Ehud Ben Zvi explores the multiplicity of meanings conveyed by the book of Jonah in *Signs of Jonah: Reading and Rereading in Ancient Yehud*. His primary focus is on “textually inscribed markers that can be reasonably assumed to have led the intended readership to prefer certain reading strategies over others, to ponder on certain matters but not others; and above all on the likely readings and rereadings of this intended readership” (5). He is especially concerned with how multilayered meanings inform each other and with readers and rereaders within interpretive communities of postmonarchic Israel/Yehud.

After an introduction, Ben Zvi turns attention in chapter 2 to the implications of Jonah as a composition written during the postmonarchic period. Since all readers approach texts from the perspective of their own horizons of knowledge, and since the author of Jonah shows Nineveh being spared in Jonah 3, what does it mean that this historical audience would have known well that Nineveh was in fact eventually destroyed? Postmonarchic rereaders of the book of Jonah would know of two opposed fates of Nineveh: one that is developed within the contours of the biblical story wherein Nineveh is spared, and the other, “deeply ingrained in their world of knowledge” (18), wherein Nineveh is destroyed. The awareness of both fates contributes therefore to the assigned meaning that
developed within the communities that reread the story of Jonah. If his conclusion is correct, then the rereadings of the book that are strongly informed by “the eventual fate of Nineveh ridicules a construction of YHWH as deity in which mercy is the final and most essential attribute” (21).

In chapter 3 the focus is once again on multiple readings based on the text of Jonah itself. Ben Zvi focuses on the first (1:2) and second call (3:2) to the prophet, wherein the choice of words allows for a multiplicity of readings that complement one another. The focus in chapter 4 is on the name “Jonah,” which appears eighteen times in this book of forty-eight verses. Among prophetic narratives this rate of occurrence is quite high. Ben Zvi explores the “probable ways” (41) in which the features and memories of the name itself affected both the original audience and subsequent rereaders of the text. The chapter also explores the reading communities’ approaches to the book of Jonah in the light of their identification with “the prophet Jonah, the son of Amittai,” who appears in 2 Kgs 14:25.

The purpose of chapter 5 is to explore the network of possible meanings and connotations raised by the characterization of Jonah as a “runaway servant or slave,” and the discussion builds upon the work of R. J. Ratner (“Jonah, the Runaway Servant,” Maarav 5–6 (1990): 281–305). In chapter 6 attention turns to the “metaprophetic” character of the book of Jonah. Since the ancient readers and rereaders of Jonah would have been influenced by the fact that this prophetic book belongs to a certain genre, the audiences would have expected certain things to happen. That is, ancient reading communities would have had a particular orientation to the text based on its genre and would have experienced various degrees of dissonance as they became aware of the book’s atypical characterization of the prophet. Thus the combination of genre expectations within the images of past prophets is exploited for rhetorical purposes. Some atypical features include the book’s in medias res opening, language, space, double ending, structure, and the charge to go to Nineveh.

The focus in chapter 7 is on the Jerusalemite literati and their image of themselves. How are they commented on? What is the image they project of themselves? Ben Zvi rejects the notion that the book is a satire originating within a particular group and aimed at other contemporaneous groups in society. He argues instead that the book “reflects and carries a message of inner reflection, and to some extent critical self-appraisal of the group within which and for which this book was written. This methods leads to, and reflects, a nuanced self-image within the literati themselves and an awareness of the problematic character of the knowledge they possessed” (100).

Chapter 8 explores issues related to the social location of the book’s authorship as well as the primary readership of the book itself, which Ben Zvi identifies as the Jerusalemite...
literati. The book’s construction of its theological setting is also discussed. The author’s greatest contribution may lie in chapter 9, wherein a theoretical framework is offered for studying the countless muddled assortment of readings of the prophetic book that have developed in time among different reading communities.

One critical question comes to mind. Though Ben Zvi often uses words such as “likely,” “unlikely,” and “probable” while advancing his argument, and though he acknowledges at the outset that there is a “speculative character of reconstructions of the writers’ intentions” (4), one is left to wonder about whether or not ancient readers’ viewpoints are recoverable. Following a majority of scholars, he concludes that the book of Jonah was first read and reread in the postmonarchic period before acknowledging that “it is unlikely that the world of the Jerusalemite literati . . . underwent essential changes during these years” (8). One question remains, however: On what grounds is this conclusion made about no essential changes taking place among reading communities over a large stretch of time?

The strength of Ben Zvi’s approach lies in his understanding of the “sea of multivocality” (11, and see esp. ch. 7) conveyed by the book of Jonah, wherein more than one reading is possible within the discourse of its intended and primary readerships. In his words, “one may trace a well interwoven ideological tapestry that better reflected and shaped the theological or ideological discourses of the literati of the time than any reading if taken alone. To be sure, a system in which multiple claims balance and inform each other implies that none of these claims taken separately from the others was seen as universally valid, but rather as relative and contingent” (10–11, emphasis original). Through a careful study and nuanced approach, Ben Zvi has called our attention to a number of important issues, including especially how the story of Jonah allowed and encouraged its readers and rereaders to understand the book from more than one perspective and in more than one way. A theological or ideological discourse is represented, then, by a network of multiple partial meanings that inform one another even as they reflect a rich discursive world that is never static.