Scott W. Hahn has produced an unconventional and intriguing commentary on the book(s) of Chronicles. The major point of contention about this book is immediately apparent in its title. The extent to which distinctly Christian terms such as “kingdom of God” and “liturgical” will be useful as lenses through which to look at this oft-neglected portion of the canon should help to formulate the primary questions throughout the book. Hahn does not provide a clear and precise definition of “liturgy” and seems to be using the word in a general sense for anything having to do with worship. Thus, it would seem roughly synonymous with the common use of “cultic” in Old Testament scholarship, a word that would likely be problematic for much of the book’s audience.

After a brief introduction, the book is divided into seven chapters, according to Hahn’s division of Chronicles: (1) “Chronicle of All Divine History” (1 Chr 1–9); (2) “Highly Exalted for the Sake of His People” (1 Chr 10–16); (3) “His Throne Shall Be Established Forever” (1 Chr 17); (4) “God Gives Rest to His People” (1 Chr 18–29); (5) “Liturgy and Empire” (2 Chr 1–9); (6) “In Rebellion Since That Day” (2 Chr 10–28); (7) “Exile and Return” (2 Chr 29–36).
This is not a standard biblical commentary in that it does not provide a translation of the text, discussion of textual issues, presentation of literary structure, or chapter-by-chapter interpretation of the biblical text. Each chapter of the book does have a set format, though, beginning with an outline of the particular section of Chronicles, followed by a one-paragraph “Synopsis of the Text.” The bulk of each chapter then consists of a “Theological Exegesis and Commentary” organized under what Hahn identifies as the major theological themes of that section. Each chapter ends with a brief section on “Christian Interpretation” of its portion of text.

One test of a commentary on Chronicles is its ability to make good sense of the book’s peculiar beginning and ending, and Hahn makes helpful progress on both counts. The nine chapters of genealogy that begin Chronicles are for many readers too large an obstacle to climb. Hahn’s understanding of them is grounded in the observation that they do not lead up to the storytelling that begins with King Saul in 1 Chr 10 but “extend into the present of the Chronicler’s first audience” (18). They are, therefore, an outline of and invitation to the whole work that demonstrates that “Israel’s history, preserved and amplified in this introductory genealogy, proves that firstborns and others can fail, beginning with the firstborn of creation, Adam. But that same history proves that God does not fail” (39). If this sentence gives the sense that Hahn is trying to read Chronicles the way he thinks the apostle Paul might have, such an inference is probably not far off.

The relentlessly paced ending of the book of Chronicles is addressed well by Hahn’s typological approach. He understands the Chronicler to be participating in the pattern of presenting the restoration as a new exodus but argues that the writer “introduces a wrinkle into this new-exodus typology” (167). Hahn’s central argument about Chronicles is clear in the final “Christian Interpretation” section of the book, where he urges more attention to Chronicles from New Testament scholars because “the authors of the New Testament lived under conditions similar to those in the Chronicler’s audience—trying to keep the faith in ‘exile’ as believers in the true God, yet under the domination of a foreign power and its gods” (190–91). Chronicles proposes “an alternative biblical theology of empire.” The major difficulty of this argument is that Hahn has made the Second Temple the critical center for the Chronicler’s vision of a new “liturgical kingdom,” and most of the New Testament was produced in the wake of the destruction of the temple.

The lack of a text-by-text treatment of Chronicles is somewhat mitigated by the extensive scripture index at the end of the book, which includes all of the references to the books of Chronicles, so material on a particular text can be readily located. The index reveals, among other things, the author’s intense interest in the connection of Chronicles to earlier parts of the Old Testament. The 203 references to the book of Exodus in the index,
for example, which amount to more than one per page of the book, are just one indication of this interest.

Assumptions found in various parts of the books sometimes seem incompatible. For example, Hahn contends that “[t]he Chronicler was well aware of the deep vein of hope for a Davidic Messiah, expectation that in the Chronicler’s own day attached to the Davidic Zerubbabel” (69). This claim generally fits with the assumption expressed in other places that “the author writes in the early postexilic period” (19). It is difficult to imagine that the hopes of a revived monarchy tied to Zerubbabel could have survived his failure much past the end of the sixth century, though, so it seems problematic when Hahn presumes that the writer of Chronicles knows the “extrabiblical traditions” about Adam and Eve being buried in the cave at Machpelah and the Garden of Eden being in the same place as Mount Moriah and, subsequently, the temple. Hahn does not identify the source of these traditions, which are found in the medieval work known as the Zohar and may be derived from midrashic sources like Bereshit Rabbah, but pushing such sources and their ideas back into the sixth century B.C.E. seems unlikely, and interaction with them on the part of Chronicles fits better with a late Persian or early Hellenistic date.

The “Christian Interpretation” sections at the end of each chapter look beyond strict textual connections for ways in which the New Testament writers may have understood their work as a continuation of the Chronicler’s. For Hahn, all of these writers are biblical theologians and commentators on Israelite religious tradition. These parallels are often creative and helpful, though they sometimes seem strained. While it is possible that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew began his work with a genealogy to imitate Chronicles (41), it seems much more likely that, given the prominence of Moses in Matthew, this Gospel writer found such inspiration in the prominence of genealogical material in the Torah. It is in one of these sections that Hahn describes “the Chronicler’s truth-be-told, warts-and-all portrait of the Davidic line” as a possible influence on Matthew’s genealogy. This seems odd in light of Matthew’s reference to “the wife of Uriah” as Solomon’s mother, an inconvenient memory that the Chronicler seems desperate to expunge.

For too long Christian biblical scholarship has sought to emphasize the discontinuity between Second Temple Judaism and the church. This is a nicely written and well-produced volume that seeks in a particular way to overcome that tendency. Regardless of whether one thinks this is the best approach to doing to, the effort is highly instructive and most welcome.