Ehud Ben Zvi’s *Signs of Jonah* offers much to think about, not only for students of the book of Jonah, but also for anyone interested in the ways biblical materials were read and reread in Achaemenid Yehud. Every chapter brims with useful insights into the book of Jonah itself and its theological/ideological functions for its earliest audience.

Most of the chapters in *Signs of Jonah* originated as conference papers; they cohere well and appear here in logical order but do not advance a single overarching argument. Ben Zvi uses chapter 1 to introduce core concepts for all the essays. The term “rereading” in the subtitle carries important implications; the book of Jonah was not simply read and set aside, but read, reread, studied, and meditated upon by its earliest audience, namely, the Yehudite literati. The range of readings possible to this audience occupies Ben Zvi’s attention throughout the volume.

For example, as Yehud’s literati reread the book of Jonah, they were well aware of Nineveh’s salvation at the book’s close but also of its destruction in the late seventh century B.C.E. Ben Zvi explores the implications of this awareness in chapter 2. Nineveh’s double fates spur multiple readings of the book of Jonah, some emphasizing Nineveh’s literary salvation, others its historical destruction.
In chapter 3 Ben Zvi further analyzes Nineveh’s multiple fates, putting them into conversation with perspectives on divine foreknowledge. Most of this chapter focuses on the semantic possibilities of קָרָא נִלְלָה in Jon 1:2—an adversarial “cry out against it” or a less hostile “proclaim to it” (cf. קָרָא אל in Jon 3:2). Ben Zvi especially focuses on how these multiple readings characterize YHWH as educating, or perhaps deceiving, Jonah; as taking a very long-term view of the future; or as not quite being sure how the entire experience will play out. (This short chapter is burdened by recurring typesetting errors in which נִלְלָה is printed backward as נִלְלָה קָרָא.)

Chapter 4 focuses on the relationship between Jonah son of Amittai in the book of Jonah and in 2 Kgs 14. Ben Zvi argues convincingly that the earliest rereaders of both books—being the same social group—would consider these the same Jonah. Ben Zvi then explores the significance of this identification for reading the book of Jonah, including the creative tension between Jonah as a figure from a period before any Israelite-Assyrian enmity and his potentially forward-looking knowledge as a true prophet.

Ben Zvi turns to the motif of the runaway slave in chapter 5. One highlight of this chapter is the discussion of the sailors’ responses to Jonah’s flight. Depending on which intertexts within the Yehudite literary repertoire a particular reader activates, the sailors could be seen as attempting to return the runaway to his master—generally accepted as an appropriate act—or as defiantly protecting the runaway—an appropriate act per Deut 23:16–17. This motif thus evokes multiple readings of the story, with corresponding diversity in the theological implications drawn from this imagery and from YHWH’s and the sailors’ actions.

In chapter 6 Ben Zvi argues that the atypicality of Jonah among the prophets, and of the book of Jonah among other prophetic books, lends the book a “metaprophetic” character. The book of Jonah, in effect, comments on prophets and prophecy, perhaps even serving as an “interpretive key” for other prophetic books. Within the excellent company of the other chapters in Signs of Jonah, chapter 6 feels somewhat incomplete. Ben Zvi makes a persuasive case, but some readers may wish that Ben Zvi had further unpacked his image of the book of Jonah as an “interpretive key” for other books by showing specifically how the book might have fulfilled this function.

Chapter 7 focuses on the Yehudite literati and their self-identification with figures inside the book of Jonah. Although the book of Jonah is often portrayed as a satire against some group with which its author(s) disagreed, Ben Zvi argues instead that it represents a serious self-reflective endeavor. Though giving due attention to alternative proposals, Ben Zvi suggests that Jonah—as much sage as prophet, deriving his theological knowledge not from direct revelation but from authoritative texts, as suggested by the
book’s many quotations and allusions—reflects the Jerusalem literati’s image of themselves as authoritative interpreters of authoritative texts. Jonah’s experience of misunderstanding God gave voice to the literati’s recognition of their own limitations. The literati’s authoritative texts challenged and balanced one another (as, e.g., readings of the book of Jonah that emphasize Nineveh’s immediate salvation and those that emphasize Nineveh’s eventual destruction), problematizing the literati’s understanding of specific events even as they seem to ever more understand “the big picture.”

For the Yehudite literati, not only Nineveh but also Jerusalem had been overturned for its sins. In chapter 8 Ben Zvi considers the fate of monarchic Jerusalem and its effect on rereadings of the book of Jonah. As so often in Signs of Jonah, Ben Zvi carefully charts multiple readings that Yehudite readers could have emphasized. For example, rereaders influenced by the knowledge that, like Nineveh, Jerusalem was eventually destroyed for its sins despite episodes of royally instigated repentance might find in that parallel a resource for understanding why some nations and cities those readers perceived as sinful had not yet been punished for their sins. In this chapter Ben Zvi also explores the partial “Israelitization” of the sailors and Ninevites in the book of Jonah. (Unfortunately, chapters 7 and 8 seem to have been copy edited less scrupulously than the rest of the book, with several grammatical and syntactical errors complicating a few paragraphs.)

The volume concludes with Ben Zvi’s proposal for a theoretical framework within which to approach multiple readings of the book of Jonah (though Ben Zvi may exaggerate when he speaks of an “infinite” diversity of readings). All readings of the book cluster around the same text and are therefore constrained by at least three factors. First, the text’s “horizon of pertinence” tells the interpretive community what sort of book it is; reading Jonah as a prophetic book opens readers to certain approaches and forecloses others. Second, the “basic global, semantic contents” of the book limit readers’ options, as they cannot rewrite the basic “facts” of the storyline. Third, readings are constrained by their perceived coherence between the semantic contents of all or part of the book and key concerns of the interpretive community.

Ben Zvi does biblical scholarship great service in Signs of Jonah. Students of the book of Jonah will find many rich insights here. In addition, several chapters—especially the last three—provide even broader value for anyone trying to understand the emerging role of authoritative texts and their authoritative interpreters in Yehud. Occasionally Ben Zvi seems to make claims based merely on probabilities or likelihoods. Sometimes he seems not to justify these claims immediately, though in most cases he does return to the point and outline his reasoning, if only briefly (or if only by bibliographical reference). Overall, Ben Zvi’s treatment is exemplary. This is a book not to be missed.