Peter T. Lanfer’s *Remembering Eden: The Reception History of Genesis 3:22–24*, a study of the later versions and interpretive traditions of the expulsion narrative, is a welcome contribution to the budding field of reception history. Although a revision of his doctoral dissertation directed by Bill Schniedewind at UCLA, this well-written work, utilizing endnotes, is an enjoyably engaging read.

In the first chapter Lanfer introduces the expulsion narrative and argues that, in spite of its apparent marginality in the Hebrew Bible (Masoretic Text), early Jewish and Christian literature demonstrate interpretations and expansions of themes and motifs, symbols and metaphors, employed by the Hebrew Bible itself—that is, the presumed marginality of the expulsion narrative vanishes when the restraint of “explicit reference” is removed. The interpretations and expansions themselves preserve the specific ideological tensions of their own historical contexts and in turn reveal the dialogue latent within the redacted text of Gen 2–3. Lanfer next delineates his methodological pluralism, whereby he, in line with the approach of Annette Yoshiko Reed (*Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity* [Cambridge University Press, 2005]), appropriates gains from source, form, and redaction criticism while nevertheless seeking to understand the significance of the composite text itself (rather than an elusive Ur-text). Refreshingly—and this is the boon
of reception studies in general—he does not quickly discard as eisegetical the contribution to our understanding of a text’s meaning by early divergent interpretations.

While not presuming to establish either the text’s singular meaning or the author’s intent, Lanfer’s common-sense course seeks to promote boundaries to a text’s meaning, as constrained by its “symbolic capital” identified in part by interpretations of the text. The symbols or motifs then become topics for the ensuing chapters (the tree of life, wisdom, immortality, and the temple), which Lanfer tries to approach more or less chronologically as follows: (1) Masoretic Text; (2) Septuagint; (3) Dead Sea Scrolls; (4) pseudepigrapha; (5) New Testament; (6) rabbinic literature; (7) patristic literature; (8) gnostic texts—and by moving from translation texts to narrative expansions to literary allusions.

Referring to the tree of life as the most salient and problematic motif, chapter 2 rightly argues that, despite the scarcity of explicit citations, the tree of life metaphor and related motifs are ubiquitous. After considering the ancient Near Eastern background to the tree of life, Lanfer suggests that the quest for wisdom from the tree of knowledge in Gen 2–3 presents a polemical response to the ancient Near Eastern analogues, with the tree of life being inserted as an effort to prioritize the cult and covenant (over against an independent pursuit of wisdom). Gilgamesh, for example, “is encouraged to seek wisdom when he loses the plant of life,” whereas in the expulsion narrative, “immortality is lost with the acquisition of wisdom (or at least a particular type of illicit wisdom)” (36). This fertile chapter also explores the concepts of the cosmic tree and the “eternal planting,” where the attributes of the tree of life are transferred to the righteous community and, in Christian interpretations, to the cross of Jesus, as well as being widely developed as a metaphor for the presence of God.

The third chapter, exploring the wisdom motif, posits a tension between the individual pursuit of wisdom, which Lanfer argues was part of the core Eden narrative (Gen 2–3), and the Deuteronomic ideology of the (polemically inserted) expulsion narrative, which is concerned primarily with covenant and cult. This tension in turn “reflects the cultural tensions between the emerging sapiential schools and those focused on covenant and cult during the Josianic reforms or in early exilic literature such as Jeremiah and Lamentations” (68). Later sapiential interpreters, it is suggested, co-opted the motifs and themes of the expulsion in their own writings so that its polemical role progressively vanished. Along the way, Lanfer covers motifs related to the interpretation of the problem of knowing in the expulsion narrative (including the idea of hubris in the pursuit of wisdom); of the threat of godlikeness in Gen 3:22 (including the role of the Torah, adherence to which allows the righteous a metaphoric return to Eden); and of life as the goal of wisdom and the “way” to the garden.
Chapter 4 examines the motifs associated with immortality, a hope expressed by interpreters as a regaining of access to Eden via reversal: the removal of the flaming sword, the opening of the gates, and so on. The great variety of interpretations of immortality—from astral immortality and lengthy blessed life to bodily resurrection in the eschaton—demonstrate the instability of ideas related to this hope. Lanfer further develops here the motif of the “way,” which, he writes, “may be most directly connected to the preparation of the ‘way of the Lord’ in Isaiah and the ‘way of life’ in Proverbs, though these may ultimately be aligned with the ‘way to the Tree of Life’ in the expulsion narrative” (126).

The fifth chapter investigates interpretations of the expulsion narrative that affirm the connection—more symbolic than “strictly exegetical,” as Lanfer explains—between Eden and the temple. This theme, Lanfer correctly notes, appears in such a variety of materials (archaeology, iconography, texts) and so persistently surfaces in both Jewish and Christian interpretations of the expulsion narrative that the original centrality of the temple in the Eden narrative of Gen 2–3 appears to be a foregone conclusion. The association of Eden and the temple is considered across three main avenues: Eden as an ideal temple, the present temple as Eden, and the future temple as a restored Eden. Throughout these sections Lanfer mines the richness of the Eden–temple connection within the history of interpretation, utilizing helpful subsections, such as on the priestly role of Adam and the dwelling of God as holy mountain.

The concluding chapter rehearses the preceding labors in summary fashion, reaffirming the composite nature of the text—essentially twofold: an older narrative containing only the tree of knowledge and a later editorial frame that inserts the tree of life (in Gen 2:9 and 3:22–24) as well as the expulsion narrative. Lanfer also reiterates his assessment that the dialogical approach to biblical studies he has employed constrains the interpretive possibilities more helpfully than other approaches, such as literary or reader-response criticism.

As already mentioned, Remembering Eden is a sound contribution to the field of reception history (and to that of interpretation in general); the comments that follow do not detract from this valuation. To begin, while there is wide consensus in scholarship as to the composite nature of the Eden narrative, some readers will not be entirely convinced that the prioritizing by interpreters of one motif (such as wisdom) over another (such as cult, emphasized by other interpreters) necessarily betrays the composite nature of a text. In any case, the interpreters themselves, as Lanfer notes, “do not necessarily choose sides between wisdom and cult/covenant, but the dialogue between the two provides a framework of interpretive restraint” (162), and this constraint—Lanfer’s main contribution from my perspective—is valid regardless of one’s view of a text’s
provenance. Returning to the point, is it possibly an anachronism to drive such a wedge between wisdom and covenant (cf. Prov 1:7; 9:10; Ps 111:10; Job 28:28, etc.), especially when one then needs to posit a progressively vanishing polemical role for the expulsion, it being co-opted by later sapiential interpreters? At the least, when one emphasizes that the pursuit of “wisdom” described in Eden is that of illicit knowledge (noted by Lanfer, though he does not follow the implications of this adequately), then the “tension” between wisdom and covenant is relieved somewhat.

Moreover, while Gen 3:22–24 is certainly freighted with temple motifs, is this insertion (along with the tree of life in 2:9) really so out of place in the Eden narrative—that is, can the temple symbolism of the Eden narrative be restricted to these verses? Gordon J. Wenham, in a landmark essay—curiously absent altogether from Lanfer’s footnotes and bibliography—entitled “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story” (1986), argued that Eden is a highly symbolic narrative presenting the garden as an archetypal sanctuary. Now while many of Wenham’s parallels between the garden and Israel’s later tabernacle/temple are to be found within the expulsion text (such as the cherubim and the eastward orientation of the gateway), several important parallels are from other parts of the Eden narrative. For example, the verb used for YHWH’s walking (ḥithallēk) in the garden in Gen 3:8 is used to describe the divine presence in the later tent sanctuaries (see Lev 26:12; Deut 23:15; 2 Sam 7:6–7); the verbs utilized for Adam’s work, “to worship and obey” (lēḇodāh ūlēšāmrāh) in Gen. 2:15 are used together elsewhere in the Pentateuch only with reference to the Levites’ duties in guarding and ministering in the sanctuary (Num 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6); YHWH’s clothing of Adam in Gen 3:21, utilizing kētōnet and the hiphil of lābaš, appears to be echoed in Moses’ clothing of priests (Exod 28:41; 29:8; 40:14; Lev 8:13); the river flowing through the garden, branching out into four headwaters in Gen 2:10–14 may also be included as temple imagery (Ps 46:5; Ezek 47); the presence of “good gold,” along with bdellium and onyx/carnelian stones in Gen 2:12 also connects the garden with the temple—a connection acknowledged by Lanfer (142). Interestingly, Wenham had also connected the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with Israel’s later sanctuaries, drawing particularly on D. J. A. Clines’s “The Tree of Knowledge and the Law of Yahweh” (1974).

Apart from Lanfer’s proposed historical context for the redaction of the garden of Eden narrative, this discussion brings up another question regarding the possible limits of a reception history merely of the expulsion narrative per se, namely, is it possible? Given that the expulsion narrative was read by interpreters “canonically,” not only within the final form of the Eden narrative, but within that of the Pentateuch, which contains intertextual parallels between the creation account(s) and the tabernacle, is it possible to determine how later interpreters viewed the expulsion account in isolation from the dynamic of its presence within the larger corpus inevitably feeding into its meaning? In
The Tabernacle Pre-figured (2012), for example, I have argued that the Eden narrative functions within the Pentateuch precisely in order to explain the logic and function of the tabernacle/temple cultus, with the Day of Atonement reversing the movement of expulsion—this latter point militating against Lanfer’s assertion that “the Eden narrative as a myth about the origins of sin is a largely Christian concept” (109).

Finally, a point of lesser material, in several places (42, 45, 205 n. 54) Lanfer states that the LXX of Ps 1 interpretively inserts “of life,” reading “trees of life”—a puzzling remark I cannot substantiate.

Having registered some issues for consideration with regard to its more theoretical aspects, I close by reaffirming the more sure contribution of Lanfer’s stimulating book. Remembering Eden convincingly maintains that the history of interpretation should serve to constrain the possible meaning(s) of a text. Perhaps it turns about as fair play: after reading (and often judging) ancient interpreters for so long, they wind up reading (and often judging) us.