Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) was a leading figure in the famous Göttinger Religionsgeschichtliche Schule and is known for his groundbreaking work on, among others, the Psalms, apocalyptic literature, form criticism, and tradition criticism. These, but especially his influential Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Eine religiösgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen. 1 und Ap. Joh. 12 (1895), revolutionized biblical scholarship and has become a classic in theological literature in general. Some of his other books on Genesis and the Psalms became available in English at an early stage, but the full text of this work is only now made available for the first time in English through this translation by K. William Whitney Jr.

In this work Gunkel examined the then-prevailing interpretive enterprise in biblical scholarship that consisted mostly of finding sources in the Bible (literary criticism/literarkritik) and dating them in terms of the original situation in and for which they were written (Zeitgeschichtlich approach). Except for its inconsistencies, he found it “methodologically objectionable” that this approach remained “only” with the end product at the end of the history of tradition and did not investigate its “often” more valuable earlier history (xxxix). As one of those rare figures who can pair deconstructive work with new, creative insights, Gunkel then used extrabiblical and religious texts that
had been rediscovered in the nineteenth century to develop his own religio-historical (Religionsgeschichtlich) approach to biblical texts in which he investigated the links of their mythological material with biblical texts. Because he knew his approach was new, he realized that he had to explicate his insights with clarity, good arguments, and solid evidence, something he did powerfully and in a still exemplary manner. He sought for “strict rules and norms” for exegetical tasks and thus took great care to develop his material theoretically and to do so “with scholarly rigor, caution, and professionalism” (xl). The scholarly approach in this book is already a good reason to get students in the field to study it in order to observe how thoroughly some of the masters in the field engaged with the challenges that they faced in their exegetical work.

Gunkel was and remains a controversial figure. Prestigious academic positions eluded him because of ideological opposition to his work. His criticism of dogmatic exegesis did not endear him to his opponents—despite the fact that he stressed that he did not want to promote a position that could “lead to the destruction of the belief that in this history God has revealed himself in a special way” (xl). In addition, his religio-historical approach was new to some of his colleagues because he insisted on locating the “special” Judeo-Christian faith in its wider religious context. His religio-historical work was for him not merely a matter of historical interest or choice. In contrast to scholarship of his time, he argued that this approach was necessary for a proper interpretation of biblical texts. He stressed that biblical texts often make sense only when they are read in the light of those nonbiblical traditions. On a deeper level, and more controversially, he wanted to develop the close link between the Bible and its surrounding world in terms of the greater unity in God’s creation—a position in which he was clearly influenced by Hegel. For him, other religions reveal that there is nothing coincidental about this world and its history and help us to understand that there is more to history than meets the eye. What seems to be human and natural is recognized by faith as God’s work in creation. Although some did not follow Gunkel in these more controversial and open views on other religions and others outrightly rejected his optimistic view, his work still challenges scholarship to account theologically for the material overlap between the Bible and its surrounding cultures.

There are other reasons why this is a valuable publication. Gunkel’s extensive discussion with proponents of literary criticism in this work provides insights into German literature that are otherwise not always accessible to English readers. But his work excels in its close readings of biblical and nonbiblical primary texts, and the results of these analyses remain challenging in many ways up to our present time. This publication also introduces one to Gunkel’s methodological acumen and skills, such as, for example, his pioneering work on form criticism. The careful reader will discover in this book an innovative, sensitive, and creative approach to texts. Gunkel with his enthusiasm for Goethe and major literary
figures of his time, understood poetic texts because of his poetic spirit and consequently had a feel for formal features of language and texts.

This book is in many ways outdated. Gunkel’s thesis about a Babylonian creation myth and its cosmogonic character has been widely criticized, although there has been some recent attempts to uphold it. His work on form criticism has also been critically investigated and questioned. His reading of Revelation in terms of a linear plot sometimes causes havoc in his exegetical work. More problematic are indications of theological prejudices that come to the fore, for example, in his perspective on later texts. Gunkel classified Old Testament prophecy as a powerful prototype and allocated to it a “very different place in oral tradition” than to the work of apocalyptists, “who know nothing of the high originality of the prophets and do not venture, even once, to mention their own names” (135). That he was not an anti-Semtitist is evident from Gunkel’s own remarks (see F. Watson in a paper on “Abraham’s Visitors: Prolegomena to a Christian theological exegesis of Genesis 18–19,” read at the Society for Scriptural Reasoning in 2001). But such a prejudice could be dangerous if it would be developed wrongly by less-gifted spirits, as indeed happened too often in the history of biblical scholarship. And it is a prejudice that is inconsistent with Gunkel’s own consistent historical approach and with his own obvious delight in a book such as 4 Ezra.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that this is the first full English translation of Gunkel’s work. It is a difficult book to translate. Except that it was written in typically nineteenth-century German, it is loaded with tables, technical footnotes, and pithy discussions of secondary literature. Any translation of it would therefore be fraught with risks and, if done well, a special feat. It is clear that much enthusiasm and time went into the translation of this book. If the mere fact that this book has been translated is to be welcomed and highly praised, the translation itself raises serious concerns. Only some examples can be spelled out here as motivation for this remark.

First, the quality of the translation varies. So, for instance, some parts are relatively flowing and thus more readable (e.g., ch. 4, pp. 181–238), while other parts are difficult to follow because, it seems, they closely follow the complex sentence structures of the German original. The translation thus is by times awkward, as, for example, on page 146:

> That he [the apocalyptic writer] would prophesy a contemporary “past” would be just as shocking as it would be totally pointless: *in what manner might faith anticipate, the thing speculates, that which everyone already knows!*

This is an attempt to translate the German original: “Denn dass ein Zeitgenosse Vergangenes prophezeit, ist ebenso unerhört wie völlig zwecklos: wie darf Der Glauben
erwarten, der Dinge weissagt, die jedermann kennt!” which means “that a contemporary (writer) prophesies past events is as unheard of as it is completely pointless: how dare someone expect to be believed when he prophesies events that are known to everyone.”

The translation is further marred by careless editing. German words are often misspelled. Thus in one footnote Vorgesungen (instead of Vorlesungen), zusammenestellt (instead of zusammengestellt) and sint (instead of sind) are wrongly spelled (334 n. 67). There are also typing errors (e.g., a missing “be” in the third paragraph from the top on p. 153). In the introduction on page xl, there is an example of another problem in the translation, that is, that phrases are left untranslated. In the original German phrase, “so doch in dieser Ausdehnung und Consequenz,” which is translated rather inaccessibly only as “at least to this degree of consequence” (instead of as “to this extent and in this consistent manner”), “dieser Ausdehnung” is left untranslated. In the same paragraph a phrase in the German original, “man wird die Behauptungen des Verfassers vielleicht für überkühne Hypothesen erklären,” is also not translated. On page 91, in the sentence “Then we arrive at a state of affairs like that which our ‘literary-critical times’ also adopts quite willingly. … nothing other than an author who copied another author,” the German phrase “Es wird alles ganz einfach” in the original is left out and replaced by an ellipsis.

There are questionable translations, as, for example, on page 374 note 326, where the German phrase “werden … die Kriege des Gogs und Magogs aufhören” is interpreted as “the war of God [sic] and Magog will belong” (instead of “stop/come to an end”). The phrase “so dass ihre Frucht abgeht,” which describes the abortion of a foetus in Exod 21:22, is literally translated as “so that her foetus goes away” (343 n. 17). On page 136, in a passage on the two witnesses, the original German phrase “weil sie zu Lebzeiten die Erde mit allerlei Plagen geschlagen haben” is wrongly translated as “they had been struck in their earthly lives with all sorts of calamities” (referring to Rev 11:6). On page xl the German phrase “ebenso sichere Resultate” is translated wrongly as “even more certain” instead of “just as/equally certain.”

On page 198 there are once again several mistranslations, of which the most problematic is that the German phrase “und schliesslich aus Mythen Sagen werden” is translated as “and finally how they become mythic sagas”—which is confusing and patently wrong. It should read: “and finally how myths became sagas” (lit., how sagas developed out of myths). For Gunkel the two were different (as is already clear from this page). Similarly, the German original that reads “Viele modernen Forscher werden diese Frage—besonders nach dem obigen Nachweis—kaum mehr für eine Frage halten” is presented in the English translation on page 91 rather puzzlingly as: “Many modern researchers would consider the question, even given the evidence above, to be little more than a question.” (Here the “mehr für” is misunderstood as “für mehr als”). It should read: “Many modern
researchers will hardly regard this question any more as a question”—especially after the above evidence. On page 340 (n. 59) there is a similar problem. Some words in the German quotation are misspelled (keines for keinen; Ducheinender for durcheinander). The first phrase (“über das Gesicht von den beiden Zeugen”) is translated as appearance instead of vision (referring to Rev 11’s vision of the two witnesses). More important, however, is the misunderstanding of the German original that reads:

Pfleiderer 329 über das Gesicht von den beiden Zeugen: Ich weiss hier keinen Rat als anzunehmen, dass dem Seher geschichtliche Vorfälle und ideale Vorstellungen in wirren Durcheinander sich vermischten.

It is translated as

Pfleiderer, Urchristentum, 329, in regard to the appearance of the two witnesses: “I know of no reason to assume here that the seer blended historical events and ideal images into a mixed-up mess,”

which is exactly the opposite of what Gunkel writes. He quotes Pfleiderer as saying that he has no other solution for this than to accept that…. In other words, he can only think that this type of mix-up is indeed taking place here.

This is not the only example of such a contradictory translation. On page 323 (n. 79), the German original that is translated is: “Dieser Satz wird wol im Princip von niemandem bestritten werden, wird aber in praxi nicht selten unbeachtet gelassen.” This is presented as: “This proposition will probably, in principle, not be challenged by anyone. In practice, however, it will seldom go unnoticed.” The last part of the German sentence should, however, read: “but in practice, it is often [i.e., not seldom] left unnoticed”—which is, once again, the opposite of the original German.

Perhaps the worst example of careless editing and translation is to be found on page 323 (n. 76), where the same five sentences appear twice in the text. To make matters worse, they are repeated in two different versions. The first translation reads:

Such utilization of Persian ideas for the interpretation of a topic which was treated by Babylonian-Israelites, is certainly a little over-methodical. The relationship lies quite a bit closer. The chapter describes the Babylonian abomination, each instance more serious than the other (6,13,15). At the end is the most serious thing—that they turn their backs on YHWH’s temple in order to worship the sun! This is the most impudent insult!!!
This is followed by a repetition of exactly the same sentences, but with differences (pointed out in italics below):

Such utilization of Persian ideas for the explication of a topic which was discussed among Babylonian-Israelites is certainly a bit over-methodical. The relationship lies quite a bit closer, however. The chapter describes the Babylonian “abominations,” each even more unpleasant than the others (vv. 6,13,15). At the end is the worse thing of all—that they [the Babylonians] turn their backs on YHWH’s temple in order to worship the sun! This is an even more impudent insult!

These differences are not merely about variations in style. Some contradict each other. Note also how the exclamation marks at the end of this passage varies (changed from three to one). It is, generally, a surprising aspect of this translation of an academic publication that sentences are often concluded with repeated exclamation or question marks, or a mixture of them—although they do not appear in the original (cf., e.g., the “?!?” added in the first line on page 140, but also on many other pages). On page 248, for example, several sentences end with exclamation marks that are not in the original (a page, by the way, also full of wrong translations). These exclamation marks may reflect enthusiasm and involvement of the translator, but they do ultimately represent questionable stylistic changes of the original text. This reaches such a point that, on page 383 (n. 78) the translator adds a “Wow!” in a footnote that he himself wrote (in which he explains the large quantities suggested by the text).

As is clear from the above examples, to which many more could be added, this translation of Gunkel’s influential book has serious flaws. Although the translation would allow the uninitiated reader some access to the thought world of Hermann Gunkel, it certainly would be unwise to depend on it for serious, advanced academic work without consulting the German original. It is sad that the translation of such a classic is marred by these serious problems—not only in the light of the obvious enthusiasm with which it was done but especially because of the importance of Gunkel’s contribution to biblical studies through this book.