Popular readings of Gen 1–11 demonstrate substantial misunderstandings of the stories. These archetypal stories figure prominently not only in the biblical canon but also in the canon of Western literature, as the interpretation of these archetypal texts matters in the forming of politics and ethics as well as theology. Gnuse sees hierarchical readings as one of the key misunderstandings of these texts. He finds egalitarian and antiroyal themes that often get obscured in popular interpretations. A historical-critical reading recovers the understanding of the original readers, and the historical settings of the Yahwist and Priestly writers in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE allow today’s reader to see the subversive appropriation of Egyptian and Mesopotamian materials in the creation of Gen 1–11.

Theodicy and theological identity were important considerations in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. These stories give a perspective about the place of the Judeans in the world and the strategy for dealing with outsiders/foreigners. They also locate the meaning of the destruction of Jerusalem. Appearing quite contemporary, “[t]he Primeval History speaks of the equality of all people before God and the equality of men and women with each other” (xvi).
The book begins with an introduction followed by three major sections, a conclusion, and a bibliography. The historical-critical commitment means that Gnuse begins major sections with a report on the relevant comparative data. Section 1 (chs. 1–7) examines the comparative material and Gen 1 and 2. Chapter 1, “Ancient Near Eastern Creation Accounts,” introduces the reader to relevant parallels such as Enki and the World Manor, Eridu Genesis, Atrahasis Epic, and Enuma Elish. He makes a case that the writers of Gen 1–2 were informed by other creation accounts.

Gnuse presents his reading of Gen 1 and 2 in the following chapters (2–7): “The Cosmic Creation,” “Creation of Humanity,” “Creation of Adam,” “The Garden,” “The Adam in the Garden,” and “The Creation of the Woman.” Gnuse characterizes the cosmic creation in Gen 1 as resistance literature, a “true intellectual guerilla warfare” (14). To that end, Gen 1 makes subversive adaptations of earlier sources of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Gnuse also wants the reader to understand that cosmic creation is not the famous Latin expression creatio ex nihilo. Parallel to the cosmic creation is the creation of humanity. Gnuse separates the creation of humanity from the creation of the cosmos with a new chapter on Gen 1:26–24a, where he leads the reader through the major issues in the text. He addresses the issue of how the plural was used in Christianity as an expression of the Trinity. Here we see how the function of Gnus’s book is to correct misunderstandings of the story. In the same chapter he examines the topic of the imago Dei and the Hebrew term selem (image) and demut (likeness). Creation of humanity reframes the Enuma Elish and subverts the ideology of the ruling empire.

The three chapters “Creation of Adam,” “the Garden,” and “the Creation of the Woman” give Gnuse the opportunity to offer a reading of Gen 2. The creation of the Adam once again provides an example of a reframing the narratives of neighboring creation stories. However, the creation of the Adam, the person made of dirt, knits the creature and the creator into a more intimate relation than found in regional creation stories. The next scene is the placing of the dirt man in the garden (ch. 4). God makes a garden (Gen 2:8–9) with two trees that are placed within and that has primordial rivers flowing from them. Mesopotamia and Egypt had traditions about primordial rivers. Mesopotamia and Egypt also had traditions of the king as the man of gardens, but Gnuse argues that the biblical writer democratizes these images in Gen 2, with God making the Adam and the garden. There the Adam interacts with other creatures that come from the soil as the Adam did. The final chapter in this section, “The Creation of the Woman,” suggests that by the end of the chapter the Adam and the Woman stand naked and unashamed. “They have no shame because they have no sexual awareness” (91).

In section 2 (chs. 8–14) Gnuse provides the relevant parallels to Gen 3 in “Origin of Evil according to the Ancients.” Once again he begins a section with an examination of the
comparative text, indicating differences between the biblical text and Mesopotamian creation myths. The former accent human freedom, and the latter have evil originate with rebellious gods. Gnuse interprets Gen 3 in the next two chapters, the first of which, “Sin in the Garden,” explores a number of misunderstandings, such as the construal of the snake, the fruit of the tree, and the culpability of the man and woman. The snake is not the devil, the fruit is not an apple, and the woman did not cause the man to sin. According to “Divine Pronouncements,” popular readings emphasize the curse on the snake over the pronouncements about the new circumstance of the man and the woman. In “Divine Blessings and Exile from the Garden” Gnuse confronts the depiction of the exile from the garden in religious art that has a stern angel sending out a forlorn couple. Instead, Gnuse reads this as an act of grace. God did not kill the woman and man but merely exiled them. He reads the story of the exile from the garden in light of the returning exiles who could have seen themselves as the new men and women returning to the garden of Jerusalem after their exile.

That Gnuse provides limited comparative data for Gen 4 breaks the pattern. Instead of a chapter that examines comparative texts, there are but a few pages of comparative material on sibling conflict. The placement of Cain and Abel account immediately after the garden story generates a number of questions. In light of this, Gnuse wonders, “Perhaps Genesis 3 arose and was partially influenced by the narrative in Genesis 4” (144). He explores the possibility that these characters could be proxies for farmer and herder lifestyles and people groups. The chapter on “The Family of Cain” indicates they were both sedentary and pastoralists, the inventors of musical instruments. Gnuse notes that the descendants of Cain left their impression on the world. The next chapter, “The Family of Seth,” examines the other family system, the family of Enoch and Noah.

Section 3 (chs. 15–20) once again begins with a treatment of the comparative data in “Ancient Flood Accounts.” Before moving to the flood narrative, Gnuse addresses the enigmatic story of “The Giants.” He depicts the giants as proxies for imperial powers. These powers and their exercise of violence prompt the flood. The flood narrative is the focus of three chapters: “The Flood,” “The Covenant with Noah,” and “Noah and His Sons.” The flood chapter outlines how the biblical writers nuanced Mesopotamian materials. “The Covenant with Noah” and “Noah and His Sons” are two parts of the aftermath of the flood. The first presents how the Priestly writer demythologizes the symbolic world of Mesopotamian flood narratives and expands the promise of Gen 8:21–22; the second describes the emerging social order that sprung from the children of Noah. This sets the stage for the next chapter, “Genealogies,” which continues the themes of power. “This little section may have been added by the Yahwist as veiled political commentary on the tyrannical powers that ruled Mesopotamia” (247).
Section 3 (chs. 21–22) gives Gnuse an opportunity to reframe Gen 11. Chapter 21 (“The History behind Babel”) has strong similarities to chapters 1 (“Ancient Near Eastern Creation Accounts”), 8 (“Origin of Evil according to the Ancients”), and 15 (“Ancient Flood Accounts”). Each provides an introduction to relevant comparative data. However, since there are few ancient Near Eastern parallels for the Babel story, Gnuse offers the historical background of the ziggurat as a cosmic mountain of Mesopotamian religions. He places the story in the exilic and postexilic community.

Gnuse delivers a commentary for the nontechnical reader that presents up-to-date research. The title clearly portrays the premise of the book, that popular interpretations of Gen 1–11 clearly misunderstand and sometimes misrepresent the biblical texts. Gnuse brings current scholarship into an accessible presentation. His use of illustrative material makes the book more readable without detracting from his line of reasoning. This book offers a theological commentary that can work in many settings.