Jeff S. Anderson’s excellent thematic study of blessing and curse offers a sound model for integrating historical and theological interests in biblical studies. His grasp of the subject matter is broad and deep, as his book develops the unfolding concepts of blessing and curse through the canon while demonstrating the contribution that ancient Near Eastern background and the Bible’s own literary history make to his subject. Furthermore, Anderson, who teaches at Wayland Baptist University in Anchorage, uses speech-act theory to enhance the more traditional critical methods of biblical theology.

Chapter 1, “The Challenges of Old Testament Theology,” surveys some of the major debates in and proposals for twentieth-century Old Testament theology. For Anderson, the task of biblical theology is “to explore and investigate themes that arise directly from the Bible” and “to parse out the interrelationships of those themes” (3). He identifies key issues such as the problem of an illusory center, the shaping of the canon, the connection of Old Testament theology to ancient Near Eastern context, and the relationship of the Testaments. His approach is “to embrace a dialectic between the historical and theological tasks, and between descriptive and the normative outcomes” (17). Anderson does not see blessing and curse as a “center” for Old Testament theology; rather, blessings and curses occur in narrative and structural seams throughout the canon (20).
In Chapter 2, “Considering Blessings and Curses Theologically,” Anderson explores the meaning and usage of key vocabulary, especially brk, ṭṛ, ʾlh, and qll, in light of the wider Semitic field. The core of the chapter is a solid, critical study of important paradigms for understanding the blessing and curse: historical (e.g., Westermann), comparative (e.g., Mendenhall), linguistic (e.g., Austin), and theological (e.g., Brueggemann, Childs).

The subject of chapter 3 is “Blessings and Curses in the Pentateuch.” This integration of source theory and narrative reading demonstrates their mutual benefit for theological insight: the Yahwist tells of the initial curse in the garden as the backdrop for the ancestral blessing, the Deuteronomist presents both blessing and curse as “open possibilities,” and the Priestly source speaks only of blessing without curse. Anderson then surveys how the major narrative units of the Torah work with this theme.

“Cursed Is the Ground Because of You” then explores Gen 1–11 in view of contrasting ancient Near Eastern accounts, speech-act theory, and a theology of the spirit of God. Anderson presents basic theological perspectives on the narrative of human sin (escalation, cyclical pattern, or a movement from creation to re-creation). Without choosing one approach over the others, he connects the blessing with humankind’s status as the image of God.

Chapter 5 addresses the topic of election in the ancestral narratives with a title drawn from Gen 12:3, “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.” While Abraham’s family is a medium of blessing to the peoples and nations, there is nevertheless “a narrowing of that blessing” with the ancestors (113). Isaac’s blessing of Jacob is “perhaps the most monumental episode” related to the ancestral blessings (115). The last half of the chapter discusses several theological issues, such as marginalizing foreign peoples related to Abraham (e.g., Lot, Ishmael, Esau), covenant, and election.

In chapter 6, “Bless Me Also,” Anderson argues that, while “the theme of blessing and curse is not as prominent in Exodus as in Genesis,” it nevertheless appears in “crucial seams in the narrative,” such as the introduction, the scene right after the plagues, the frame surrounding the book of covenant, and the completion of the tabernacle (136). The golden calf episode functions as a warning of “the threat of curse from within” (140), whereas blessing is explicated through the primary theme of divine presence and glory. The chapter concludes with a compelling study of the angel of the Lord, a messenger and deliverer whom Christian theology has sometimes wrongly associated with the preexistent Christ (157).

Chapter 7, “I Set before You Today the Blessing and the Curse,” is Anderson’s foray into Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History. He argues that the four-part sermon
structure of Deuteronomy draws attention to blessing and curse, from Moses’s “historical review” to the literary frame around the legal code of Deut 12–26. The thematic message surfaces through brief expositions of five common verbal imperative forms: choose, hear, remember, love, and watch. Anderson follows modern critical notions of Deuteronomistic theology in divine addresses, leaders’ speeches and prayers, interpretive summaries, and covenant renewal ceremonies.

“The Sword Will Never Depart” (ch. 8) considers how the narratives about Saul, David, and Solomon depict their reigns as “under blessing” but also “under curse.” While the message of blessing tends to precede that of curse for all three kings, literary features within those accounts reveal theological tensions about kingship in general and these monarchs in particular. Anderson strikes a healthy balance of praise and critique regarding the royal theology associated with the Davidic dynasty.

In chapter 9, “Damned if You Don’t,” Anderson explores prophetic traditions, especially the link between the prophetic “call summoning Israel back to covenant” (218) and the Deuteronomic theme of blessing and curse. He offers a particularly apt treatment of vineyard imagery in several prophets to portray the desolation (šēmāmā) that expresses God’s curse upon the land. Furthermore, the use of metonymy reveals that Israel itself becomes “a curse for all the peoples of the earth” (228).

Chapter 10, “May the Lord Bless You,” primarily studies blessing and curse in Psalms, but the wider concern is Israel’s cult. After a succinct primer on Psalms scholarship, Anderson argues that the five-book structure of Psalms points to the role of blessing in the canonical shaping of the Psalter. Once again, it is in the seams—specific psalms at the beginning or ending of the five books (Pss 1–2, 41, 72, 89, 106, 145)—where the theme surfaces. The second half of the chapter applies the model of performative speech to the Psalter before concluding with the priestly curse and blessing in Num 5–6, respectively.

Chapter 11 studies the book of Job within the context of Israel’s wisdom theology, with the chapter title taken from the words of Job’s wife: “Curse God and die!” The chapter’s subtitle refers to “rhetorical brinkmanship” in the way Job’s curse upon his life comes very close to cursing the Lord without actually doing so (280). Anderson shows how the theme of blessing and curse can assist in accounting for the book’s canonical literary structure (286–87). The second half of the chapter relates his interpretation of Job to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in terms of creation theology, especially in light of Leo Perdue’s important work on the subject.

Chapter 12, “A Curse Devours the Earth,” illustrates the insights of apocalyptic theology through Isaiah’s “little apocalypse” (Isa 24–27), the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s
dream (Dan 2:31–45) and Daniel’s prayer (Dan 9), and the vision of the day of the Lord (Zech 14). Anderson concludes the chapter with an excursus of sorts on the theological function of the Kidron Valley and the Mount of Olives within apocalyptic discourse.

The book’s concluding chapter, “The Other Side of Covenantal Failure,” deals primarily with the close of the Old Testament canon and a few specific New Testament passages that cite Old Testament blessing or curse texts (Gal 3; Rom 10; Rev 22), avoiding general New Testament blessing or curse language, such as Jesus’s cursing the fig tree. In the final pages, Anderson develops “three theological notions too trivial to be true,” contending that the Old Testament refuses to trivialize life, election, and divine providence (344–49). He returns to the three basic ways interpreters have dealt with the theme of curse: ignoring the theme altogether; emphasizing the greater development of the blessing theme; or his own perspective, that “God stands to enhance or oppose a life of fullness, depending on decisions made by humans” (348, emphasis original).

Anderson deserves praise for a careful study that exhibits both scholarly rigor and theological sensitivity. One of the book’s greatest strengths is the healthy amount of scripture citations within the body of the text in order to illustrate the claims. There is a lingering methodological question whether an investigation primarily of literary seams can provide enough raw materials to trace a clear trajectory of blessing and curse. A related observation about the book’s organization is that about half the book is devoted to the Torah, making the remaining treatments seem a bit thin by comparison. That being said, it is difficult to argue against this choice, given the fundamental role the Torah plays in establishing the blessing and curse theme in the first place. Finally, while I question the editorial decision to use abbreviated footnotes even for a source’s first citation, one can find the necessary information in the extensive bibliography.