Amy C. Merrill Willis’s volume takes a unique approach to the popular apocalyptic visions of the book of Daniel by viewing them not primarily as countdowns to the end, encouragement for the persecuted, or even support for political rebellion. Instead, she argues that these visions represent the writing community’s struggle with the sovereignty of God (188–92). This perspective represents an interesting twist, in that many would find not a struggle with the sovereignty of God in Daniel but a statement of the sovereignty of God (i.e., Herbert Niehr, “Das Buch Daniel,” in Einleitung in das Alte Testament [ed. Erich Zenger; 7th ed.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2008], 507–16). That said, the book argues for the writing community’s struggle with the sovereignty of God by examining most of the visions in the Masoretic Text of Daniel, namely, 2:31–45 and chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10–12 (5).

The primary concern of chapter 1 is demonstrating the need of a reevaluation of “the apocalyptic depiction of God’s power and presence over history” in the book of Daniel through “rhetorical and ideological methodologies” (1). The argument is that “texts are not simply reflections of reality or statements of fact, but are instead suasive and argumentative. They respond to a particular historical situation and emerge from an implicit dialogue of ideas” (1). The symbolic nature of the visions in Daniel becomes that
particular area where “rhetorical and ideological analyses” can be helpful (2). Willis’s argument, in essence, is that the vision scenes are actually symbolic historical summaries/résumés that reveal dissonance not so much through “non-fitting or contradictory cognitions” (27) but through the narrative placement of these different symbolical historical summaries together: “Daniel’s visions do most of that cognitive work by knitting together a narrative of imperial history which brings to the fore the subtle interactions between divine power, imperial power, and the community. Through this narrative, its readers come to envision an end that can account for and mediate the present experience of divine absence and invisibility in history” (31). The dissonance is highlighted by comparisons with “the social and cultural setting of the text’s producers” and “gaps created by the logic of a text” when it is suppressing “certain voices or views” (33). This, of course, necessitates locating the composition of these texts of Daniel in a particular time period, which Willis does between the late third century and shortly after 163 B.C.E. (35; see also 40).

Chapter 2 unfolds this interpretative plan in relation to Dan 2:31–45. Although Willis identifies three compositional layers (37), she focuses her discussion on the second compositional layer (38), identifying “between 252–190 B.C.E.” as the key social and cultural setting for understanding this text (40). This places this text firmly within the “early Seleucid setting … in which Jesus ben Sira was at work” (40). The Hebrew text of Sir 36 and the Aramaic text of Dan 2:31–45 are then compared to one another. Sirach actually becomes the hypertext due to the “transparent character of Sirach’s forms of writing” (40), while Daniel becomes the hypotext. The proposed Sitz im Leben of Sirach is the failure of a Deuteronomic perspective that “is no longer able to provide a meaningful or coherent way of knowing and asserting God’s power” (44). The second compositional layer of Daniel is argued to deal with this dissonance by using the four-kingdom schema in a vaticinium ex eventu form that “works to establish the community and their God in relation to the foreign powers in such a way that they can imagine the transcendence of the experience by projecting a point at which the pattern will be disrupted permanently and foreign power replaced permanently by native rule” (60).

Chapter 3 deals with the vision of Dan 7, seeing “experiential and cognitive rupture for the community,” which is evidenced by multiple layers of redaction in the chapter (62). Willis notes that the first vision cycle in 7:1–18 may date from the same time period as the key redaction in the vision from chapter 2; however, the decisive redaction of chapter 7 is “in 167 B.C.E.” and is “to reflect the outlawing of Torah observance by Antiochus IV” (67). This redaction creates two vision cycles, the first in 7:2–18, focusing on the four kingdoms similarly to chapter 2, and the second in 7:19–27, focusing on the little horn (67). The first vision cycle essentially replays the vision from chapter 2, adapting the imagery when it “weds this pattern to mythic and prophetic traditions that create ongoing
opposition as well as cooperation between the divine and human sovereign” (79). The second vision cycle marks “a reworking and expansion of the first vision cycle culminating in a noticeably revised historical résumé” (81) that is occasioned by Antiochus IV in 167 B.C.E. She states about this second cycle, “[T]his construction of divine sovereignty resolves the community’s dissonance through the assertion of divine power in the unfolding of time” (86).

Chapter 4 takes up the vision of Dan 8, viewing the whole vision as a “sequel to Dan 7’s vision of sovereignty” and “depicting the emerging crisis of divine absence taking shape in the winter of 167 B.C.E.” (92). The vision cycle’s focus on the little horn and its interpretation (119) is understood to be a departure from earlier resolutions to the concept of sovereignty in Daniel. The departure is a “shift away from the model of divine legitimation of kingship” because of “Antiochus’s desecration of the temple” (121). This separation leads to the biblical chapter’s disappointing conclusion.

Chapter 5 takes up Dan 9. The text seems to find its composition after the previous texts (127) but before “the restoration of the temple in 164 B.C.E.” (128) and “provides a complementary response to the profound dissonance evident in ch. 8” (124). In distinction to the earlier vision cycles, Dan 9 is clearly identified as a Deuteronomic cycle with clear borrowing from Lev 26 (130). However, the main dissonance is the lengthening of the seventy-year prophecy of exile from Jeremiah to seventy weeks of years in Daniel. Willis notes in this regard, “The prolongation of the oracle may be viewed as a textbook example of the way in which cognitive dissonance emerges due to failed prophecy, which is then resolved through recalculation” (135). However, this recalculation is exegetical, based on Lev 26, 2 Chr 36:21, and Dan 9, understood “to be a calculation of ten jubilee periods or seventy sabbatical cycles rather than a precise timetable” (140). Just as with each of the other vision cycles, this information is identified as vaticinium ex eventu (143). Willis concludes, “[T]he prayer and the oracle together form a process in which divine absence is addressed through the symbolic reconstitution of the holy” (150).

Chapter 6 handles Dan 10–12. The majority of the final vision cycle is dated after the previous texts but just before the rededication of the temple in the winter of 164 B.C.E. (158). With so much restatement of previous material from earlier chapters in Daniel, Dan 10–12 introduces in earnest the role of the maskilim. In this regard, Willis concludes, “Thus chs. 10–12 overcomes divine absence at the end not by reasserting the direct intervention of the divine, but by reenvisioning the agency of the maskilim ultimately as better knowers than the kings, better mediators of the divine theophany than the temple and priesthood, and better resistance than the Maccabees” (178).
Chapter 7 summarizes and concludes the book by making clear that the visions of Daniel are focused on sovereignty “rather than evil or religious persecution” (181).

The book as a whole is well-written and documented, especially in relation to literature in English, with significant interaction with secondary literature in the footnotes. However, the overall argument is problematic when the visions are viewed within the context of the whole of the book of Daniel. Both the visions in Dan 2 and 7 are the book ends of the larger chiastic argument that points exactly not to a problem with God’s sovereignty but to God’s sovereignty in 4:31–32 (Niehr, 508–9). Further, the idea of resolution from the visions in Dan 8, 9, and 10–12 pushes against the obvious lack of resolution not in relation to God’s sovereignty but the very difficult situation(s) of God’s people. Toward this end, the strategic placement of Dan 9 in the middle of the visions found in Dan 7–12 undermines the supposed questioning of the Deuteronomistic history from the comparative text in Sirach.

These issues highlight the continual struggle within biblical studies in relation to the primary context of interpretation. Willis clearly views the reconstructed historical context of the primary redactions of Daniel as the best way of understanding the text(s) of Daniel. Others would argue that, even though the text is clearly made up of smaller texts, the canonical text, even with its purposeful typological ambiguity, is the appropriate context for interpretation.