Sarah, the woman standing in Abraham’s shadow who casts out her maidservant Hagar and her maidservant’s son Ishmael so that the child of the covenant, Isaac, could take his prominent place in Israel’s history, is someone both esteemed and resented in biblical history. This creative text by Tammi J. Schneider focuses on Sarah in a new light. Bringing together all of the material pertaining to Sarah that has been embedded and scattered throughout the book of Genesis, Schneider uses a literary approach for her analysis of Sarah to argue that she is as much chosen by the deity as Abraham and that, thus, her role in salvation history complements Abraham’s role. Although Schneider recognizes and affirms the traditional role of Sarah as wife, mother, and leading figure in the establishment of a people who later evolve into the Israelites, Schneider allows the biblical text to speak for itself with regard to the person of Sarah, and she beckons readers to have an open mind, to hear the text anew, and to allow the fullness of Sarah’s character to emerge with grace and eloquence.

Schneider cogently argues her case in a clear and systematic way that she outlines for readers in the introduction of her study. Using the Masoretic text, represented in BHS, as her starting point, she takes into account the history of interpretation of the various texts she explores, looks at the unit and chapter breaks, and draws particular attention to the texts’ connecting units. In her evaluation of Sarah, Schneider asserts that the connecting
stories hold the key for understanding Sarah, and are integral to viewing Sarah’s profile in relation to the other characters in the Sarah-Abraham cycle of stories. Schneider discloses the important role that foreshadowing plays in the life of Sarah and in the biblical texts about her, and unlike other biblical analyses, Schneider does not enter into dialogue with all of the major scholarly discussion associated with Sarah. She chooses, instead, to engage the thought of three scholars in particular: Walter Brueggemann, E. A. Speiser, and Gerhard von Rad. In doing so, she brings her study into conversation with biblical theology (Brueggemann), ancient Near eastern thought and philology (Speiser), and literary criticism (von Rad). Schneider’s limited and focused approach serves her argument well insofar as she aims for depth of thought that yields provocative and insightful results, all of which bolsters her central argument.

The focus of Schneider’s first chapter is Gen 11, where she lays the claim that Sarah’s story begins in Gen 11:10. She concludes that in the context of Gen 11:10–32 Sarah is the least likely to be the mother of the heir to the divine promise; she is barren. Thus, although Abram is the one favored by God, the Deity has a plan for both of them. In chapter 2 Schneider explores the variety of relationships that make up the fabric of Gen 12–13. She concludes that Abram is self-concerned; in his view, Sarai is a liability. Hence, he treats her worse than any other family member and is calculated in his use of her to support his own goals and aspirations. Given Sarai’s situation within the family, Schneider then considers the role that God plays in Gen 12–13 and shows how the Deity acts on behalf of Sarai, which, in turn, makes a powerful theological statement, namely, that God acts with justice and compassion for those who are struggling and oppressed regardless of gender or status.

The theme of relationship continues in chapter 3, but here the topic is the changing status of relationships as they unfold in Gen 14–17. Here Schneider shows that most of Abraham’s family members, along with their status, have changed radically. The promise made to Sarah has also changed. Additionally, the road that Sarah must travel is anything but smooth. The focal point for Schneider is Gen 16. She argues that this chapter is crucial to understanding Sarai. Through her close reading of Gen 16, Schneider rightly observes that this chapter has been often disassociated from the rest of the Genesis material that pertains to Sarai and Abram. Schneider’s study of this chapter yields two important points: (1) the Deity has kept Sarai from bearing children; and (2) Hagar’s actions influence how the characters within the story and later readers of the text perceive Sarai, which in both cases has often been disdainful. Schneider’s analysis of Gen 16 is particularly insightful especially because it invites ongoing critical theological reflection on the biblical text with respect to how God and God’s ways are portrayed. Such critical theological reflection invites further hermeneutical consideration by those contemporary
readers interested in the theological aspects of the Abraham-Sarah story as a whole and its impact on the biblical vision of salvation history.

Like Gen 16, Gen 18 has not been seen as a text integral to Gen 18–19 as a unit. Schneider’s literary analysis argues for the unity and centrality of Gen 18, which has been widely held as a “sidebar” and “prelude to” the Sodom discussion (79). Schneider’s literary analysis yields two noteworthy points: (1) the long-held idea that the Deity accuses Sarai of lying cannot be substituted by the text’s grammar and content; and (2) Sarai does not fear God; she fears her husband. Lastly, Schneider argues that Gen 19 is foundational to understanding Gen 20.

Chapter 5 focuses on Gen 20–22 and the evolving ancestral family. Here Schneider examines Gen 20 in relation to Gen 12:10–20 and 26:1–11, all of which have one theme in common: Sarah’s wife-sister relationship to Abraham. The analysis of Gen 20–22 brings to the fore Abraham’s use of his wife for his own gain, the fulfillment of the divine promise made to both Sarah and Abraham, and Sarah’s emerging strong voice that forces Abraham to make tough decisions. In this chapter, one becomes cognizant of Sarah’s precarious position within the ancestral family and her social world and her emergence as an independent person in her own right, with her own voice, as awkward and as harsh as that voice may sound.

The final chapter of Schneider’s study explores Gen 23. Schneider argues on linguistic grounds that this chapter begins essentially with Gen 22:20–24. Schneider sees this unit serving as a transition that links the end of Sarah’s life to the beginning of the text’s focus on Isaac and Rebekah. Significant in Gen 23 is Abraham’s accolades toward Sarah after her death. Here the text features him honoring Sarah in a way he never did while she was alive. Thus, Schneider draws attention to the importance of Sarah in the ancestral stories and her lasting effect in the lives of the stories’ characters, particularly in the life of Abraham insofar as she has paved the way for future generations of covenanted people. In Schneider’s concluding chapter, she pulls together all the central points of argument made throughout her study, and in doing so she provides her readers with an excellent synthesis of a very complex study. The appendix to Schneider’s work offers a comment on Sarah as she appears in the New Testament. A rich bibliography and various indices draw the volume to a satisfying close.

Schneider’s study is ambitious yet not overly tedious. With careful attention to detail, her analysis of the biblical material pertinent to Sarah shows how this character’s portrait has either been skewed or underdeveloped by scholars. Written from a feminist perspective, the study is methodologically sound and judiciously honest. Schneider’s central argument developed throughout the study is convincing, as well as the final point that she makes,
namely, that God has surely chosen Sarah just as God has chosen Abraham “especially in terms of the continuation of the promise” (129). In sum, this text offers new information and insight and makes a fine contribution to works already done on the character of Sarah. I recommend this text to students and scholars alike, especially to those engaged in a literary and feminist study of the Torah. My one recommendation is editorial: on page 79 in the section on “Conclusions,” the third sentence should read “messengers’.” Minor editorial points can sometimes escape the eye of a careful proofreader.