In Portraits of a Mature God: Choices in Old Testament Theology, Mark McEntire demonstrates the development of the divine character in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible. This depiction of God is “the product of a long tradition of theological reflection, which has passed through a long and difficult story of building a society, watch that society be destroyed, being dispersed, and struggling to rebuild or find a permanent way of life in a foreign world” (20). McEntire does not argue that God has matured throughout history or that ancient Israel’s understanding of God has matured. The development of the character of God is at the heart of his argument. God at the “end” of the story in Ezra-Nehemiah resembles more closely the world of the shapers of the final form of the biblical text than a capricious, theophanic, “interventionist” God of the beginnings of the story upon which they are reflecting.

In chapter 1, “The God at the End of the Story,” McEntire carefully and thoroughly situates his methodology in the field of Old Testament theology, especially within two approaches of dealing with the diversity of images of God. The first approach enumerates the many depictions of God and allows those differing images to stand in tension equally (for the most part) with one another. The second approach views the texts as linear to trace the historical and/or narrative development of the character of God, which requires
an ordering of the texts. While McEntire’s study falls within the second approach, his method does not stand wholly outside of the first approach. The differing images of God stand opposed, but one characterization merges into another characterization as one linearly reads the overall narrative of the Hebrew Bible, from the act of creation to ancient Israel’s rebuilding of life in a postexilic world.

Creation in Gen 1–11 and its iterations are the focus of the second chapter, “A Creative and Energetic God.” Creation is limited to these eleven chapters in Genesis as God the Creator does not continue the process. Other creation texts reminisce on the distant past of the world’s origins rather than present a continuation or renewal of creation. The world of the primeval history complex is vastly different from the producers of the final form of the text. Aside from the acts of power wielded in creation, God often intervenes when humanity does not act as God expects, and these responses “are erratic, unpredictable, and largely ineffective” (45). Creation is a remembrance, and God’s creative activity contrasts with God’s activity for the human characters of the narrative present.¹

Chapter 3, “A Commanding and Delivering God,” covers the remainder of the Torah, and the focus is now with the Israelite ancestors. The world of the characters now more closely resembles the world of the Torah’s first readers rather than that of the primeval history narrative. Now that God has entered into a closer relationship with the ancestors and the fledgling Israel, an intermediary is necessary—approaching God is a dangerous endeavor. Human characters as well as the legal code function to mediate the divine presence to the people. The law also serves as an avenue to the establishment of ancient Israelite society. The complaint episodes allow for God’s character to develop, especially in providing a rationale for an intermediary. These events depict a God who provides (albeit the provision is often necessary because of God’s doing), uses the Hebrews as an outlet for anger, often displays a lack of morality, and forgets promises made. Recollections attenuate this violent, unpredictable God and emphasize the immediate presence of this God of the narrative past for a period when God does not seem to move directly.

In chapter 4, “A Nation-Building God,” McEntire focuses upon Joshua through Kings and Chronicles, which emphasizes the establishment of the nation under a king. The deity becomes a God of war and oversees the practice of holy war. God’s succor, however, is wildly conditional, although the divine character still responds to cries for help, even when God has punished them in the form of defeat. God chooses two intermediaries—judge and king—and will abandon individuals in those roles intentionally, eventually

¹. McEntire describes the world of the characters of the text as the “narrative present” and their recollections of previous history is the “narrative past” (28).
abandoning the institution of judges. The establishment of the temple is another intermediary safeguard to contain and protect against the divine presence. Recollections of this era present an idealized past in which the warrior-God fights for the people and demonstrates nostalgia for the monarchy, especially under David and Solomon, with insinuations that God could restore the monarchy in restoring the nation. The lasting elements for the narrative present is the desire to be an independent nation and the return or reestablishment of the temple.

The division and exile of the northern and southern monarchies and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in Kings, Chronicles, and the prophetic literature form the subject of chapter 5, “A Punishing and Destroying God.” With the division of the nation, God’s character and attention must divide. While the temple continues as a form of mediation of the divine presence, prophets become the standard mediators in this era. After Elijah and Elisha, a prophet is less of a miracle worker and more of a mouthpiece for God. YHWH appears to change from “a God of action to a God of words and their rhetorical influence” (141). The behavior of the character of God toward ancient Israel is the principal subject of the prophetic books, particularly God’s reaction to and judgment of the nation’s actions. As orchestrator of the events of punishment, God remains an active character. The prophets feature the deity as an active figure in the future and their messages turn toward hope and restoration.

The primary text for chapter 6, “A Restoring God,” is Ezra-Nehemiah, the continuation of the ancient Israelites’ story after the exile. It is the religious experience of this era that shaped the final form of the canon. The returnees of Ezra-Nehemiah are not the sole voices of the postexilic time, and McEntire includes other texts of the dispersion, such as Daniel, Esther, Proverbs, Ruth, and Job, where traditional means of mediation (e.g., the temple and the priesthood) were not available. The portrayal of God in this era is not one of mighty acts but God acting in the form of influencing foreign kings and those kings’ relationship with ancient Israel. Subtle and indirect is the divine behavior. McEntire writes: “God no longer fights for them, but allows them permission to fight to defend their own interests” (199). The portrait of God in these texts recognizes a complex God, one whose divine influence favors the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple but also looks to the interests of Jews in the diaspora.

The greatest contribution Portraits of a Mature God offers the area of Old Testament theology is bringing the “end” of the story to the center through a narrative lens.\(^2\) When

\(^2\) McEntire occasionally delves into the composition of a text when it helps support his argument. Unfortunately, he constantly reminds readers of his narrative critique and that textual and source criticism has little to no place in his approach.
tracing the ancient Israelite narrative, the portrait of God that emerges in the last events of the Hebrew Bible is one opposite of the “active, energetic, and exciting divine character” of the early narratives and that was previously at the center of scholarship. Rarely does Ezra-Nehemiah factor in Old Testament theology. By placing the religious experience of the shapers of the final form of the Hebrew Bible at the center, all texts, even subversive texts such as Ps 90, Job, and Ruth, are given a voice, and the images of the divine character develops as ancient Israel’s history develops; this development presents “a God who is as complex as the world has become at that story’s end” (209).

McEntire’s work, while slightly thin for the great works of Old Testament theology, should stand as an essential reference work in addition to the excellent contribution of his different, distinctive, and novel argument. McEntire cites a plurality of Old Testament theology texts that came before. His acknowledgement of the area ranges from lesser known or mostly ignored works such as Jack Miles’s God: A Biography to the giants in the field such as von Rad and Brueggemann, as well as many recent works. For every discussion and at every juncture, he interacts with, affirms, or disagrees (while providing a counterargument) with this vast amount of literature. He also provides a variety of tables that can easily serve as a helpful reference guide; examples of these tables include the frequency of divine designations and divine behavior in the narrative present in particular books.

Because of McEntire’s deference to the history of Old Testament theology, Portraits of a Mature God can often feel like it is a recitation of research rather than the crafting of an argument. Interestingly, however, his work is not as exhaustive with regards to the biblical texts as he is with scholarship. The book does not purport to be exhaustive, however. An excellent companion piece, by either McEntire or another scholar, would be one that fits the remaining unexamined biblical texts into McEntire’s schema, such as the multiplicity of creation and exodus texts.

Another strength of this work is McEntire’s acknowledgement that he is a Christian doing Old Testament theology. He is clear that he limits Old Testament theology to the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. He encourages readers to hear what the Tanak says on its own rather than pointing it in the direction of the New Testament or forcing it into a mold that requires the New Testament as the next chapter of the story. McEntire writes: “[E]very book is given serious consideration and … there is space provided within the framework for an interpretation of every text” (208).

3. Cultural memory critics may also find this volume helpful as it is closely akin to the method, which McEntire acknowledges, and can act as an example for the first steps of the process of cultural memory critique.
When delving into this book at first, the reader may feel as if *Portraits of a Mature God* simply is recounting the perception of God from the beginning to the end of ancient Israel’s history. The key, however, is that McEntire draws comparisons to find a drastically changing God based upon the development of the people of ancient Israel. The portrait of a subtle, indirect, unseen God by the shapers of the final form of the biblical text rarely receives attention in the scholarship of Old Testament theology; moving such a portrait to the center of Old Testament theology, allowing the “end” to be the beginning, allows “their own voice and their own place to speak that is not drowned out by the claims of mighty acts” (22).