This book contains eleven essays on priests and Levites in the Hebrew Bible. They are taken from papers presented at two recent SBL Annual Meetings for a corresponding program unit (“Priests and Levites in History and Tradition”; see 10). The essays pertain to a variety of related texts and time periods. In this broad context, the essays have been broadly divided into three differing groups, even though this can only be taken in a broad sense, as there is much overlap and, on the other hand, each essay stands on its own, with the volume rather building into a kind of tapestry over the subject as a whole (a nice one at that, as will be elaborated below). The first group of four essays (“Priests and Levites in Social Context”) discusses historical and sociological aspects of the religious functionaries of ancient Israel. The second group of four essays (“Priests and Levites in Scriptural Context”) largely examines aspects of pentateuchal traditions about the priests and Levites. The third group of three essays (“Priests and Levites in Exegetical Context”) focus on how any of the pentateuchal and other biblical traditions relate to the Persian and Hellenistic periods. In the following I will quickly summarize the contents of each essay and then offer a few comments in response. I will then conclude with some general comments in response to the volume as a whole.

Ada Taggar-Cohen discusses biblical priesthood from a comparative perspective with Hittite priesthood (second millennium B.C.E.). It is a useful, even if a relatively brief,
discussion about the similarities and differences between the two spheres that also reminds us that priesthood as an institution, together with accompanying temple service, has ancient roots in the Near East (a fuller discussion of Hittite priesthood can be found in her larger work on the subject). The couple of cautions at the end of the essay concerning the comparative approach are useful for reflection, but one might explicitly add that one would not need to expect everything to be exactly the same between cultures that are cognate but distinct as a whole when making comparisons.

Susan Ackerman examines priesthood and sacrificing in the late premonarchic and early monarchic period. It is overall a solid discussion that teases out a number of the issues involved. The main problem with the essay for me is the assumption that, because priests are not directly mentioned as sacrificing in certain texts, this means that they did not. This conclusion is of course possible as such but cannot be proven. Also, one does find it interesting to reflect on the range of possible roles of a Nazirite (or vows in general), on which the Bible does not seem to give a full picture (here Samuel and his relation to the Shiloh sanctuary in 1 Samuel). For example, is it possible that these could encompass an otherwise layperson so that this one could thereby be taken into the priestly sphere, in whatever form, at least for the duration of the vow, at least in some cases?

Jeremy Hutton includes a very nice summary of past academic discussion on the Levitical towns, together with some remarks of his own on the topic. The presentation illustrates how difficult is to make any definite conclusions on the matter, and this includes the author’s own conclusion, which to me seemed more aesthetic than as arising from the preceding discussion. The treatment could have been clearer in places; it was not always easy to follow in some of its detail. The short description of a possible anthropological parallel to the Levitical towns was most interesting. An idea mentioned in passing (79, describing a view by Hauer) that the list would name only those cities that were intended to be institutionalised as members of the system, although Levites might be spread more widely across the land, could in my view be one possible link toward a solution of this little conundrum in biblical studies.

Sarah Shectman provides a good, straightforward discussion of the social status of priestly and Levite women. Most of the comments seemed quite reasonable, in my view. While the focus on the face of the essay is expressly on women, the coverage is in reality wider.

Joel Baden examines pentateuchal texts that describe the violent origins of the Levites in a useful and interesting discussion. Baden pretty much relies on traditional source-critical theories, as per his overall approach to the Pentateuch. Interestingly, the essay emphasizes the diversity of traditions used by J (Gen 34; 49; Deut 33; perhaps Exod 32:26–29 [see below]). This brings to mind that there might be alternative source-critical explanations,
too, for example, something more akin to fragmentary theories, as in traditional sourcecritical discussion the unity of sources is generally argued. For me, the comments touching on the relation of postulated pentateuchal sources and the pentateuchal redactor at the end of Deuteronomy was an interesting issue—for one thing, how (and perhaps why in terms of the way things would have resulted) does one weave a coherent end result there? On the postulated source-critical attribution of Exod 32:26–29 (109), contrary to Baden, Deut 10:8–9 could refer to the passage, as the expression “at that time” does not require a strict chronology. So it seems difficult to make a conclusive source-critical attribution (in terms of his own system, at least). Also, in connection with this, that Deut 33:8 and 33:9 speak about the same event is not clear, so the discussion on 110 suggesting the original positioning of Exod 32:26–29 around Exod 17:1–7 must remain speculative. The discussion about the relationship (including chronological one) of the examined texts on 113–15 is also speculative, even if interesting. In addition, interestingly, the two aspects and related etiologies of the Levites—their scattering and their cultic status—are, as Baden suggests, both taken into account in the Priestly materials of the Pentateuch, and one could add the concept of Levitical towns in Josh 21 as attesting to the scattering.

Cory Crawford discusses the relationship of the tabernacle and the temple. Here he is more open to a possible historicity behind the narrative than many other recent treatments (as he also shows by his review of scholarship). By way of response, I note that it is a moot point whether nomadic tribes could have found a way to collect materials needed for the construction of the tabernacle; as such, it is as much an aesthetic decision for a historian of what he or she may find plausible. Much depends of the use of argumentative networks (argumentationsketten) across the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible here. Even if potentially historical, the biblical materials could also partly be of the nature of a stylized description. On 2 Kgs 16:17 (128–31), what exactly takes place there seems not entirely clear; a move toward aniconism is no more or no less than one possible explanation. A related conclusion (130) is interesting but could also be coincidental (and, is there a full parallel, e.g., considering the pomegranates in the priestly garments?), also considering that postulated authors (of Kings) at a later time do not seem to find the description of the Solomonic temple problematic, even when one could in principle think with the author of this essay that those creating a description of the tabernacle could have different views, agendas, and knowledge of the past than any author or authors of Kings. Still, Crawford provides a fairly nicely formulated hypothesis, even when, in addition, from the perspective of argumentation, a postulated marrying in of Shilonite and Jerusalemite traditions would probably be more cogent for a time when Jerusalem was just establishing its hegemony than for a time some two to three centuries later (see the comments at the bottom of 132).
Peter Altmann examines Levites and priests in Deuteronomy, with a focus on 18:1–8. The essay starts with a very useful reflection on related methodological approaches by both American and European scholarship. Many of the comments are more widely applicable to Old Testament scholarship as a whole. The second part of the essay provides an exegetical analysis of Deut 18:1–8. The exegetical discussion (esp. 146–53) could have been presented more clearly, even when the points made are very good as a whole and illustrate the difficulties of finding historical contexts for the biblical materials. In terms of the whole, I would also ask the question of as to what extent Deut 18:1–8 could constitute what we call loose language in terms of its distinction between priests and Levites.

Stephen Cook provides an interesting treatment of potential correlations between Deuteronomy (esp. 18:1–8) and Jeremiah, with reference also to the reform of Josiah. One interesting related point is that Cook essentially reads 2 Kgs 23:9 as being in coherence with Deut 18:1–8 (163–65) in certain important ways, yet assumes that Josiah went beyond the powers that would apparently have been bestowed on him by Deuteronomy on an average reading (166). It is correct that there is no big contradiction here in the treatment of the author, but there is nevertheless the question of to what extent one should (and in practice would) expect Josiah’s reform to correspond with Deuteronomy’s vision, including in each and every “identifiable detail.” Related to this is the question of how one “should” read the corresponding passages and how the ancients would and “should” have read them. Another interesting detail (162) is the suggestion about the possible relationship between Jeremiah and Shiloh priesthood (including Jer 19:3 versus 1 Sam 3:11, referring to earlier work by Jeremy Hutton, also the possible link between Abiathar and Anathoth [1 Kgs 2:26] and Jeremiah [Jer 33]); of course, the book of Jeremiah refers to Shiloh directly, too (Jer 7; 26). If so, assuming a preexilic date for the books of Samuel, the book of Jeremiah would probably be aware of these books and would purposefully have alluded to them. If so, the interesting point is that this is occurring at a level that is not easily distinguishable on a casual reading. This might then have bearing on arguments made about the perceived lack of quotations from other biblical books that might be expected in terms of establishing the chronological order of biblical documents. This said, if the book of Jeremiah, on the other hand, is building on a common tradition, the reuse of the saying in 1 Sam 3:11, unless a common saying or otherwise coincidental, would suggest the passing on of that particular tradition or saying for potentially up to centuries. Further, Cook’s treatment of course suggests (at least the strong possibility of) the same for an overall link with Shiloh in Jeremiah that may date back for centuries. This actually would seem to tie with Cook’s overall approach that the Levitical lineage systems are of old, even premonarchical, origin (155, at least in terms of the overall lineage system). This then begs the further question of how these (Levitical) lineages originated, which is not included in the considerations of the essay. Finally, about the last two
paragraphs of the essay, some of the comments included in them seemed to be slightly non sequitur in relation to the preceding discussion.

Mark Christian suggests that much of the pentateuchal material that pertains to priests and Levites was formulated with the concerns of essentially what one might consider a kind of middle class in mind in the postexilic period. This is a good straightforward treatment in a number of ways, closely following a current mainstream approach to the Pentateuch and containing some interesting insights and suggestions on that basis. There seemed to be a few minor errors included in the presentation (e.g., some of the Akkadian spellings in n. 5, a verse reference in n. 72, and reference to Deut 30:17b at the bottom of 194). In the opinion of this reviewer, the presentation could have been just a bit clearer in a few places, too.

Jeffrey Stackert examines the cultic status of the Levites in the Temple Scroll. The main argument of part 2 clarifying the status of Levites both in terms of elevating their status but also placing restrictions on them seems a good one as a whole, even though, in relation to the conclusion on page 211, looking back at the preliminaries (part 1), the point that a late text such as Malachi does not attest a strict terminological distinction between priests and Levites (202) demonstrates the strong possibility that such lack of precision was intentional or incidental and therefore that the same could have been the case with Deuteronomy. If so, the Wellhhausenian idea of Dtr being a midpoint in a related development would be called into question, as would Stackert’s conclusion in part 2. In other words (and as already suggested in my response to another essay above), we might be dealing with something like loose language rather than an actual lack of capacity for distinction in the mind of an author. This then also begs the question, and these comments are intended to complement the author’s related analysis in part 3, together with a summary of a range of possible related alternative readings (211–12), of why a particular feature is more emphasized in a particular document than in another one. Is it because of a historical development or because of authorial interests (and to what extent should one think these might relate to specific community interests?), intention, and characteristics? (Of course, a combination of these two aspects is also as such possible.) And, any accidents of survival in terms of the current canonical collection as a sample of Israelite literature from differing times and settings, with the times and settings themselves subject to academic discussion and debate, may also affect our readings.

Finally, Mark Leuchter discusses how the book of Daniel has used earlier traditions and adapted and reworked them in its Hellenistic setting. It is an interesting essay that shows the diversity of approaches by authors to related issues in the Hellenistic period. Again we come to the question of to what extent a particular text represents the view of an author, or a community as potentially channeled through an author, and what type of sociological
conclusions can be made based on the viewpoint of a particular text, as much as authorial intention (whether express or unconsciously projected by the author) can be recovered from it. One related question to ask is that if a text expresses a particular view, is this intended in an “exclusive” manner or otherwise (e.g., 218 n. 17, based on Ezek 3:1, “For Ezekiel, the divine word can only be obtained from the mouth of the priest-prophet who has consumed it” [emphasis added]; in any case there would easily seem to be other ways to interpret this divine-symbolic action by the prophet). Further, what might have been happening in the society/societies outside spheres potentially recoverable from available texts, at least in terms of plausibilities?

In sum, this is a very nice collection of essays with multiple perspectives based on largely mainstream approaches (some of the most conservative positions are also mentioned, even if largely in passing) and with some excellent bibliographic links to further research, even when I do not (nor probably do the authors themselves) think that it gives actual answers to a number of the questions the book revolves around. The book is recommended reading for all Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholars, regardless of whether and to what extent one might agree with any of the conclusions espoused. One interesting point that arises from the discussions is that conclusions on matters discussed in the essays are quite dependent on one’s overall choices of interpretative frameworks for the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible as a whole, thus necessitating a holistic approach to the topic in the context of the whole of the corpus of this collection of world literature. One may also in general consider issues that relate to theory construction and how one should find a related best fit for the biblical data, both at micro and macro levels, and reflect on how one might be able to determine what a best fit is.