How did communal norms develop in Judah under the Persian domination, how were they stabilized, and how did they spread in the multinational and multicultural context of this empire? These questions question stand at the center of this impressive and many-faceted volume, which is the published outcome of an international colloquium at the University of Heidelberg (April 2008) and the fourth in a well-known series discussing the status of Judah and the Judeans in the exilic and postexilic periods. Many of the papers include an extremely rich, even daunting bibliography. Thus the editors are to be congratulated with the production of an(other) important contribution to the study of a period of vital importance for the history of ancient Judah and Judean religion.

This subject is treated under two headings: one series of papers is concerned with theological and in particular sociological aspects of the diversity within the biblical evidence, and a second series treats of contacts with the multinational environment and with cultural issues.

The discussion of the biblical evidence is opened by Konrad Schmid’s essay concerning “Judean Identity and Ecumenicity: The Political Theology of the Priestly Document,” which centers on the promise to Abraham (Gen 17). Schmid argues that the inclusion of
Ishmael within the covenant fits the environment of the Persian Empire, in which Edomites, Judeans, and Arabs could share a place like Hebron. He could have mentioned Abraham’s burial by Ishmael and Isaac together (Gen 25:9). Unfortunately, this study fails to deal with the position of Hagar and Ishmael in Gen 16; 21. One should also take into account that the position of Esau is fundamentally established in “non-P” texts such as Gen 25; 27. The Abraham narrative is likewise discussed by Anselm C. Hagedorn’s study “The Absent Presence: Cultural Responses to Persian Presence in the Eastern Mediterranean,” which contrasts the tale of Abraham in Gerar (Gen 20) with the Esther novella. Hagedorn situates the benevolent attitude toward Abimelech, who is credited with direct contact with the Israelite deity, as an indication of the backdrop of the Achaemenid Empire, present but not mentioned. By contrast, divine intervention is not mentioned in the Esther novella, which is situated at the Persian court but should be placed in the Hellenistic era, since the picture of the powerless king would not fit the mighty rulers of the Achaemenid Empire. Studies of this type always leave one with the question of how much literary history really represents reading stance and interpretation in disguise.

Joachim Schaper argues in “Torah and Identity in the Persian Period” that the written text was crucial for the establishment of the religious and cultural identity of the Judean community under the empire and adopts Jack Goody’s thesis that religious conversion is only possible on the basis of a written text. One should, however, ask oneself if and how this thesis harmonizes with the early history of the Islam, when Mohammed converts numerous Mekkans to his preaching of monotheism.

A study of “Ethnicity and Identity in Isaiah 56–66,” by Christophe Nihan, centers on the later authorial/redactional strata of Trito-Isaiah ( Isa 56:1–8; 65–66, including 63:7–64:11; dated to the first half of the third century) in its anti-Zadokite polemics with Ezek 44 and their opposition to Deut 23 and the dominant attitude of Ezra-Nehemiah. Nihan shows that these strata allow for the integration of foreigners when keeping to the religious norms of the Judean ethnos but do not let them cross the ethnic boundary. Such foreigners, however, will be part of the eschatological community, which will not include Judeans who do not accept the religious norms. But one asks oneself who these “foreigners” actually might be: residents of Idumaea or Samaria with close Judean contacts or Babylonians and Persians serving the empire?

A slightly different view of the prophetic vision of ethnic identity and boundaries is proposed by Jill Middlemas in “Trito-Isaiah’s Intra- and Internationalization: Identity Markers in the Second Temple Period,” in which the fall of the kingdom of Judah is described as “the collapse of the symbolic universe” of Judean society. Describing Isa 56–66 as explanation for the lack of realization of the promises in Deutero-Isaiah, Middlemas...
distinguishes between the nucleus (Isa 60–64) that centers on the Judean community itself and expresses a negative attitude to foreigners and a surrounding international redaction (56:1–59:21; 65–66) with a far more universalistic posture, in which “as with the Judahites, not all foreigners are included in the community envisioned by the prophet” (116). In a nonspecific way Trito-Isaiah offers a prospect of a community that is not defined on the basis of ethnicity. Nevertheless, Middlemas also views some connections with expressions used in Ezra and thus concludes that this prophet may have lent authority to the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah. The studies of Nihan and Middlemas might both suggest that in the Trito-Isaian vision the Persian Empire forms the framework for the eschatological era.

A different angle is taken up by Dalit Rom-Shiloni in “From Ezekiel to Ezra-Nehemiah: Shifts of Group Identities within Babylonian Exilic Ideology.” Rom-Shiloni envisions a differentiation between two exclusive ideologies in Persian Judea. In the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, the in-group is the community of returning exiles and their descendants, whereas the descendants of the Judeans who were not exiled are beyond the boundary. The in-group, recognized as “all the people” and forming the only legitimate continuation of the kingdom of Judah, dominates all religious and communal institutions. By contrast, in Zech 1–8 the exiles return to an “empty land” with no other inhabitants. The Ezra-Nehemiah view is traced back to Ezekiel’s exilic ideology, suitable to the exile of 597, and rejecting the remainder of the Judean kingdom. By contrast, Deutero-Isaiah accepts both the exiles from 597 and those from 586, an attitude reflected by Zech 1–8, but inherits Ezekiel’s concept of the empty land. What is common to the studies of Nihan, Middlemas, and Rom-Shiloni is the conscious use of sociological models of identity and ethnicity, but those models always entail living people with all their needs and in all their actions, interactions, and dominance relations. In the exegetical discussion this concrete, existential dimension often has to yield to the abstractions of idea complexes.

A study by Yonina Dor, “The Rite of Separation of the Foreign Wives in Ezra-Nehemiah,” argues that the breakup rite, repeatedly enacted by Ezra and Nehemiah, was a communal ceremony designed to inculcate the need of maintaining the prohibition of intermarriage rather than a real expulsion. Katherine Southwood (“The Holy Seed: The Significance of Endogamous Boundaries and Their Transgression in Ezra 9–10”) uses the sociological model of Peter M. Blau to construe different aspects of the Judean separatist enmity to intermarriage as overlapping, and thus mutually corroborated, boundaries. These boundaries include a dichotomy in which all non-Judeans are counted as one group, a view of endogamy as precondition for the maintenance of religious and cultic purity in addition to the ethnic boundary, and a view of ethnic history that relates compliance with the law to the inheritance of the land. Since this configuration empowers “third parties” to have their say in marriage choices, the Ezra-Nehemiah expulsion of the foreign wives is
in Southwood’s view entirely possible. However enlightening these models are, they raise severe questions regarding the moving force behind these attitudes and thus the power of the religious convictions, hopes, and fears motivating the persons entertaining these exclusivist views and initiating these actions/rites.

Additional items in this section include an essay by Jakob Wöhrle, “Israel’s Identity and the Threat of the Nations in the Persian Period,” positing the Persian period as the backdrop to a well-defined redaction stratum in the Book of the Twelve. Deirdre N. Fulton, in “What Do Priests and Kings Have in Common? Priestly and Royal Succession Narratives in the Achaemenid Era,” compares the priestly lineages in Chronicles to the genealogical data in the inscriptions of Cyrus and Darius I and argues that both systems serve as a link to the past in order to legitimize the present.

The section concerning the cultural and international environment contains two valuable essays concerning the exiles in Babylonia. Paul-Alain Beaulieu discusses “Yahwistic Names in Light of Late Babylonian Onomastics” and urges caution with regard the theological implications of Yahwistic names of the exile communities. Laurie E. Pearce’s “‘Judean’: A Special Status in Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Babylonia?” provides additional data concerning the contracts from the by-now famous āl Yahudu in the Nippur region, in particular in connection with the titles of low-ranking officials in town.

An extremely extensive study by Donald Redford, “Some Observations on the Traditions Surrounding ‘Israel in Egypt,’ ” reviews, summarizes, and updates Redford’s analysis of this matter, including in particular the Moses-exodus traditions, which he posits basically in the Persian era. André Lemaire studies “Judean Identity in Elephantine: Everyday Life according to the Ostraca,” with important additions to the corpus of data from the papyri. An additional study of the subject “Yehudite identity in Elephantine” is offered by Bob Becking, with an important discussion of the problems posed by the term identity. Becking assumes an overly critical stance toward the Passover letter, in which he finds only calendrical concerns, dismissing all connections with the Mazzot festival. But what could be meant by the sender’s concerns with the exact dates in Nisan and the exclusive eating of mazzot, if not Passover? Reinhard Kratz, in “Judean Ambassadors and the Making of Jewish Identity: The Case of Hananiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah,” uses the Passover letter, sent by Hananiah, in order to develop a model of a Persian empowerment of Judean religious authority exerted by envoys of the empire. In view of important differences between Hananiah’s task and the description of the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, Kratz concludes that this description has been rewritten in order to turn it into a discourse on Judean identity.
In “The Interaction of Egyptian and Aramaic Literature” Joachim Friedrich Quack brings his considerable expertise as an Egyptologist to bear on fragments of an Egyptian demotic version of the Ahiqar text, which has parallels in the Syriac tradition of this text and likewise in the Greek “Life of Aesopus.” Quack concludes that the Egyptian version probably reflects an ancient, deviant Aramaic Ahiqar tradition. In addition, he discusses possible connections with the Egyptian “Teachings of Khasheshonqy” (Onkhsheshonqy) and the Aramaic texts written in demotic script.

Historical issues stand at the center of some notable contributions. Rainer Albertz discusses important aspects of the relationship between the Persian authorities and the Judean religious leaders in “The Controversy about Judean versus Israelite Identity and the Persian Government: A New Interpretation of the Bagoses Story (Jewish Antiquities XI.297–301).” Albertz lays a connection between the mention of Bagohi as governor of Judea in the Yadanya petition and his conflict with the high priest and the Judean community as described by Josephus. In his view, this conflict arose when Bagohi cooperated with Sanballat and his sons for the authorization of the rebuilding of the temple in Elephantine (407), as a stabilizing factor in face of the Egyptian riots. Albertz assumes that Bagohi’s measures were countered by a Judean complaint to the imperial authorities, in a step that eventually led to the mission of Ezra, meant to strengthen the Persian hold on the area. However important this reconstruction may be, it remains a reconstruction. Albertz’s identification of Bagohi as a Persian seems less felicitous. He may have been a Judean from the Tobiah party or a Samaritan.

Jacob Wright highlights a neglected but central issue in his essay on Jewish soldiers in the imperial armies of the Assyrian and Babylonian, the Persian and the Hellenistic period: “Surviving in an Imperial Context: Foreign Military Service and Judean Identity.”

Joseph Blenkinsopp’s “Judeans, Jews, Children of Abraham,” deals, among other things, with the problem of identity continuity through and after the collapse of the Judean kingdom and describes the narrative of the common ancestor, Abraham, in a Persian era perspective. Seen in this vista, the Abraham cycle is considerably more inclusive and positive toward the foreigners than Ezra-Nehemiah. Thus Blenkinsopp can conclude that the Persian period knew attitudes that were far more open than the seemingly predominant exclusivist tendency. Manfred Oeming discusses “Jewish Identity in the Eastern Diaspora in Light of the Book of Tobit” and shows the power of “a clear, ethical monotheism,” corroborated by traveling preachers, a strong boundary between Jews and non-Jews, but also a positive relationship with the righteous among the nations, accompanied by the role of Jerusalem as spiritual center and a strong eschatological perspective giving hope for the future.
Essays on archeological data include a discussion of the scribal arts by David Vanderhooft, “’El-mēdinā ûmēdinā kiktābāh: Scribes and Scripts in Yehud and in Achaemenid Transeuphratene,” and of coinage by Oren Tal, “Negotiating Identity in an International Context under Achaemenid Rule: The Indigenous Coinages of Persian-Period Palestine as an Allegory.” A study of “The Identity of the Idumeans Based on the Archaeological Evidence from Maresha,” by Amos Kloner, indicates the local interaction between this population and the Judeans in their midst.

Two subjects are sorely lacking in this rich palette: the relationship with the province of Samaria and the place of Ramat Rahel in this international framework. That said, I can only return to the opening. This is an extremely important publication that will lead to much refinement in the discussion of a crucial period.