As the author notes in the preface, this book represents the culmination of over forty years of research into issues relating to writing and literacy in the biblical world. It thus offers the reader a comprehensive and systematic presentation of the direction set out in two of Demsky’s previously published introductory articles on the subject: one in a 1988 collection edited by M. J. Mulder, and the other in the 1997 Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East (for full bibliographic details, see p. 405 of the present work). Demsky aims to substantiate two basic claims: (1) the necessary conditions for the emergence of a literate society were present in ancient Israel from its inception, that is, in the period between the thirteenth and eleventh centuries B.C.E.; (2) the increase in writing that is empirically attested to in ancient Israel between the eighth and sixth centuries B.C.E. penetrated all levels of society, not merely the elites; thus Israel of this period can and should be designated as a fully literate society.

It should be noted from the outset that each of these claims has long invited lively scholarly controversy, but Demsky does not flinch from the task of subjecting them to detailed and sustained scrutiny. In a lengthy introductory chapter (sixty pages), Demsky spells out the basic terminology and methodology that govern his work. First, Demsky adopts a wide definition of literacy that encompasses the ability to recognize individual
letters of the alphabet. Even this minimal skill enables one to participate, albeit on a very rudimentary level, in a society whose members communicate through alphabetic means. Second, Demsky stresses throughout the book that we have no satisfactory way of gauging the actual number of people in ancient Israel who achieved this or that level of literacy. Rather the emphasis ought to be, following J. Goody, on tracing the features—social, political, geographic, and otherwise—that would have contributed to the emergence of a society in which the potential for literacy was not restricted a priori to a limited class of scribal literati. In applying Goody’s model, Demsky describes his own methodology as “inductive,” in the sense that it draws from the full gamut of evidence (epigraphic, archaeological, literary, etc.) in order to obtain the widest possible profile of ancient Israel as a literate society. Each ancient society was influenced by a unique set of historical and sociological conditions. Thus comparative studies on the question of literacy, for example between ancient Israel and ancient Greece, have only limited heuristic value in arriving at firm conclusions. Finally, in terms of methodology, Demsky is sympathetic to the growing recognition of a symbiotic relationship between oral transmission of ancient traditions and the committing of such traditions to writing, as opposed to previous models, which posited an exclusively diachronic relationship between the two processes.

The body of the book contains seven chapters. In chapter 1 Demsky describes the social dynamics characteristic of the restricted-literacy cultures of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. In each of these societies the scribal guilds were both elite and insular. The training involved in the intricate writing systems of these societies was long-term and thus amenable only to those with a scholarly bent. Moreover, the scribal guilds were primarily immersed in the sorts of texts that would only be accessible to the scribes themselves, such as lexical and omen lists. Other literary genres, including “canonical” literary texts, foundation inscriptions, and hymns, were also not intended for a wide audience but rather for the scribes’ self-edification or for the attention of the gods.

The second chapter sets the beginnings of literacy in Israel (and its immediate neighbors) in historical context. The Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age witnessed the confluence of two major developments that laid the foundations for a literate society in early Israel. The first was the establishment of the Canaanite alphabet and its offshoots as a facile and accessible system of writing. The second was the complete overhaul of the social and political order in Syria-Palestine, in which the erstwhile great powers were replaced by new, localized ethnic polities that were not tied to the traditional social convention of a restricted scribal class.

Chapters 3 and 4 build on this foundation by seeking to identify which particular groups in premonarchic and early monarchic Israel took advantage of the new technological and social conditions and what their actual educational program might have entailed. In this
regard, Demsky enumerates the following groups: tribal scribes, Levites, officers, and palace officials. Eventually toward the later stages of monarchic Israel, the latter category would come to include high-ranking persons in the military, the diplomatic corps, and the wisdom teachers, as well as the king himself. The curriculum that Demsky reconstructs for the royal officialdom includes mastery of the alphabet, preparation of letters, contracts, and other legal documents, biology, mathematics, cartography, and linguistics.

In chapter 5 Demsky spells out the ramifications of the alphabetic revolution on Israelite religion. The fact that Moses is portrayed in various pentateuchal sources as involved with writing (e.g., Exod 17:14; 24:4; Num 33:2; Deut 27:2–3) points to an authentic memory of early Israelite monotheism taking shape in historical simultaneity with the earliest Israelite adaptation of the alphabet. The recurring motif of a written covenant between God and Israel reflects this same matrix. The overlap between fidelity to the covenant and writing is extended even further in various Deuteronomic precepts (Deut 6:7; 17:18–19; 31:10–13). Another no less significant historical convergence can be seen with the golden age of Israelite prophecy coinciding with the spread of literacy among the general populace in the eighth to sixth centuries B.C.E. The classical or writing prophets were not only highly literate themselves (see Isa 8:1, 16; 30:8; Jer 30:2; Hab 2:2; Ezek 43:11), but they were clearly addressing a literate audience (see Isa 10:1; Jer 8:8; Ezek 37:15–20).

Chapter 6 presents various criteria for assessing the extent of Israelite popular literacy in the eighth to sixth centuries B.C.E. In this context Demsky expands upon the nature of the discourse between the classical prophets and their audience in which a working level of mutual literacy is often assumed. Demsky also discusses the proportional increase in personal seal stamps that are lacking accompanying pictures, the proportional increase in weight stones that are identified by a written word or abbreviation, the increased use of “vulgar” writing, and the increased quantity of inscriptions that were drawn up for the use of merchants and artisans. Finally, Demsky takes note of the increased evidence for the use of written legal documents (e.g., Jer 32:1–14; in a literary context, Job 19:23–24).

In the closing chapter, Demsky highlights the role of Ezra the scribe in establishing the postexilic community as the “people of the book.” This was accomplished by exposing the entire people to the words of the Torah and their meaning, which was henceforth derived through textually based exegesis.

The book concludes with a brief postscript in which Demsky summarizes his major conclusions, a ninety-four-page bibliography, an index of primary sources, and an English abstract.
In critically evaluating Demsky’s methodology, one might argue that his exceedingly broad understanding of the concept “literacy” almost predetermines his conclusions and that a more rigorous distinction between literacy and semiliteracy is called for. Demsky’s culling from the widest range of possible sources is an obvious strength of the book. Yet at times his use of biblical sources seems overly optimistic. A case in point is the book of Chronicles. While Demsky correctly cites 1 Chr 2:55 as evidence for nonroyal scribal groups (144), his use of 1 Chr 24:6 to illustrate the presence of scribal clerks within the offices of First Temple high priests (154–55) seems much more open to debate. Demsky’s work is clearly aligned within the positivist school of biblical history, as attested by his numerous references to W. F. Albright, B. Mazar, A. Rainey, and A. R. Millard, among others. This tendency is most blatant in Demsky’s acceptance of the traditional categories of the patriarchal age and the judges period, as well as in his early dating of the covenant tradition. Yet while many scholars might be inclined to dismiss these positions as a hindrance to authentic historical reconstruction, Demsky harnesses them successfully, to my mind, in tracing a broad trajectory of the development of literacy in biblical Israel based on the incremental evidence of the traditions themselves. Thus Demsky argues that the patriarchs are not presented as literate individuals, even in the context of drawing up a binding legal agreement over real estate (Gen 23; contrast Jer 32). Moses is presented as one who reads and writes, but not as one functioning within a literate society. The extent of subsequent alphabetic proficiency as described in the sources moves from a handful of tribal or local officials (Judg 5:14; 8:14) to eventually encompassing a significant segment of the population, as evidenced in the interaction between the classical prophets and their audiences. Demsky thus allows the bulk of the biblical sources to speak for themselves, with the extrabiblical epigraphic and historical data serving as confirming control mechanisms. It is this holistic view that makes Demsky’s work such an exciting read, even if one may quibble with some of the details.