Long’s book is the fruit of her doctoral studies undertaken at the University of Wales, and as its title suggests it offers a reception-historical study of the story of Abraham offering Isaac for sacrifice (Gen 22). The book falls into two distinct parts. In the first part Long reviews the treatment of the narrative in the Hebrew Bible and in subsequent Jewish and Christian tradition, discussing treatments in both literary and other media. In the second part Long discusses five musical settings of the Gen 22 narrative, four of which are from the Christian tradition and one from the Jewish tradition.

The more detailed contents of the book are as follows. After a short introduction in which Long sets out the structure of the body of the book and gives a list of questions that have influenced the discussion of the differing treatments, chapter 1 consists of a discussion of the text of Gen 22. Long characterizes this as literary rather than textual exegesis, in that it focuses on issues of structure within the Gen 22 narrative. The first two sections of chapter 1 discuss characters and narrative structure in broad terms, and then Long presents a literary analysis that divides the Gen 22 story into a prologue, three acts with several scenes each, and an epilogue. Throughout Long intersperses comments on the biblical text with references to how particular aspects of the story have been treated in subsequent reception history.
In chapter 2 Long addresses the reception of Gen 22 in Christian tradition. Here she includes sections on the New Testament, early Christian art, the church fathers, the Feast of Corpus Christi, the fifteenth century, the sixteenth century, sixteenth-century tapestry, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artifacts, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the twentieth century. A vast range of media is surveyed in the course of this chapter, from sculpture and painting to musical compositions, liturgies, plays, tapestries, and household objects adorned with images inspired by Gen 22, as well as the speculations of the theological literati. As before, Long intersperses comments on how the aspects under discussion appear in subsequent reception, particularly in the five musical works that will be studied in more detail later on, with the discussions of the aspects themselves.

Chapter 3 focuses more closely on one particular aspect of Christian reception of Gen 22, namely, mediaeval mystery plays. Once again Long highlights where particular plot elements that are present in the plays appear in the five musical compositions that will be discussed in detail later in the book. Chapter 4, the final chapter in part 1 of the book, discusses Jewish reception of Gen 22. This mainly deals with sources from antiquity (Philo, Pseudo-Philo, Josephus, Jubilees, midrashim, and targumim), although more modern Jewish treatments in a range of media are also mentioned, as are Jewish liturgical uses of Gen 22.

Part 2 comprises four main chapters plus a conclusion. Chapter 5 covers the seventeenth-century oratorio based on Gen 22 by Giacomo Carissimi, the so-called father of oratorio, which probably functioned in a devotional setting as part of the celebration of Mass. Long works through the oratorio in sections, commenting on both the libretto and its musical setting, and argues that Carissimi used a range of musico-rhetorical devices in order to portray Abraham as entirely virtuous and obedient to God, in other words, as an appropriate example for the faithful to follow. Chapter 6 moves on to the eighteenth century and discusses a setting by the Bohemian composer Josef Myslivecek of a libretto based on Gen 22 by the Italian Pietro Metastasio, court poet to the Habsburg emperor Charles VI in Vienna. Much of this chapter is spent on tracing the compositional context and the reception history of Metastasio’s libretto, while Myslivecek’s setting of it receives a short treatment at the end of the chapter. Long concludes that Metastasio’s libretto was intended to instruct Catholics and encourage them to remain faithful to the Church and the emperor, while Myslivecek’s musical setting altered the nuances of the libretto, particularly in making Isaac a more active character.

Chapter 7 addresses two twentieth-century settings of the Gen 22 narrative by the English composer Benjamin Britten, which were produced in the context of post-WWII reconstruction. One (Canticle II) is based on the fifteenth-century Chester mystery play Abraham and Isaac, and the other (Offertorium) combines Wilfred Owen’s poem “The
Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” which is a negative retelling of the Gen 22 narrative in which Abraham slaughters Isaac, with words from the third movement of the Latin Mass for the Dead. Long discusses both treatments together for much of the chapter, comparing aspects of their libretti and discussing the musical techniques used to bring the various elements of each libretto to life for the listener. She concludes that both works show a loving, nonviolent God but that the Offertorium shows the dark side of Abraham, epitomizing human rejection of God, while the Canticle presents Gen 22 as Isaac’s rite of passage that shows him worthy to succeed Abraham as patriarch.

Finally, chapter 8 discusses a treatment of Gen 22 by a contemporary female Jewish composer, Judith Lang Zaimont. Zaimont combines text from three different sources: a fifteenth-century Suffolk mystery play, Wilfred Owen’s poem “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” and the Jewish prayer the Mourner’s Qaddish, in order to reflect on how a loving father—whether Abraham or God—could contemplate or allow the violent death of his only son. In this work, as in Britten’s Offertorium, Isaac dies at the hands of his father, and there is no happy ending, an outcome that challenges both the christological interpretation of the Gen 22 narrative and the Christian understanding of God’s work of salvation in Jesus.

Following chapter 8 a conclusion that draws together thoughts from the discussions of the five musical treatments and stresses the ability of music to bring new depths of interpretation to the text. It ends with the idea that biblical commentators have neglected the concept of hearing in Gen 22, whereas all of the musical treatments stress Abraham’s ability to hear as being crucial to his correct understanding and the growth of his insight.

As this summary demonstrates, there is an enormous quantity of information in this book, which testifies to an immense amount of assiduous research. Long succeeds admirably in demonstrating just how pervasive a part of Judaeo-Christian culture and understanding the Gen 22 narrative has been. Her comments on the musical settings are also frequently insightful, demonstrating how the various musical devices contribute toward an overall interpretation of the texts and how they suggest particular nuances of understanding. Where the book is less successful, however, is in its structuring. Put simply, there is a lack of focus and discrimination in the book’s construction, which appears in several ways. First, discussions of given aspects of the topic often stray far from their purported focus into other aspects, so that everything is jumbled together. Thus, for example, chapter 1 is designated a literary investigation of the biblical text; however, it includes not only numerous references to the five musical works that are studied in part 2 of the book but also examples from pictorial art ranging from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries and a twentieth-century Irish poem mourning the death of a life-long
companion, a poem that is evoked for Long not by the biblical text but by a modern pictorial representation of Abraham mourning Sarah’s death.

A second issue is that of the book’s argument: there is none, or at least none that is readily discernible. This is a problem that often occurs, as in this case, when authors use multiple headings within chapters: the headings alone are erroneously assumed to be sufficient to indicate how the different sections of a work relate to each other, whereas in fact the author needs to write this relationship into the text. As remarked earlier, there is a wealth of material, but it lacks shape and direction and could be much more effectively deployed if it were more carefully structured and edited. A third issue is with titles: there is not always a very close correspondence between titles and content. This is perhaps most noticeable in the title of the book as a whole. The book describes itself as “The Reception of a Biblical Story in Music,” yet part 1, which reviews the reception of Gen 22 across the centuries and through the various media, at 133 pages is actually longer than part 2, in which the five musical works based around Gen 22 are discussed (116 pages). Additionally, in part 2’s chapter 6, only seven of the chapter’s twenty-nine pages actually discuss the musical setting to which the chapter is supposedly devoted. The net effect of all this is that, even though in part 2 Long provides a conclusion for each chapter and a series of conclusions for the book as a whole, the body of the book reads more as a catalogue of occurrences of Gen 22 in various media than as an ordered presentation of structured thought relating to a particular group of these occurrences.

There is a danger in reception history that it is undisciplined and simply becomes a list of observations. This book illustrates that danger. While it contains some very interesting material and some insightful analysis of the musical treatments, the lack of structure and discrimination in the book’s presentation makes it difficult to see beyond individual examples to any broader principles or to see how the conclusions that it offers have been arrived at.