Campbell and O’Brien promise the reader nothing less than something “radically new” (xiii) in *Rethinking the Pentateuch*. The radically new perspective is the rejection of source criticism as the methodological basis for interpreting the Pentateuch. The authors note that the problem with the Documentary Hypothesis is its low regard for editors, which results in a negative judgment on the final form of the text. “The old assumption that unevenness in a text [is] adequately explained by editorial intervention or editorial clumsiness” must be abandoned (xiv). In particular, the repetitions that form the basis of the Documentary Hypothesis must be reevaluated, with an eye on the final form of the text. What is required is a paradigm shift in which variant versions of stories are “preserved for selection by the users of those texts in ancient times” (xiii). The thesis of the book is that the “text-as-base-for-user” approach better accounts for the multiplicity, arrangement, growth, and distribution of the stories in the Pentateuch than the Documentary Hypothesis. The argument is presented in three parts: first, the evidence (ch. 2); second, the outcome (ch. 3); and, third, the reading of selective texts (a series of appendixes).

In chapter 2 the evidence for the text-as-base-for-user approach to the Pentateuch is briefly summarized without literary demonstration (the reader is referred to the appendixes for illustration). The evidence is presented in two parts: a rejection of P literature in the Pentateuch; and the description of the text-as-base-for-user approach.
First, there is no P text in Genesis. The argument begins with Gen 1–11. The vocabulary of Gen 1 is “neutral” with regard to identifying a Priestly author. The literature in the flood story traditionally attributed to P is “unlikely” to come from the same author as Gen 1. The ambiguity of the P literature in Gen 1–11 continues throughout the book of Genesis for three reasons: (1) the divine names do not conform to continuous sources and more probably provide alternatives for the user; (2) the genealogies “cannot be used as evidence for a single author, for they point to an interest or attitude that may stretch across several circles or generations” (14); and (3) the literary characteristics of the dates in Genesis claimed for P are “doubtful” (15).

Second, the text-as-base-for-user approach provides a better paradigm for interpreting the Pentateuch. Two transformations are necessary for the new paradigm to have an influence: (1) the nature of the text must be envisioned as a source for expansion, not a closed, canonical text for “expounding”; (2) the role of the original user, as storyteller, must be examined anew. The variants in the Pentateuch “were recorded in the text so as to be available to the storyteller’s choice” (16). The authors conclude further that “as a rule, only one option would have been actualized in a given performance of a story” (16). The brevity of the stories indicates the need for expansion by the storyteller. The reevaluation of the text and the user provides the core insight of the text-as-base-for-user approach. Three hermeneutical transformations result: there is (1) a change in focus from the ability of the modern reader to the ability of the ancient user; (2) a move in methodology from analyzing and dissecting to selecting from and expanding; and (3) a new perspective on the text from the vision of a dense final text to a condensed base text. This hermeneutical perspective applies only to selective storytelling texts, which leaves a great deal of the Pentateuch outside the scope of the study.

The presentation of evidence takes a historical turn at the conclusion of chapter 2. The limited distribution of pentateuchal characters outside of the Pentateuch indicates the late formation of the literature. The late dating, in conjunction with the text-as-base-for-user approach, suggest that pentateuchal stories are not about history. They are vignettes about the human condition and visions of an ideal world, upon which storytellers expanded. This conclusion leads to the subtitle of the book, “Prolegomena to the Theology of Ancient Israel.”

Chapter 3 is a broad reading of the Pentateuch from the hermeneutical perspective of the text-as-base-for-user approach. The methodology, according to the authors, attends to the present biblical text, as opposed to past methods that focus on “whatever lay behind the Pentateuch” (104). The outcome of the study is that the Pentateuch is made up of large story complexes. Exodus–Numbers is the “core of Israel’s experience.” It consists of two narratives of the exodus from Egypt, which begin with the call of Moses. One ends at the
Reed Sea, and the other extends through the construction of the sanctuary in Exod 40. The relationship of Leviticus and Numbers to these narratives is not clearly spelled out. Genesis provides the backdrop of the core of Israel’s experience in Exodus–Numbers. Genesis 1–11 contains vignettes about “the ideal for humanity balanced by equally theological reflections on the reality of the human life” (100). The stories in Gen 12–50 are “the archetypal images that gave identity to Israel at an ancestral level” (100). Deuteronomy provides a conclusion to the literature by challenging the nation to live out the ideal of Gen 1–11 in the realm of reality.

Four appendixes contain exegetical studies of varying detail and quality on a series of texts: Gen 1; 5; 6–9; 12–13; 18–19; and Exod 14. The final appendix presents a reading of the entire Pentateuch, identifying the origin and function of each component part.

I found this book stimulating. The authors clearly control a wide range of texts in the Pentateuch. They appear to be well versed in the history of pentateuchal interpretation, and they present an interesting hypothesis for reading the Pentateuch in a new and potentially creative way. But the book also presents a number of significant obstacles and problems for the reader.

The first problem is simply the layout of the book. The chapter on evidence is presented without evidence. All the literary information is relegated to appendixes, which puts an overdue burden on the reader. The reader is repeatedly assured that the “painstaking” literary work to support the “radically new” conclusions about the literary design of the Pentateuch can be found in the appendixes.

A second problem is the abstract presentation of the argument and the lack of critical engagement with contemporary pentateuchal research. The authors target the Documentary Hypothesis as the object of their criticism without explaining the methodology or relating their interpretation to the extensive reevaluation of the Documentary Hypothesis in the past several decades. Several examples provide illustration. There is a large body of literature that reevaluates the character and composition of the Priestly literature. Frank M. Cross, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John Van Seters, to name just a few interpreters, have questioned the unity of the Priestly literature as a source document, arguing instead that it is supplemental literature. How is this different from the criticism of the P literature in the present volume? Rolf Rendtorff has argued for some time that the growth of the Pentateuch must be evaluated in literary complexes and not as continuous sources. This hypothesis has been expanded and modified by a number of recent interpreters (e.g., Thomas Römer, Konrad Schmid, Erhard Blum). How does the argument in the present volume relate to this body of work? The same problem continues with more detailed literary conclusions. For example, in the
discussion of the different divine names, Yahweh and Elohim, the authors conclude that biblical texts provide alternatives and options for users and that, even though there may have been distinct traditional uses of the names, these differences need not impact their distribution in the present form of the text (13–14). This is a very important conclusion, since the distinct divine names are a lynchpin of source criticism. The hypothesis, moreover, has been evaluated extensively by any number of scholars who seek new literary theories concerning the composition of the Pentateuch. Yet the history of interpretation is reduced to one footnote, in which the extensive work of Erhard Blum is judged to be too hypothetical and to lack detailed engagement with the pentateuchal texts (13). I could find no detailed work on the topic in the appendixes. The brief summary in appendix 4 on the divine names followed the conclusions of Martin Noth (132), which would appear to argue against the thesis of the book.

Finally, the text-as-base-for-user approach requires further description. I suspect that the authors are correct in their judgment of modern approaches to the biblical text, which do not sufficiently explore the dynamic role of the literature as a resource for oral presentation and ancient storytelling. But this thesis left me with more questions than answers. The authors conclude that the method is limited to “storytelling texts,” which they estimate to be 45 percent of the literature in the Pentateuch (18). I was unclear what the characteristics of storytelling texts are as compared to other texts in the Pentateuch. And, even with a more precise definition, how does the text-as-base-for-user approach incorporate the other bodies of literature in a global methodology? The authors are certain that the methodology would not apply to legal texts in the Pentateuch (“certainly not to legal texts” [18]), yet David Daube has long argued that laws are incomplete “base-texts” upon which subsequent jurists would expand. Why not include law within the methodology of the book?

The authors have certainly invited the reader to rethink the Pentateuch, but the radically new often takes time to be worked out. I look forward to the future contributions by the authors on the text-as-base-for-user approach to the Pentateuch.