In *Genesis 1–11: Tales of the Earliest World*, Edwin Good offers a fresh translation of the Hebrew text of Gen 1–11 along with brief commentary on its content. Good is Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies and of Classics at Stanford University (he retired in 1991). His other major publications include *Irony in the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1981) and *In Turns of a Tempest: A Reading of Job with a Translation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990). This unexpected project arose from a conversation that Good had with his wife about the creation story in Gen 1. He began rereading the Hebrew text of Gen 1–11 and taking notes. These notes ended up being shaped into this slender volume.

Good divides Gen 1–11 into twelve units: 1:1–2:4a; 2:4b–24; 2:25–3:24; 4:1–16; 4:17–26; 5:1–32; 6:1–4; 6:5–9:17; 9:18–29; 10:1–32; 11:1–9; 11:10–32. These units form the twelve chapters that are the heart of *Genesis 1–11*. Good also offers a brief introduction and coda. Endnotes make up the final pages of this monograph. There is no bibliography because Good does not interact with the scholarly literature.

Good writes this book for students and others interested in reading the Bible. He does not write for academics, meaning those who may be expecting a conversation with the
scholarly tradition. Instead, Good reads the Hebrew text of Gen 1–11 closely and interacts with the ideas, characters, genealogies, and stories of the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. He asks questions that arise naturally from a close reading of the text. He also attempts to understand Gen 1–11 as an ancient religious document and not assume later theological questions and doctrines that may hinder a modern reader from engaging the content of the book of Genesis.

In each chapter Good offers his own English translation based on his careful analysis of the Hebrew text. He uses the final form of Masoretic Text as the basis for his translation. He does not dabble in textual criticism. If he finds a word that he considers untranslatable, he puts an ellipsis (…) in his translation. Although he stays wedded to the final form of the received Hebrew text, he changes vowels (but not the consonants) if he judges this to be helpful in understanding the text. Good’s translation is well done. He has a good sense of the aesthetic beauty of biblical Hebrew and works diligently to capture its essence in his English translation.

Part of the charm of Good’s translation is his decision to emphasize the cultural differences and antiquity of Gen 1–11. Toward this goal, Good moves away from several standard practices in English translation. First, he departs from using “LORD” and “God” for the deity described in Gen 1–11. Instead, he opts for the Hebrew words “Yahweh” and “Elohim.” In Good’s view, “LORD” does not speak meaningfully to a modern audience for whom monarchy is ancient history. Likewise, he suggests piquantly that by avoiding the word “God” he will help readers from making assumptions about the meaning of the word “god” that may cause them to mishear the message of the book of Genesis. Second, Good avoids using modern English equivalents for ancient Hebrew names. Thus, readers encounter “Qayin” and “Hebel” in place of the “Cain” and “Abel,” and “Eve” becomes “Chavah.” Last, Good shuns dynamic ways of understanding the Hebrew waw consecutive imperfect and simply renders each one sequentially as “and.”

After sharing his translation, Good offers his readers some interpretive comments. His comments focus on explaining succinctly the meaning of the words and images within the ancient Near Eastern context. For example, Good provides his readers a substantive and accessible explanation for the terms and images in the first creation account (1:1–2:4a). He paints the picture of the ancients’ understanding of cosmology using accessible English terminology. Most helpfully, he uses “bowlshape” in place of the typical English translation “firmament” to describe the divide between the waters above and waters below.

By focusing intently on the text, Good is able to help readers hear the early chapters of Genesis as its original listeners did and less through our modern religious filters. This is
one of the strengths of his book. Persons of various religious backgrounds or none at all can appreciate Gen 1–11 as an ancient religious document whose ideas and images influenced, inspired, and informed the development of Judaism and Christianity. Good can be provocative, but he does this as a good teacher always does by posing challenging questions. He raises questions that arise from a close analysis of the text. He points out tensions between theological affirmations stemming from later Judaism and Christianity and the statements in the text. For example, in his remarks on Gen 1:2 he helps readers to understand that creation ex nihilo is a later concept that does not fit the thought patterns of Gen 1. He also points out that many modern English translations use the word “spirit” or “Spirit” to refer to God’s presence over the primordial waters. He argues that this practice is more about a later canonical understanding of God as spirit and would be foreign to the original audience of Gen 1. A second example is his frequent argument that Gen 1–11 is not strictly monotheistic. Such a claim is hardly controversial to students of the ancient Near East, but it will be provocative to some readers. He finds evidence that Israel’s god Yahweh is addressing other deities in the first-person plural statements in 1:26, 3:22, and 11:7. He also points to the ambiguity of one strand of Israel’s religious tradition’s use the plural form ‘elohim to refer to its deity.

Good’s interpretation is rooted in the final form of the text, and he makes many excellent literary observations on the text within the various units that he discusses. His work with the macro structure of Gen 1–11 is less helpful. He assumes the basic source-critical understanding that the extant text stems from various strands. He is not wedded to any particular articulation of source criticism, but it does provide him with an explanation for the tensions within the flood story and for what he describes as two traditions for how the earth was filled with people (10:1–32 and 11:1–9). If the flood story displays the careful melding together of traditions, this later example does not. He notes that 11:1–9 seems to retell the result of 10:1–32. Obviously appealing to source criticism is a possible explanation for this, but it does not explain the literary arrangement well. The author/redactor of Gen 1–11 could have easily located 11:1–9 before 10:1–32 but did not. Is it perhaps because Gen 1–11 is attempting to set up the subsequent call of Abram (12:1–3) by repeatedly organizing the earliest history of humanity in a series of cycles of rises and falls of readers’ expectations for the men and women described in these chapters? Genesis 10:32 seems to be an unambiguously positive statement about humanity’s achieving of God’s creational intentions (1:28; cf. 9:1), but the hopes of readers that somehow postflood humanity is living rightly are dashed in 11:1–9 when they learn that humanity has spread across the earth due to its ongoing attempt to move beyond the creator God’s imposed boundaries. This is a small quibble, but it illustrates both a strength and weakness of Good’s approach. He is at his best when discussing the
small details of the nuance of a word rather than in observing the whole of Gen 1–11 as a coherent and vital prologue to Gen 12–50.

The only real flaw in this volume is Good’s decision to eschew conversation with academic biblical scholarship. Good’s reluctance to dialogue with scholarly literature does a disservice to his ultimate goal of helping interested readers. He is well-versed in the discipline from his years of research and teaching. He appeals to source criticism several times in this volume. He explicitly identifies two distinct flood accounts within the biblical narrative. Such explanations surely pique the interest of students who may be unfamiliar with biblical criticism. A few simple bibliographic entries could have provided his readers with suggestions for further study and strengthened the usefulness of his volume.

In sum, Good’s *Genesis 1–11* offers readers of the book of Genesis a close analysis that introduces these chapters anew to teachers and students as well as to their friends and family. Good is an eloquent writer. His grasp of Hebrew and English allows him to produce a quality translation of Gen 1–11. His English prose is a pleasure to read and will prove accessible to a wide range of readers interested in a fresh exploration of Israel’s understanding of its prehistory. Good demonstrates good interpretive method by observing carefully the details of the text and engaging the questions that inquisitive readers would ask regardless of their prior theological commitments.