This book takes seriously the conviction that retrenchment among scholars in recent decades into synchronic and diachronic camps is regrettable, unnecessary, and, in fact, reversible. The volume is a revised dissertation supervised by Marvin A. Sweeney and thus reflects the version of form criticism developed by Rolf Knierim and Sweeney at Claremont, although Frolov differs in certain nuances here and there. The focus is the first eight chapters of 1 Samuel, a composite text often given less attention than the book of Judges before it or the rest of 1 Samuel after it, for a variety of reasons.

The unit under investigation presents many difficulties, including its composite plot with sometimes competing story lines, tying together biographical information for the important figure of Samuel, the corrupt Shiloan priesthood, and the wanderings of the ark of the covenant. Themes of this unit include consecration of children to the temple, privileges and abuses of the priesthood, the role of the cult, and others, many of which make little or no contribution to the extended narrative of the Former Prophets. How these first eight chapters of 1 Samuel hold together and how they make a contribution to the whole are not entirely clear. In a useful survey of both diachronic and synchronic approaches to these chapters (6–27), Frolov demonstrates that the synchronic approaches have failed to disprove the unit’s composite nature and that, in fact, the subdivisions most
often identified by synchronic studies are invariably similar, if not identical, to the sources identified by diachronic criticism. At the same time, synchronic studies have recently highlighted the formal and conceptual links and retrieved an appreciation for a high degree of order in these chapters.

The last portion of Frolov’s introductory chapter is essentially a serious engagement of the discipline at its most critical methodological need: answering synchronic-oriented scholarship’s arguments against diachrony and diachronic-oriented scholarship’s arguments against synchrony (27–36). Frolov succeeds in demonstrating that both frames of reference are perfectly valid and that we have no theoretical warrant for eschewing one over the other (29). He illustrates how biblical studies arrived at this unfortunate bifurcation by drawing on a comparison with recent work in physics, to show how divergent and mutually exclusive accounts of the studied object offered by “two paradigms are not only equally comprehensive but also equally true” (30). Frolov asserts that it is not necessary to choose between synchronic or diachronic exegetical methods and appeals instead to a “dissipative, or dynamically unstable system” (32), which is characterized by (1) openness to an influx of information and (2) fluidity, making dramatic transformation possible in response to the change of this influx. The behavior of such a system is predictable until certain external parameters are exceeded and the system moves away from the equilibrium toward destabilization. At this point, bifurcation occurs, resulting in differing stable states, neither of which is privileged over the other. As this all relates to textual methodology, Frolov asserts that the reader’s understanding of a text is a dynamically unstable system, fed constantly by the information received in the process of reading. For 1 Sam 1–8, Frolov assumes a default frame of reference that is synchronic but that loses its stability with each new indication of diachronic development. Thus he begins with a presumption of synchrony, while at the same time observing properties that push the reading out of equilibrium, opening the door for an alternative, diachronic approach (35).

The rest of the volume demonstrates this methodology. Frolov’s reading concludes that 1 Sam 1–7 can be read only as a complex composition that includes also chapter 8 (hence the inclusion of all eight chapters in his study, as opposed to a division between chs. 7 and 8; pp. 37–52). As a literary unit, these chapters create dissonance within the Deuteronomistic History (DH) regarding the monarchy, cultic centralization, and other central themes. Diachronically, these eight chapters comprise a post-Deuteronomistic polemic against several themes of the DH. Synchronically, the reading loses equilibrium when held in balance with the rest of Genesis–Kings and calls for a nonlinear, multidimensional reading, which shows that the author was ambivalent about the Deuteronomistic agenda. In either case, the thrust of the Former Prophets is driven by non-Deuteronomistic elements.
While I am by no means qualified to appraise the parallels adduced from the field of particle physics, the attempt to begin one’s work with a synchronic reading, while also considering all indications of diachrony (e.g., doublets and repetitions, contradictions of thought or of geographical and personal names, syntactic breaks, linguistic shifts) is obviously desirable. In fact, the real contribution of this volume is Frolov’s discussion of methodology and the way he brings into focus the need for both synchronic and diachronic approaches. Unfortunately, various methodologies in recent decades have been perceived as mutually exclusive, when instead they may be viewed in relation to each other along a continuum between two extremes. On the one side of the continuum are those who analyze sources without regard for rhetorical effect or final form. In the case of 1 Sam 1–8, scholars have identified (1) Shiloh narratives, (2) the Ark Narrative, and (3) Deuteronomistic speeches and editorial pieces linking the whole together. Those who err on the source-oriented side of the continuum have little or no regard for the authentic whole or structural unity. This approach is atomistic and has been soundly criticized in recent decades as highly speculative and lacking in consensus. On the other side of the continuum are those who overemphasize the final form and its rhetorical effects, showing no regard for the diachronic development of the sources behind the final form of the text and their role in ancient Israel’s history, insofar as that role is discernible. Typically scholars in this vein eschew the sociohistorical origins of a text and are agnostic at best about any source analysis and antagonistic at worst. This extreme fails to take seriously the multifarious texture of the final form and the role and function of the sources in Israel’s society prior to the final redactional activity. Frolov’s introduction alone makes this volume an important contribution for anyone interested in the synchronic-diachronic gridlock, although we may quibble with him over the extremely laconic definitions of “diachronic” as tracing evolution over time and “synchronic” as treating the biblical texts as “compositions created at one go” (8).

At times Frolov seems to lean too far to the side of synchronic readings. This comes to the surface, for example, not by his insistence on beginning with synchrony, which is only logical, but when he traces the history of scholarship on 1 Sam 1–8 (6–27), comparing and contrasting the results of source-, form/traditional-, and redaction-critical approaches with those of more recent synchronic investigations. He characterizes the former as consistently falling into the trap of viewing the Hebrew Bible as lesser than the sum of its parts, although the early history of form criticism may be said to have actually viewed the Bible as greater than the sum of its parts. The more recent synchronic approaches, by contrast, have a single common denominator in the midst of their many differences, according to Frolov: these approaches all consider the Hebrew Bible to be equal to the sum of its parts. Frolov’s point seems to be that diachronic approaches, be they source-, form-, or redaction-oriented, are by definition incapable of balancing the
text’s final form with their atomistic tendencies, whereas synchronic approaches have it right. In a sense, we have been prejudiced from the opening chapter to see all diachronic approaches as flawed.

However, it is possible to see the long history of diachronic research on these chapters as culminating in a great achievement, that is, wide agreement about the basic “building blocks” behind 1 Sam 1–7, despite the many varieties of descriptions and theories about their origins. We are hardly justified in accepting the results of diachronic research (i.e., the various sources behind the text), while at the same time rejecting the methodologies because they do not agree in all the particulars. To his credit, Frolov acknowledges that the unit breaks of synchronic studies, be they “scenes,” “acts,” or “episodes,” are usually the same “building blocks” identified by older diachronic scholarship. Building on the work of Sweeney and Knierim, Frolov chooses to begin with the synchronic structure of a text but allows the text’s default “frame of reference” to set the exegetical process, which may be either synchronic or diachronic. As the exegete arrives at a point of destabilization of this frame of reference, the method may change depending on the viability of the alternative approach.

I applaud any serious attempt at rapprochement between synchronic and diachronic approaches. Indeed, many in biblical studies now acknowledge that so-called “literary” approaches to the Hebrew Scriptures are not inconsistent with historical criticism and, in fact, never have been (see John Barton, “Intertextuality and the ‘Final Form’ of the Text,” in Congress Volume: Oslo, 1998 [ed. A. Lemaire and M. Sæbo; VTSup 80; Leiden: Brill, 2000], 33–37; Daniel B. Mathewson, “A Critical Binarism: Source Criticism and Deconstructive Criticism,” JSOT 26 [2002]: 3–28). If we are to move to a genuine tertium quid, greater attention needs to be paid to the methods by which we approach a text or extended narrative with both synchronic and diachronic sensitivities. The rise of literary studies of the Bible over the past thirty years makes it incumbent upon us to combine older diachronic approaches with the so-called synchronic methods. Although I believe many of today’s literary critics routinely overstate the degree to which scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries neglected or obfuscated the literary unity of biblical books, it is nevertheless true that they often failed to give enough attention to the “final form.” As many in the synchronic camp have asserted, we cannot dispense with either the diachronic or synchronic when interpreting Hebrew narrative. But rarely does one today find a truly mediating position between them. In most cases, individual scholars will lean to one extreme or the other, sometimes merely nodding begrudgingly to the other approach, as though they are aware of this rather unfortunate and unwanted stepsister but not particularly inclined to do much about her. Frolov’s contribution is exemplary in striving for the appropriate balance, and in many respects he achieves it. He is to be commended for leading us in the right direction.