Seth D. Postell, Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Israel College of the Bible in Netanya, Israel, advances the interesting thesis that Gen 1–3 is a microcosm of Israel’s larger story. Postell argues that Gen 1–3 introduces both Torah and Tanak and as such anticipates and foreshadows Israel’s failure to live by the Sinai covenant and exile, all the while also highlighting for readers the anticipated eschatological activity of God in the “last days.” The book is a revision of his doctoral thesis completed at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, California, under the direction of John Sailhamer. The book is divided into seven chapters; a bibliography, scripture index, and subject and name index round out the volume. There is a great deal of depth and richness to the inner/intratextual echoes and allusions that Postell draws out; the volume is highly detailed, and this review cannot hope to capture all relevant aspects of this fascinating argument.

Chapter 1 serves as a very brief (four pages) introduction to the volume, making explicit the purpose and thesis of the book. Regarding the former, Postell adopts a “text-centered” approach, the particulars of which he will enumerate in more detail later in the volume; as to the latter, the book argues that, “when understood as the introduction to the Torah and to the Tanakh as a whole, Genesis 1-3 intentionally foreshadows Israel’s failure to keep
the Sinai Covenant as well as their exile from the Promised Land in order to point the reader to a future work of God in the ‘last days’” (3).

Chapters 2 (“History of Interpretation”) and 3 (“Recent Studies”) together form the larger history of scholarship on the question, though Postell has done the reader a favor in constructing these chapters in a worthwhile way so that readers will not want to skip over them. Rather than simply rehearsing a litany of scholarly forays into Gen 1–3, which we all know can be quite monotonous to read even though it is a necessary component of the dissertation, Postell uses this section to advance his argument. His survey of precritical (an unfair misnomer, in my eyes) approaches (among them Jewish midrashim, Jerome, Calvin, Johannes Cocceius, Matthew Poole), critical approaches (including Astruc, Gunkel, von Rad), challenges to critical approaches (Eckart Otto, Joseph Blenkinsopp, Gordon Wenham, and a number of literary scholars such as Alter, Sternberg, and Fokkelman) is put in service of legitimating the methodology advanced in the book: that Gen 1–3 in its final form exhibits both literary coherence and is shaped with an intentional authorial strategy (26). Moreover, the “Recent Studies” (surveying the works of André Sousan, C. John Collins, and John Sailhamer, among others), seeks to establish, among other things, that the canonical Pentateuch has a “prophetic orientation” (41).

Postell outlines his “Methodology” in chapter 4, expounding on what a text-centered approach is and what it is not. For him, a text-centered approach (1) is not ahistorical; (2) is not divorced from authorial intentionality; (3) does not locate meaning in the reader; and (4) does not locate meaning in the canon. These notices lead to the conclusion that “the Torah in its final form is the embodiment of authorial intent and its final form is an attempt to interpret accurately and faithfully the essentially Mosaic Torah (the precanonical Torah)” (54–55). A text-centered approach is one that (1) sees the final form of the text as the locus of meaning; (2) does not minimize the importance of historical events to which the text refers or which produced the text; (3) poses questions to the text that are text-centered yet not event-centered. The text, in this schema, is itself “the divine interpretation of God’s activity in history” (56). Concluding this section is a discussion of intertextuality as an all-too-often unappreciated yet integral part of understanding Gen 1–3.

Chapter 5 (“A Text-Centered Analysis of Genesis 1–3, Part 1”) begins to address the text proper, arguing specifically “that Genesis 1-3 prophetically foreshadows Israel’s exile (as a result of their failure to keep the Mosaic Covenant) in order to wed the final form Pentateuch with a prophetic eschatology” (75). Postell first argues for a relationship between the two creation accounts, seeing Gen 2–3 as assuming and elaborating on Gen 1:1–2:4, where God first creates the land ex nihilo and then, in 1:2–2:4a, prepares it for habitation. The remainder of this lengthy chapter highlights various textual connections
between Gen 1–3 and the larger Pentateuch and Torah. Among the connections Postell isolates are the following: the “good land” of creation and the “good land” promised to Abraham, Eden and the Promised Land, Adam and Abram, the precreation state of the land (הוֹרָה יָבֵד) with its status during the exile (cf. Jer 4:23, 24–26a), the creation mandate in Gen 1:26–28 and the command to conquer the Promised Land, the serpent and the indigenous Canaanites (with the serpent described as a proto-Canaanite), creation and the tabernacle, Adam’s failure/disobedience and the failure/disobedience of Israel’s later kings. All of this contributes, argues Postell, to the establishment of a prototypical Sinai covenant between God and the first couple in Gen 1–3.

In chapter 6 (“A Text-Centered Analysis of Genesis 1–3, Part 2”), Postell continues his close reading of the text, drawing out and isolating more textual connections. With the framework from chapter 5 in place, Postell’s attention now turns to Adam’s failure and its resonances with the Sinai narrative and the larger primary history. Postell contends, “not only is Israel’s sin depicted as the prototypical failure at Sinai, it is also depicted as Israel’s prototypical failure under Sinai” (129, emphasis original). Genesis 1–3, therefore, is not a warning to follow Sinai but a prophecy that Israel would not adhere to it (135). Genesis 1–3, for Postell, anticipates several key themes in the Pentateuch, prophetically foreshadowing Israel’s own life and failure under Sinai, leading to the need for eschatological deliverance. This future hope is tied up with two key figures, Jacob and Moses, in whom Postell sees “paradigmatic examples for the ideal readers of the final form Pentateuch to emulate” (142). Jacob and Moses become emblematic of life in exile and point toward the expectation and need for a “future-oriented faith (eschatology)” (147).

The final chapter of the book, chapter 7 (“Genesis 1–3: An Introduction to the Tanakh?”), investigates the seams of both the Pentateuch and the larger Tanak for textual cues about the narrative intentions in the Pentateuch’s shape. Postell sees the possibility for an eschatological future concluding all three sections of the Hebrew canon—Torah, Prophets, and Writings—and further sees Chronicles as telling the canonical story in nuce and thus concluding with the expectation of a Davidic figure who would lead Israel out of exile. As it relates to Gen 1–3, Adam is this prototypical king, the king of the beginning who foreshadows the king of the end. Already in the beginning (Gen 1–3), therefore, the “end” is in sight, suggests Postell.

Two important implications for biblical theology arise, says Postell, if readers accept his thesis. First, “to keep the Torah” does not mean to follow the Sinaitic stipulations but is (in line with Jesus’ words in John 5:46) “to believe in the one about whom Moses testified and through him, to experience the realities of a circumcised heart” (167). Second, Gen
1–3 contributes to New Testament theology, with Adam and Eve as a “biblical template for the Messiah and his ekklesia” (167).

Postell has offered a thorough, thoughtful, and detailed analysis of the textual complexity and contours of Gen 1–3 within the context of Genesis more specifically and the Pentateuch and Hebrew Bible more broadly. His analysis has highlighted precisely how important and seminal Gen 1–3 is as the introduction to the Torah and Tanak. It provides a whirlwind tour of the various yet beautiful intersections between this formative narrative of beginnings and the rest of the biblical text and demonstrates one way in which the biblical narrative breathed energizing life into the community of faith that was ancient Israel. There are, however, some questions and issues that persist. In the interest of clarity, I will present these under two rubrics: (1) rhetoric and organization; (2) method and argument. Some are, no doubt, more significant than others.

Regarding rhetoric and organization, despite the richness of the innumerable connections Postell draws, I wonder how much of this shaping is in fact intentional. Given the sheer number of connections Postell adduces to make his case, I am left wondering who would have noticed this and if in fact what Postell advocates is in fact too clever. Relatedly, the text does not lend itself to easy reading, becoming cumbersome and muddled at several junctures throughout. This is most likely a symptom of Postell’s trying to do too much in the space he had. For example, in each of the two substantive textual chapters (chs. 5 and 6), nearly every subsection, and some sections within those subsections, had its own uniquely defined and delineated thesis, usually introduced by the phrase “the purpose of this section is to argue…” or some variation thereof (see, e.g., 76 and 82 within the same chapter or 120, 125, and 142 within the same chapter). While this is certainly helpful in that the reader is entirely clear what Postell wishes to argue, the number of independent theses becomes a bit much after a while, and, more importantly, their relationships and interactions become increasingly less clearly defined. It may have proven stronger, organizationally, had Postell combined the four-page introduction with the history of interpretation (combining chs. 1 and 2), and also included the “Recent Studies” (ch. 3) in this unit as well. Methodology could then be afforded its own chapter, and rather than two chapters unhelpfully titled “A Text-Centered Analysis of Genesis 1–3” in two parts, reorganize this material topically so the flow and development is more apparent to the reader. Also making things difficult are several places where narrative hints are mentioned and only later developed more fully; the volume would have been better served to keep all this material together. For example, on page 142 Postell offers a multipage treatment of the intentionally of the Pentateuch and its canonical shape, which would fit much more appropriately in the method section, where this topic is taken up already. These repetitive moments make the book sometimes disjointed to read.
On the rhetorical side of things, three critiques emerge. First, there are an overwhelming amount of block quotations. I count forty-five within a 168-page book, coming out to an average of one block quotation approximately every 3.7 pages, with some taking up the entire page and others occurring multiple times on a single page. While this will not bother some readers, the cumulative rhetorical effect of this is twofold: it makes the person quoted, rather than Postell, the authority on the topic under discussion, and it makes following the argument and Postell’s own voice difficult. Where the quoted author’s ideas end and Postell’s own voice begins, and whether he is using them to advance his own arguments or as a foil, is not always clear. Second, while Postell’s study has paid very careful attention to a great many sources—the footnotes dominate many pages and show his breadth and depth of reading and research—this, too, becomes overbearing, especially when multiple sentences on a single page have three or more footnotes to them. While many may confess to not reading footnotes, to those of us who do give them attention, having more than one in a sentence makes reading that sentence alone a disjointed exercise. Gathering all footnote material together at the end of the sentence would have made reading far easier. Third, I wish Postell had shown more sensitivity to issues related to gender-inclusivity. On one occasion he fails to use gender-inclusive language (117: “Man’s dynamic relationship to God is reflected throughout the Pentateuch by means of the addition of dietary regulations”), and on another he seems to perpetuate the old adage that Eve was to blame for Adam’s failure in eating the fruit (“Just as Solomon had once enjoyed Adam’s glories, he likewise repeats Adam’s folly by passively following after the practices of his wives,” 133). More sensitivity to these issues would be welcome.

Pertaining to method and argument, I wish to highlight a few questions and concerns. First, the method espoused is surely a welcome breath of fresh air in Genesis and pentateuchal studies, yet Postell’s dual affirmation that a text-centered approach does not locate meaning in either the reader or in the canon produces difficulties. As to readers, Postell does not want to diminish the intentionality of the author’s meaning. While I resonate with this view and with Postell’s assertion that “readers, therefore, do not create meaning; rather, they discover it (intention) by means of a careful analysis of the text (embodied intention)” (53), I am less optimistic than he is that the meaning readers discover is always, or must be, part of the author’s intention. This need not pose a problem, though; herein lies the beauty, timelessness, and sustaining power of the biblical text. Further, on matters of canon, it remains ill-defined how what he does throughout the book differs from a truly canonical reading of Gen 1–3.

I applaud Postell’s appreciation for the book(s) of Chronicles, though question his appropriation of them in service to his overarching thesis. To reiterate, he sees the conclusion of the Tanak, with Chronicles, as leading to the expectation of a prophet or
redeemer who will lead the people out of exile, thus contributing to the eschatological expectation for a coming Davidic figure. While Jesus is, it seems, this figure in Postell’s mind (he is a professed messianic Jew or “Jew for Jesus”), this interpretation fits much better if one accepts the Christian canonical ordering of the Old Testament, ending with Malachi and the expected return of Elijah, heralding the coming of the Messiah. The interpretation, however, labors with Chronicles, which ends already with the edict of Cyrus announcing the return and provision for rebuilding the temple. Moreover, giving pride of place to the biblical canon’s historical narration of events (as opposed to what canonical book occurs last), by simply widening the canonical scope readers know well that this Davidic figure who leads the exiles home is introduced in the book of Ezra: Zerubbabel.

Relatedly, the emphasis on eschatology and the Torah and Tanak as having an eschatological scope is not entirely convincing. A future expectation and scope, yes, but I continue to marvel at why anything related to the “future” necessitates being called eschatological. While no one is an entirely disinterested reader or interpreter, it appears plausible that the Jewish messianic movement of which Postell is a part has colored his interpretation here more than what the text itself will allow. How far “the future” actually reaches need not be centuries. Additionally, Postell’s tethering of Gen 1–3 and the Pentateuch to a prophetic eschatology needs to be more nuanced, appreciating more deeply prophecy’s contribution to and development into eschatology. To simply and uncritically equate “future” and “eschatology” produces problems, again, not least of which is that within the canon one can clearly isolate Zerubbabel as the figure who fits the bill, leading the Judahites out of exile. Postell uses the phrase “king of the end” in reference to this messianic figure; what is meant by the word “end” here, especially given our current context in which the world was supposed to end twice in 2011 and will, if the Mayans are correct, end in December 2012? More transparency about the nexus of terms “eschatology,” “future,” and “end” is needed.

Briefly, a few less significant concerns, yet important ones nonetheless. While Postell does not advocate that Moses penned the final form of the Pentateuch, he does accept Mosaic authorship of large parts of it. While he states that this is not definitive for his argument, at several points the assumption of Mosaic authorship and authority unfairly colors his interpretation. For example, he sees the final form of the Pentateuch as “prophetic validation of Moses’ predictions regarding certainties of seduction, failure, and exile” (120), whereas critical scholarship has demonstrated that these are after-the-fact predictions that naturally came to fruition given the compositional concerns of the shaper(s) of the Pentateuch. Postell’s own theology also creeps in while discussing the connection between Gen 1 and Gen 2–3. Postell argues for Gen 1:1 as God’s initial work of creation, after which in 1:2–2:4 God makes that creation a habitable place, employing
the rationale that this “eliminates the problem of explaining any pre-created material” (85). Why must this be a problem? Joseph Blenkinsopp’s recent Creation, Un-creation, Re-creation: A Discursive Commentary on Genesis 1–11 (T&T Clark, 2011), which I have also reviewed for RBL, addresses this issue head on and in a theologically and textually sensitive way.

Lastly, the figure of the serpent appears inexplicable to Postell. Why would God allow such a cagey and crafty figure to exist in the Edenic paradise? Postell’s answer is that the serpent is in fact a symbol of the prototypical Canaanite. Postell further suggests that “this solution alleviates any possible suggestion that God is responsible for the origin of the Canaanite cults or evil in any way” (121). In fact, accepting this premise produces the exact opposite effect. If the serpent is a prototypical Canaanite, and Adam/Israel is threatened by them but will ultimately overcome, does this logic not then implicate God all the more in the Canaanite genocide when Israel conquers the land in Joshua and Judges? How precisely is God exonerated? Also as it regards the serpent, Postell maintains that the ancient Near East is an unhelpful context to use to aid in comprehending the character of the serpent more fully, claiming that one “run[s] the risk of hypothetical interpretations moving beyond the confines and control of the text itself” (121). Pressing beyond the confines and control of the text, however, is precisely what it seems Postell does in interpreting the serpent, once hinting at and only a few pages later explicitly connecting the serpent with Satan (120, 123) when no such evidence in support of this fact exists in the Genesis text. One example would be the serpent who eats the plant of life after Gilgamesh has retrieved it in the Gilgamesh Epic, marking a strong potential connection with the Genesis narrative and the concerns of the first couple.

It is not my intention through these multiple critiques to undermine what Postell has achieved. He certainly cannot be faulted for failing to show his work, and the connections between Gen 1–3 and the Torah and Tanak are indeed quite prevalent. Postell has given us ample reason to appreciate Gen 1–3 anew for its richness, complexity, and importance as the introduction to the Bible and has shown that even the most tired texts still have much in the way of new things to say.