Writing a review on such a genre of book is a bit strange for a Continental scholar. Handbooks of this kind, destined for teaching purposes, are typical for North America. Obviously, this depends upon the structure of the relevant institutions: theological schools and colleges where basic insights have to be taught to students who at first actually are beginners. The appearance of a second edition after six years (orig. 1999) shows that the book was a success. In Germany, survey lectures are mostly usual in educational studies, though recently a thoroughgoing study reform introducing B.A. and M.A. degrees imitating the American system will probably produce a demand for such works also in this country.

The book is without doubt an educational work. The wording of some chapters often has the character of a paraphrase of the respective biblical texts. Another pedagogical measure is selecting for each chapter exemplary key texts, such as Gen 1–11 and so on. In the second edition, maps and charts were added to the volume.

But what is a “theological introduction”? The term “introduction” has its roots in the field of biblical exegesis: normally it is a technical term in the realm of historical criticism describing the literary growth of the biblical scriptures. The title “Introduction to the Old (or New) Testament” indicates that the work in question displays the results of the
literary analysis of the biblical books and their parts, components, and sources, that it seeks to describe their mutual relationship and tries to find out their exact date of origin. This also means that the history of Israel is important as the background for this development. Introduction to Old Testament and the history of Israel are connected topics. All this characterizes also the present volume. The authors themselves admit “that our discussion has been roughly organized in a chronological way” (381). The biblical books are treated in the canonical sequence. The importance of the canon as a theological topic is underlined by speaking about its role already in chapter 1.

But the authors intend more. Therefore they entitle their work “theological.” All three are known as theologically engaged scholars, by several works in which they give expression to their Christian belief. And they seek to show that also biblical authors write as believers. For instance, on the Elijah/Elisha stories they remark: “The modern reader should not interpret these texts in a narrowly historical way, as if they were fundamentally concerned to reconstruct the history of Israel” (281). They call such narratives “symbolic” and show how their authors by intertextual allusions between both prophets and Moses and Joshua indicate a connection of these events and the tradition that witnesses to God’s involvement in the history of his people. These are stories narrated by believers. That this introduction is the work of believers becomes visible also in a superscription as “The Word of God Shapes Israel’s History” (283).

Important as co-author of the volume is obviously W. Brueggemann. In chapter 1, “The Old Testament as Theological Witness” (1–28), important aspects known from his earlier works are the theme. Usual textbooks are criticized because they treat the Old Testament “as evidence for the religious experience and witness of ancient communities but seldom as theological resource for contemporary confessing communities. The biblical text is used as descriptive of ancient faith, not as scripture speaking a word to modern faith” (preface to the first edition, xiii). The problem, however, is, how to realize this aim, if not by a sort of sermon (the authors call it “theological essays” [xiv]). On the other hand, the authors state repeatedly that “historical-critical methods cannot be set aside” (6). Though the final text is the last resort for a theological (believing) understanding, the earlier stages of the textual development are not unimportant and worth being studied. This methodical step distinguishes this approach from fundamentalism. But part of the hermeneutical presuppositions of the historical critics must be reassessed. Especially the search for historical reality behind the text as decisive, for its truth is put into doubt (7). Although the authors repudiate the opinion of those scholars who regard the whole narrative tradition as fictitious, the “imaginative and rhetorical integrity of the text itself” seems also important to them (7). In the background stands the postmodern context, which replaced many modern assumptions. Especially Brueggemann is known as an adherent of postmodernism. An important hermeneutical insight of this movement
(elsewhere called “reader-response theory, although this is not the language of the volume) is that the hearer or reader of a message has the last word in forming the content. This opens also the door to a believing approach.

The problem remains that between such theoretical hermeneutical theses and the practical realization in the context of an introduction a complete harmony is difficult to reach. Also in this volume the authors cannot avoid mentioning many historical “facts” because, as already remarked, chronology is the thread on which the whole representation hangs. It is also possible to use the volume to learn about the formation, time, or political background of a certain text, be it a biblical or another one. In addition, the use of the Bible as a historical handbook in a restricted sense is not illegitimate.

All in all, this is a useful volume. The second edition will continue to fulfill the purposes the authors intended.