This is a fascinating book. It takes the reader on a long journey through the book of Jonah—and its interpreters. At times the author seems to be heading off track, but everything on this road, each stop and detour, prepares the reader for a strange but charming destination. This destination is not the end of the road, but the beginning of a new journey, a never-ending process of making new meanings of Jonah.

Green’s book is not a commentary in the traditional sense, neither does it explain every word and verse, but it is passionate about meaning: “our ultimate quest is the construction of meaning with and from the book of Jonah.” The way meaning is construed is by means of asking questions: “Our strategy is questions, employed to accomplish various purposes: to disclose information, diagnose assumptions, spur imagination” (15). Green’s scheme of asking questions is an extremely challenging option. Instead of pursuing answers, she follows the question route (1). Neither historical-critical investigation nor structural analysis but the simple “device” of questioning is her approach. This is an exciting challenge, and the author executes her task with great success. At times the reader is overwhelmed by questions, but when they are carefully studied, they all pertain to the meaning of the book of Jonah.
To ask the appropriate questions, the author distinguishes three worlds: the world behind the text, the world within the text, and the reader’s world. These three worlds are bound to one another by the constant search for meaning. In every one of these worlds people struggled to make sense of life, of the world, and of God. Events (such as the exodus) were always reinterpreted and retold in order to sustain the community by means of new interpretations and new meanings: “By recounting older stories people find fresh meaning for their own adventures” (2).

This ongoing process of creating meaning has consequences for our understanding of Jonah. In Jonah’s time people struggled with all kinds of problems that are reflected in the text. Present-day readers also search for meaning, but they experience a feeling of alienation from the biblical text. Before the Reformation the relationship between text and context was simple and uncomplicated. One could easily move, so to speak, between two worlds without noticing the abyss separating them. Somewhere in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a particular event ripped these two worlds apart forever; the integration of these two became nearly impossible. During these and consequent centuries (especially the Aufklärung) a different mindset arose that led to new ways of looking, of seeing, asking, investigating, and judging (4). Consequently, the perception of the Bible as a divine book changed radically to an understanding of the Bible as a human product.

This change widened the gulf between past and present, between ancient author and present-day reader, between reading the Bible critically and accepting “the Bible’s spiritual identity,” so much so that people came to view critical Bible study as “the enemy of a genuine spiritual life nourished by the Bible” (4). Green’s book addresses this problem. It is not a cheap answer to the pressing problems of critical scholarship but reflects great ingenuity and creativity.

It is important to note that Green starts off with a short history of the interpretation of Jonah. This is not exegesis but a history of interpretation. We can only appreciate the book of Jonah if we understand the explanations of other people. To mention but one example, Jonah became a dialogue partner to Johan Cassian in the Egyptian desert. John wanted not only to understand Jonah but also to embody the text, to integrate it into his flesh and blood. When his community struggled with the problem of sin, they appropriated and applied Jonah 4:10 to their own context. According to this text, God will look after his people as someone would look after his or her cloak. No one will cast a damaged cloak away if it can still be repaired. Similarly, God will never reject his people just because they have sinned. In “historical” explanations such as these we can discover aspects of the Jonah narrative that otherwise would have been impossible.
In a chapter on analogical reading, Green focuses on texts from the third to the fifth centuries. One might easily discard these readings as outdated because they never take the first readers seriously and have no understanding of the text, its origin, and its life context. However, it is important to note that Green persists in listening to these voices. Except for the scholars who read Jonah allegorically and typologically, Green pays special attention to Jerome. Or, as she says: Jerome is “my favorite reader of Jonah.” In these commentaries Green finds elements that enhance her own understanding of the book. Put differently, by means of these authors, she “enlarges” the possible meanings of Jonah and illustrates their importance for today’s reader.

One example may suffice. According to Jerome, Jonah’s reluctance to go to Nineveh must be viewed in terms of his love for his own people. Jonah reasoned that his people would be lost if the Gentiles were saved. He did not resent the Gentiles as much as he was hurt by the idea that his people would have to pay the prize for the Gentiles’ salvation. Therefore, he fled from his responsibilities not because he was obstinate or unfaithful but because he regretted the possible loss of his own people. Green comments: “If Jonah’s problematic behavior can be explained as an excess of grief rather than a selfish and petty stubbornness, then my defenses are lowered so that I can see the need for redirection of regretful anger’s energy. Jonah can learn, and I, standing behind him, can see as well” (74).

These ancient voices are stimulating, and Green incorporates them into her own understanding in an extremely fruitful and challenging way. However, she also focuses on Jonah’s historical context as well as on the text’s literary features. With regard to the former, she regards the work of Ehud Ben Zvi on Jonah as an indispensable aid to determine the times and readers of Jonah. According to Ben Zvi, these readers are situated in the Persian period, reflecting among other things on God’s ability to control events.

Green also devotes a section to the literary features of the book of Jonah, issues such as Jonah as narrator, the rhetorical and narrative structure of the text, genre, irony, and satire. A reader-oriented understanding of the book enforces the awareness that interpretations of Jonah vary from the one reader to another. Not all readers read the same things and construe the same meanings, and this has consequences for our reading of Jonah.

Another set of questions pertains to Jonah’s journey into the whale, and once again it renders some intriguing answers. Green compares Jonah to the Gilgamesh Epic, some biblical water motifs, and statements in the Jewish midrashic tradition, then concludes that this study gave her a sharper focus and “a more vivid sense of the stakes involved”
(133). According to her, Jonah “is cousin to the ancient Gilgamesh story … and to many biblical water motifs” (133).

Close to the end of her book Green starts to explain the Jonah text. One may object that this is too late, but she would answer that Jonah’s meaning is codetermined by the far-off voices of the past. Only after she had appropriated these insights was she able to look for meaning in the text. Ultimately, no definite meaning is determined, and the reader remains confronted with a host of unanswered questions, but this does not really matter. The journey was extremely rewarding, and the different stops along the road were fascinating, illuminative, and enjoyable. This is an excellent book that deserves to be studied by scholar and layperson alike.