Persia from Babylon as dualist and monistic, respectively. Gerstenberger then credits the Persian era with the elevation of the laity and the creation of the rituals and festivals of Judaism, monotheism, eschatology and apocalypticism, new concepts of purity, and the formation of normative monogamy. Gerstenberger concludes with musings for the relevance for contemporary theology, in which he ranges from intertextuality to modern physics, ethics, and pluralism. The volume closes with two indices.

The book is thus quite wide-ranging, and the number of topics discussed with their prefaced citations will make it a useful tool for English speakers, even if the translation is sometimes a little infelicitous. Nevertheless, there are several aspects of the volume with which this reviewer must take issue.

The dating of the entire Hebrew Bible to the Persian period (or later) is nothing new. Yet, while Gerstenberger’s thoroughgoing late dating of texts has significant precedence, it decreases the usability of this book for nonbiblical scholars and for students, since it gives the mistaken impression of a consensus for such dating for all of these texts, and it is not given a thorough methodological defense in this book. The comments in which Gerstenberger defends Persian dating are often circular arguments: the intellectual horizon is somehow congruent with the Persian period, so the text must be Persian period (e.g., lack of familial concern in the Joseph cycle, 189).
One thing that stands out in this volume is the prominence of psalms, liturgy, and festivals for Gerstenberger’s understanding of the period (e.g., 125–26, 148, 213, 216–52, 270–73, 328, 458–68). Given the notorious difficulty of dating poetry in general, the psalms in particular, and our general ignorance of the development of early Jewish liturgy, this is quite remarkable. Gerstenberger is aware of this difficulty (24) but uses it as an excuse to treat the psalms by default as Persian period (218). Even more problematically, he quickly and easily moves from the content of such material to assumptions of their sociological and historical context, in the present context inevitably the Persian period. This is especially evident where he thinks the psalms’ language of social injustice demonstrate that Qumran-like “fragmentation” started with the temple’s restoration (236). Much firmer evidence would be required for such a claim. The above two points imply that, even when Gerstenberger has valuable insights into texts, these insights may not have much secure relevance to the Persian period per se.

I applaud how seriously Gerstenberger takes the Persians and their traditions for the historical contextualization of Judaean traditions within their empire. He frequently attempts to bring the empire to bear on the topics discussed and in this models a procedure more biblical scholars ought to follow. That said, however, his particular interpretations and presentations of Iranian material ought to be used with care, representing either uncertain interpretations or inaccuracies. An example appears right at the front (xvi). The map labeled “The empire of the Medes and Persians” is misleading. It is a map of the previous Median federation, something not otherwise discussed in the book, rather than the Achaemenid Empire, and it contains a peculiar mix of toponyms from various eras. Much more important are inaccurate details that affect the analyses, such as Gerstenberger’s depiction of Zoroaster as a reforming (Protestant?) monotheist (71–72, 75, 82, 247, 350–53, 430) or the assertion of Avestan “cultic communities”(438). Be that as it may, the citations are wide-ranging, and one hopes the precedent will spur deeper engagement with the empire.

Overall, Gerstenberger’s work represents a new synthesis of the period, one that should stimulate further research that takes the Persian Empire seriously for its subject Judeans.