The past decade has witnessed a dramatic rise in interest in the texts and contexts of the Persian period. Accompanied by a general tendency to assign a later date to many biblical texts, as well as the development of interpretative paradigms within biblical studies that place a larger emphasis on the finished text rather than its sources, this interest has helped generate an ever-increasing view that the Hebrew Bible in general is a Persian-period book, the compilation and codification of which is congruent with the imperial interests and policies of the Achaemenid rulers who governed western Asia in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. Grätz’s book, a slightly revised version of his dissertation at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, calls for a reevaluation of this view and a reexamination of the sources cited in support of this thesis. In particular, Grätz identifies a twofold aim to his study: (1) specific analysis of Artaxerxes’ edict authorizing Ezra to teach and enforce the law of God and the law of the king in the province of Yehud (Ezra 7:12–26) and its validity with regard to historical reconstructions, and (2) a larger assessment of nonbiblical texts from the Achaemenid period in view of Peter Frei’s thesis of imperial authorization (1).

Grätz is methodologically consistent. He begins his study by repeating Antonius H. J. Gunneweg’s warning that a confusion of historical and literary questions, which is not
infrequent in Ezra-Nehemiah studies, should be avoided in favor of a strictly literary analysis (3). Although Grätz addresses both literary and historical questions, he is careful to stay within the limitations of what a text-focused approach can answer. This approach may be more suited to offering corrective critique than positive propositions, but as such it is highly successful and certainly needed. Having stated his methodological premises, Grätz describes his understanding of the relationships among the different textual traditions pertaining to Ezra-Nehemiah as well as 2 Esdras (here 3 Esra, as the text is commonly called in German scholarship). This section offers few surprises. He affirms the more recent dominant opinion that 2 Esdras is not a fragment of an earlier, larger (Chronistic) text and that 2 Esdras and Ezra-Nehemiah are literary works in their own right that make independent use of other sources. Regarding the textual traditions within the canonical book of Ezra-Nehemiah, Grätz sees the Ezra story (Ezra 7–10; Neh 7:71b; 8:1–12) as presupposing and responding to the Zerubbabel story of Ezra 1–6 (35–43), while the Nehemiah memoir (Neh 1–6; 12–13) constitutes an originally independent literary tradition (44–61). Each of these three textual units, however, offers a different solution to the question of membership in the *ethnos* of Israel, of which the Ezra story with its focus on law is perhaps the most the rigorous (286). This thesis is intriguing and could have benefited from some additional analysis, but it is not central to the larger goals of this study.

By far the largest part of the book is appropriately taken up by an in-depth analysis of the commission of Ezra through the letter of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:12–26. Grätz offers a translation with very extensive textual notes (65–78), and an excursus on the designation of Ezra as כהנה ספר דנה יראל שמים (67–70). Having established his premises and his text, Grätz begins to form thematic connections, first with quite evidently relevant biblical traditions (Moses, Josiah), then with larger concepts, such as the image of the “king who bestows” and the people who respond with contributions (der schenkende König und das spendende Volk, 92–98) or the enforcement of laws (98–102). In doing so, Grätz also enlarges his textual scope to include extrabiblical evidence about royal donations or legal sanctions. The initial impression resulting from this comparison is that the letter of Artaxerxes finds a high degree of thematic connectivity to Hellenistic literature. This impression is further supported by an analysis of genre, which employs the same comparative method. In this section of the book Grätz offers the most serious and convincing challenge to Frei’s theory of imperial authorization, which posits Ezra 7:12–26 as a royal edict in the form of a letter. He concludes in response to Frei that the letter of Artaxerxes is not an example of a *lex sacra* but rather a bilateral cultic donation. In other words, we are dealing not with a simple donation by the Persian monarch supplemented by popular generosity but rather with a two-part donation contract with the conditional support of cultic operations dependent (dogma) on the proper
enforcement and observance of the law by the people (dosis). Here Grätz makes methodological use of a theory first developed by Bernhard Laum (Stiftungen in der griechischen und römischen Antike: Ein Beitrag zur antiken Kulturgeschichte [Leipzig, 1914]) and developed by Anneliese Mannzmann (Griechische Stiftungsurkunden: Studien zu Inhalt und Rechtsform [Fontes et Commentationes 2; Münster: Aschendorff, 1962]). As an appropriate text for comparison Grätz cites and examines the trilingual inscription of Letoon (113–37), which was also used by Frei in support of his thesis. According to Grätz, the Letoon inscription is not representative of Persian imperial policy but is rather an example of Greek law and social organization. As such, it represents the earliest specimen of Greek legislation concerning a bilateral donation, which is more commonly found in the Hellenistic era, especially in the third century B.C.E. (138, 187).

In chapter 4 Grätz tests this conclusion that the letter of Artaxerxes is more reflective of Greek and Hellenistic practices than of Persian policy against an examination of inscription based evidence of Achaemenid imperial policy toward conquered peoples. He questions the applicability of the Cyrus cylinder to this discussion, since it is modeled after the royal ideology of Neo-Babylonian texts and was primarily designed to legitimate Cyrus’s rule to the priesthood of Marduk in Esagila rather than to present a novel administrative direction. Grätz also considers the inscription on statues of Udjahorresnet and of Darius I in Susa, a collection of Egyptian texts from the time of Darius I, the letters from Elephantine, the Gadatas inscription, as well as inscriptions from Ephesus regarding the imposition of capital punishment for sacrilegious acts, dating to the end of Achaemenid rule in 334 B.C.E. On the basis of these examples, he concludes that Persian imperial policy was not so much religio-ideologically motivated as it was politically pragmatic within a financially restrictive context. The tendency of Achaemenid monarchs was to allow for the restoration of religious sanctuaries and cults whenever it was politically advantageous for them, rather than to sponsor their development in order to implement a consistent imperial ideology throughout their conquered territories (263). A direct and deliberate involvement in local religious cults was therefore atypical for Persian kings. By implication, a commission by Artaxerxes of Ezra to regulate temple matters and to teach and enforce the law of Yahweh and of the Achaemenid king would be historically improbable and more likely represents a fictional account reflecting Hellenistic practices that were projected back onto a Persian context.

Grätz’s analysis is quite comprehensive and well presented. His argumentation is sound, and its structural organization, moving from a very detailed literary examination of biblical evidence to an increasingly expanding scope of innerbiblical and extrabiblical, Greek, Persian, and Hellenistic points of comparison, is very successful. A possible point of critique is Grätz’s reliance on a fairly old theory regarding the Hellenistic practice of bilateral cultic donations (based on studies from 1914 and 1962) without a discussion of
possible recent advances offered within the field of classical history. However, any further scrutiny on this issue would likely have to be offered from outside the discipline of biblical scholarship.

Grätz concludes that Frei’s thesis of imperial authorization is not supported by the available evidence and that Ezra 7:12–26 in particular is more likely indicative of a Hellenistic rather than an Achaemenid context. Going beyond his self-imposed methodological restriction to text-based evidence in order to indicate possible trajectories of his analysis, Grätz notes that archaeology has produced relatively little evidence of Persian material culture in Yehud and that more recent demographic research suggests rather small population figures for Yehud (which also calls into question J. P. Weinberg’s model of a citizen-temple community, which would require a higher number of inhabitants). As such “the Achaemenid period remains, in some respect, a dark age” (279). Given the proliferation of Persian-period studies over the past few years, such a verdict seems surprising. Of course, Grätz’s study is not the first critique of this sort to be voiced, but it is arguably the most comprehensive and serious challenge to date to a premise about the extent of Persian involvement in the Levant, which has influenced a significant number of studies in the last decade. One can hope that this book will stimulate further research and discussions in this area in years to come.