This book is the product of the “seventh meeting of the European Seminar on Methodology in Israel’s History” 2002, and the theme is “the history of Judah in the seventh century BCE, with a focus on the Josiah tradition” (3). It contains papers both discussed at the meeting and submitted afterwards. The editor, Lester Grabbe, introduces the eleven papers contained in the book with a fine introduction that both discusses the submissions and recapitulates them. He then ends the book with a thorough conclusion that discusses the general findings as far as historical methodology is concerned. Not surprisingly he concludes that our methodology should be governed by archaeology and the use of primary and secondary sources. All of which, of course, must be treated critically, and indeed even the word “source” needs to be examined critically. Each of the articles presented here is well written, scholarly, and thought provoking.

Rainer Albertz leads the discussion with “Why a Reform Like Josiah’s Must Have Happened,” a response to an article by Philip Davies that appears later in the book. Davies had argued a fifth-century date for Deuteronomy, but Albertz believes that “the book of Deuteronomy must have been largely finished by 540” and that most of the Deuteronomistic History “was composed during the 15 years following the release of Jehoiachin (562)” (40). These dates are too close to the historical period under discussion to allow the authors to fabricate Josiah’s reform; that is, the author’s contemporaries would not have tolerated such a blatant fiction. Thus the reform must have actually happened. Indeed, several passages from Jeremiah also acknowledge the reform.

Next, Ehud Ben Zvi in “Josiah and the Prophetic Books: Some Observations” takes the opposite position as Albertz when he observes, “[T]he books of Jeremiah and Zephaniah
… agree in their explicit request from their readers to imagine the period in the most negative, ideological terms. In both cases, Josiah is not referred to as a major character and his religious reform is nowhere mentioned” (53). He further maintains that “any attempt to identify the historical Josiah with the Josiah of the prophetic books would be mistaken and methodologically faulty, since such attempts would involve blurring the differences between literary/ideological characters and historical figures” (56). In fact, postmonarchical biblical thinkers were much more interested in Hezekiah than in Josiah, since the former actually saved “Judah and Jerusalem” but the latter did not (55).

Philip Davies follows with “Josiah and the Law Book,” in which he finds that “the fifth century BCE provides a plausible context for both the law book of Deuteronomy and the story of Josiah’s reform” (76). He follows Na’aman in maintaining that Josiah was executed by Neco II, but he adds that this may have been for the destruction of Bethel. Thus, “Over a century later, when Jerusalem was being reinstated as the major sanctuary of the Persian province of Judah, perhaps at the expense of Bethel…, such an act would easily have identified Josiah as a righteous figure, and provided the context for the retrospective introduction of Deuteronomy into the earlier history of Judah. Indeed, the ‘Deuteronomic reform’ of 2 Kings 22–23 should then be seen, not as a historical event, but as a disguise for a new Jerusalem-centered community to seek to impose its definition of ‘Israel’, its god and religion, and specifically its written law, on an ‘idolatrous’ indigenous population” (76).

Lester Grabbe’s “The Kingdom of Judah from Sennacherib’s Invasion to the Fall of Jerusalem: If We had Only the Bible…” comes next. First he compiles biblical data, archaeological data, Palestinian inscriptions, Assyrian sources, Babylonian sources, and Egyptian sources, then compares the biblical and extrabiblical material and summarizes his findings with respect to which biblical data can be confirmed with regard to history, which data cannot be confirmed but may be correct, which data is most likely incorrect, and which data has gaps. With regard to Josiah’s reform, he observes, “[T]he disappearance of Yhwh’s consort and astral symbols form the iconography suggest a significant religious change” (111–12).

Christof Hardmeier then presents his detailed analysis of 1 Kgs 22–23 in “King Josiah in the Climax of the Deuteronomic History (2 Kings 22–23) and the Pre-Deuteronomic Document of a Cult Reform at the Place of Residence (23.4–15): Criticism of Sources, Reconstruction of Literary Pre-stages and the Theology of History in 2 Kings 22–23.” He finds that 2 Kgs 22–23 is a subunit of the Deuteronomistic History “framed by the stereotypical ‘regnal resumé’ of 2 Ki. 22:1 and 23: 28–30” (126). These frames are pre-Deuteronomistic. The body of the subunit is made up of a “discovery report” (2 Kgs 22:3–20) and a “reform report” (23:1–24). The discovery report “is not based at all on
historical events of the year 622” but is a “Dtr construct” (141). The reform report is made up of the frames 2 Kgs 23:1–3 and 21–23, 24b. The body of the report is formed by 23:4–20, 24a, which is divided into two parts. The second part is made up of 23:16–18, 19–20, 24a: it is a “late-Dtr reshaping with a universal Israelite extension” (144). The first part includes 23:4–15 and is formed by vv. 4–5, 6–12, and 13–15. These verses are a part of an annalistic document of minor cult reforms that were transformed into major cult reforms by Dtr editing. It is this minor cult reform document that is a primary source for Josiah’s reforms.

Ernst Knauf’s “The Glorious Days of Manasseh” finds that living conditions in Judah during Manasseh’s days were pretty good, even if the “inequality in the distribution of wealth” became much more pronounced than in “the previous generation” (167). The reason for these good living conditions was Manasseh’s pro-Assyrian politics. Assyria took a lively interest in Jerusalem as a way to fortify its flank against Egypt in the disputed region of Philistia, and Manasseh was more than willing to integrate his kingdom “into the Assyrian world economy,” not only for the sake of survival but also for prosperity (169). Knauf goes on to discuss some biblical passages from the time of Manasseh and observes that originally Deut 12 “was not a law on cultic centralization” but “cultic legitimacy” (187); “[c]ultic centralization set in, under Assyrian influence, during the reign of Manasseh” (188).

Nadav Na’aman then notes in “Josiah and the Kingdom of Judah” that Alt’s dating of the town lists of Judah and Benjamin from the book of Joshua to the period of Josiah is correct and that originally there “existed a single town list covering the entire Kingdom of Judah” (197–98). This town list reveals the great destruction wrought on Judah by Sennacherib. Indeed, Judah remained under Assyrian control through the first half of Josiah’s reign. Then the Assyrians transferred control of their western domains to Egypt, which means that for the second half of his reign Josiah was under the control of the Egyptians. Their control was looser than the Assyrians, which allowed Josiah to conduct his reforms and expansions. Josiah, however, overreached and was executed by Pharaoh Neco II as he entered the region to secure fealty oaths. Na’aman goes on to note, “By selecting only specific material, the author was able to present a different picture of the past, thus portraying Josiah as having acted independently of foreign dictates throughout his rule, and having been capable of implementing the necessary reforms without the intervention of a foreign element” (217).

In “The Blackballing of Manasseh” Francesca Stavrakopoulou argues that it “was under the direction of Manasseh that the kingdom not only recovered from the devastation wrought by Assyria in c. 701 BCE, but positively flourished: Judah was transformed from an economically decimated city-state into a prospering and enlarged kingdom” (248). She
goes on to note, “It would thus appear that the Kings Writer scapegoats Manasseh in order to distance Judah from direct responsibility for the exile. This is effected in two ways: first, his religious behaviour is portrayed as that of the foreign nations; second, Manasseh is explicitly and implicitly characterized as a Northern type of king” (252). The reason why the author/editor of Kings chose Manasseh was that he “is the only biblical king to share his name with a Northern tribal-territory…. This factor may have singled Manasseh out as ‘a quasi-northerner’ in the eyes of the Kings Writer, thereby sealing his fate as a villain” (253).

Marvin Sweeny in “King Manasseh of Judah” observes that synchronically there is tension in the Deuteronomistic History, as the narrative leaves the reader unprepared “that Jerusalem might be subject to the same punishment as Israel” (267) and as Manasseh single-handedly overturns the divine promise of an eternal Davidic line. These tensions are more than likely deliberate as the Deuteronomistic Historians wrestle with issues such as “that YHWH may well have failed, insofar as a Babylonian and later a Persian monarch sat on the throne in the place of the now-defunct Davidic dynasty” (275). This is all the more the case when we consider that “Jehoiachin’s eating at the table of the Babylonian king marked the end of the Davidic monarchy” (273). The Chronicler, on the other hand, “portrays Manasseh’s repentance … as the basis for its later claim that Josiah bears responsibility for his own death and the later downfall of Jerusalem, Judah, and the house of David” (272). Both the Deuteronomistic and the Chronicistic accounts are based on history, but we need “to take account of both theological agendas and historical events in the interpretation of biblical literature, insofar as the two are closely interrelated, that is, historical events provide the basis for the development of theological perspective and theology provides the basis by which readers … understand and reflect upon historical events” (266).

Like Albertz, Christof Uehlinger, in “Was There a Cult Reform under King Josiah? The Case for a Well-Grounded Minimum,” finds some historical basis for Josiah’s reform. This is true even though “without that tradition no one would look out for a ‘cult reform’ when studying the archaeology” of the period (279). Nonetheless, “Judahite symbolism of the late seventh and early sixth centuries was remarkably parochial and rather conservative—a picture which fits rather nicely the general cultural profile of the reign of Josiah as we perceive it from the biblical record” (295). Similarly, Uehlinger notes, “Hebrew and particularly Judahite inscriptions make it probable that between c. 700 and 587 Yahweh took over specific functions as provider of blessing and salvation from ‘his Asherah’ ” (296). Also, certain aspects of Josiah’s reform “appear to be directed against cult practices or institutions whose introduction in Judah must have been originally connected with the Assyrian expansion and the accompanying reception of Assyro-Aramean traditions of astral cults” (300).
David Warburton closes the collection with “The Importance of the Archaeology of the Seventh Century.” Here he postulates, “It would appear … that a Northern Kingdom existed from some time in the ninth century, and that the capital of this kingdom, at Samaria, was destroyed by the Assyrians in the eighth. The capital was then moved to Jerusalem or Ramat Rachel, and new defences erected to ward off the Assyrians. This new state flourished during the seventh century” (329). Thus, “Jerusalem and Ramat Rachel would represent successors to Samaria and the northern cities, rather than a parallel manifestation of political power and independence. We can thus conclude that Jerusalem was founded as a substitute capital after the fall of Samaria, and that it was surrounded by hostile powers. For most of the seventh century, the Assyrian domination and the Philistine culture were the most important features, and not Judah” (330). This leads Warburton to conclude that “the archaeological record would imply that the seventh century is effectively the entire history of Judah, rather than merely the highpoint” (324).