While the Hebrew Bible is not easily construed as a univocal theological voice, its canonical shape reflects a strong dose of what E. P. Sanders has described as “monotheistic, covenantal, nomism.” Indeed, the Bible presents this brand of Judaism—let us call it “biblical Yahwism”—as both normative and very ancient, going back even to the Hebrew patriarchs themselves. Modern biblical scholars are predictably and understandably reluctant to comment about whether biblical Yahwism should be construed as Jewish orthodoxy in any metaphysical sense, but they have expressed serious questions about the historical accuracy of this canonical portrait of Israelite religious history. Over the course of the last century, biblical scholars have assigned the emergence of biblical Yahwism to increasingly later periods. What the Bible ascribes to the patriarchs and Moses, modern scholars would date to the late monarchy, or, more often, to the exilic and postexilic periods. The resulting history of Israel’s religion tends to look like this: Israel and its Yahwism emerged from the religious and social matrix of second-millennium Palestine. Early on, Israel’s devotion to Yahweh was henotheistic in character, but this henotheism was gradually supplanted by, or developed into, a more exclusive variety of mono-Yahwism. According to scholars, this three-stage evolutionary process—from polytheism to henotheism to monotheism—was mirrored in the development of Israel’s theological ideas (e.g., “covenant”) and also in the development of its religious institutions (e.g., the sacrificial cult). In nuce, while the Bible assumes that...
Jewish orthodoxy was a constant presence throughout the otherwise checkered history of Israel, historical criticism depicts biblical Yahwism as a late development in Jewish religion.

Now, there are indeed many scholarly permutations when it comes to the story of Israelite religion, and it would be misleading to suggest that there is consensus on all of the relevant details. Nonetheless, the historical portrait that I have just offered is, more or less, standard fare in biblical scholarship. It is against this standard perspective that Cook has taken up his pen. He writes,

I disagree that biblical Yahwism evolved out of Canaanite religion and then developed through the work of the prophets and through various reforms and crises into its current form of universal monotheism. In place of this common view, I shall offer a more critical understanding of the roots of biblical Yahwism. I shall show that these roots run deep in ancient Israel’s history and society…. I intend to overturn the current trend that considers this “biblical Yahwism” a late invention of the Deuteronomists, of the exile, or even of postexilic times. (10, 68)

Cook’s agenda is utterly clear. He believes that the “biblical Yahwism” which dominates the present canon of the Hebrew Bible is indeed ancient, and he believes that he can prove it. How does he pursue this aim?

Cook’s first task is to define “biblical Yahwism” (ch. 2). For him, biblical Yahwism is none other than the normative, covenantal Judaism that governs the present shape of the Hebrew canon. Its primary textual witnesses include the pentateuchal Elohist, Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomistic History, the Asaphite Psalms (Pss 50; 73–83), and several prophetic books (especially Hosea, Jeremiah, and Malachi). On the basis of these admittedly Deuteronomic sources, Cook isolates the following salient features of biblical Yahwism: (1) Israel as God’s elected [covenant] vassals; (2) land as Israel’s inheritance; (3) God as sole landlord; (4) conditional tenancy [of the land]; and (5) tempered rule over the inheritance [an allowance for Israelite kings]. Because of the central role of the Mosaic covenant in this five-fold orthodoxy, Cook goes on to identify “biblical Yahwism” with what he calls “Sinai theology.” In the remainder of the book, these two terms are used interchangeably as short-hand descriptions of normative Israelite religion.

Cook’s next task is to demonstrate the antiquity of this normative religion. There are many twists and turns in his thesis, but the surprising linchpin of Cook’s argument regards the little book of Micah. Why so? When it comes to preexilic Israel, modern scholars tend to distinguish pretty sharply between the religious traditions of the northern and southern Hebrew kingdoms. Northern Israelite theologies often accentuated Moses,
the exodus, the law, the covenant, and a polemical mono-Yahwism, while the preexilic southern traditions of Judah tended to accentuate Zion, the Davidic dynasty, and social justice. Also, in southern contexts, mono-Yahwism tended to be assumed more than argued. As one can readily see, in this standard line of thinking, the provenance of Cook’s “Sinai theology” is observably northern. Insofar as this observation is accurate, it also implies that the Bible’s Sinai theology is not so ancient. If it were ancient, dating to or before the united monarchy, we would expect its features to appear prominently in both the northern and southern traditions. Obviously, for Cook’s thesis to hold, he needs to demonstrate that Sinai theology was at home in the south as well as in the north. He isolates some evidence for this in the historical books, which schematically describe the mono-Yahwistic reforms of Jehoiada the priest, Hezekiah, and Josiah (see ch. 3), but Cook’s primary preexilic source for Judah’s Sinai theology is the book of Micah.

Cook believes that the prophetic collection of Micah attests quite unambiguously to the Sinai theology that he has isolated in his study (chs. 4–5). The key text in this regard is Mic 6:1–8, which Cook reads as a “covenantal lawsuit” in which Yahweh takes his people to task because they broke the Sinai covenant. At the same time, Cook avers what few would deny—that the northern prophet Hosea also reflects many elements of his biblical Yahwism. As a result, Cook believes that we have two eighth-century prophets, one each from the north and south, who are strong advocates of normative Sinai theology. If he is right, this evidence would strongly support (but not require) his contention that Sinai theology originated before the division of the Israelite kingdoms. Obviously, this possibility would be strengthened considerably if Cook could demonstrate that the views espoused by Micah and Hosea are older than the prophets themselves, and this is precisely what Cook attempts to show.

According to Cook, the ancient societies of Israel and Judah were bifurcated along social lines, so that a political class of national administrators in Jerusalem and Samaria ruled over the older, kinship-based levels of society. As it turns out, Cook believes that the respective communities of Micah and Hosea can be located fairly easily within this two-level scheme (see ch. 6). Micah was a prophet associated with the “elders of the land,” whereas Hosea was associated with the traditional Levites who were disenfranchised by Jeroboam’s heterodox reforms. Both of these groups, the elders and Levites, subsisted within the traditional, kinship-based level of Israelite society. One can easily see where this is going. While the monarchic politicians were responsible chiefly for Israel’s religious heterodoxies, the traditional, kinship-based communities of Micah and Hosea inherited and faithfully preserved the orthodox traditions of Sinai theology. Because traditional societies tend to be conservative in matters of religious tradition (see Cook’s anthropological data), this implies as well that the Sinai theologies of Hosea and Micah may be very old, going back even as far as Israel’s tribal origins (see chs. 7–8).
Consequently, Cook would have us outline the history of normative Israelite religion as follows: biblical Yahwism originated during the tribal era of early Israelite history, and it was faithfully preserved by a minority of mono-Yahwists until it emerged late in Israel’s history as the standard expression of Jewish orthodoxy.

What are we to make of Cook’s thesis? As strategies go, his is quite sensible. He defines biblical Yahwism, attempts to demonstrate that it has preexilic roots in the northern and southern kingdoms, and then provides a rationale for the conclusion that biblical Yahwism is still older than these preexilic biblical sources. If the actual evidence is as Cook construes it, this account of things could indeed imply the relative antiquity of “biblical Yahwism.” Nevertheless, it seems to me that the soundness of his thesis suffers at several crucial points.

Perhaps the most glaring weakness of Cook’s thesis is that so much of it hangs upon the tenuous thread of the book of Micah. As many readers will know, almost any approach to Micah will admit that the book has been heavily edited over the course of its history, so that the present form of the collection includes not only preexilic but also exilic and postexilic materials. If there is a secure preexilic core of the book, this seems to be mainly in the first few chapters of Micah, but Cook’s thesis demands that other parts of the book must pass as preexilic, including especially Mic 6:1–8. Given the questions about Micah, Cook’s argument for the authenticity of Mic 6:1–8 is quite inadequate: “The suppositions of the passage are authentic to the historical prophet Micah. In 6:7, with its references to lavish offerings, the prophet likely reminisces about the extravagant offerings of King Hezekiah depicted in 2 Chr 30:24” (76–77). In this instance, Cook’s argument for the authenticity of Mic 6 is doubly weak, not only because of the questions about Micah itself, but also because few scholars would take the Chronicler’s account of Hezekiah so seriously. To the extent that Mic 6:1–8 turns out to be either exilic or postexilic, to that same extent Cook has lost his witness to biblical Yahwism in preexilic Judah. And without this witness, his thesis essentially fails.

Cook’s uncritical use of Micah is one of many instances in which his handling of the biblical sources lacks nuance. He assumes that Jehoiada’s ninth-century coup in Judah is an expression of biblical Yahwism (45–49), when the relevant portions of that story probably derive from the Deuteronomistic Historian rather than from older sources. Cook further assumes that the pentateuchal “Elohist” is northern and relatively old—now a much contested point—and he also accepts, somewhat uncritically, the theory of H. P. Nasuti that the Asaphite Psalms are northern. Now, it is certainly feasible that Jehoiada was a mono-Yahwist and that most of Micah dates to the preexilic period and that the pentateuchal E document and Asaphite Psalms are northern in provenance. But, overall,
Cook is asking readers to accept quite a number of debatable points in order to support his thesis.

More problematic still is Cook’s conception of “biblical Yahwism.” If Cook’s objective was to demonstrate the antiquity of normative Judaism, then he should have defined “biblical Yahwism” on the basis of the Hebrew Bible’s final canonical shape rather than on the basis of his smaller Deuteronomic “canon within a canon.” If he had done so, he would have discovered, among other things, that Hosea’s theology does not cohere so easily with “biblical Yahwism.” Whereas the Hebrew canon portrays God as sovereign over all nations, in Hosea his domain is in Israel alone (9:3). Whereas the Hebrew canon is unabashedly monotheistic, Hosea seems to be more henotheistic (with Yahweh and Baal in their respective lands; see 9:3, 10). Whereas the Hebrew canon accentuates the Davidic promise and leans in the direction of messianic apocalypticism, Hosea critiques the monarchy in principle (8:4; 13:11). Whereas the Hebrew canon offers many messages of hope, Hosea’s prophecies are filled with doom. How can Hosea—one of Cook’s primary sources for “biblical Yahwism”—differ so markedly from normative Judaism on such basic points?

The answer to this question is clear. Because his study depended heavily (and admittedly) upon Deuteronomic sources, Cook’s “biblical Yahwism” is probably better described as “Deuteronomic Yahwism.” This means, of course, that the aspect of normative Judaism that he has traced back to Hosea is not “biblical Yahwism” so much as the mono-Yahwism that many other scholars have found in the Deuteronomic and proto-Deuteronomic traditions. Consequently, if we set aside Cook’s problematic treatment of Micah, he has done little more than confirm the widely held belief that Deuteronomy’s mono-Yahwist agenda can be traced back in some measure to the eighth-century prophet Hosea. Cook’s attempt to use sociological models of ancient Israel, and extensive anthropological evidence, to trace this mono-Yahwism still further back into Israelite history is novel and suggestive but necessarily speculative. Consequently, it seems to me that we shall never know very much—apart from faith, perhaps—about the nature of ancient Yahwism or about whether it originated as the evolutionary product of Canaanite polytheism or as the theological innovation of some charismatic prophet. In sum, whether one is an antirealist or merely a critical realist, in this postmodern era it will be difficult to convince readers that the normative faith of Second Temple Judaism, itself an elusive thing to define, can be traced all the way back to the Late Bronze/Iron I period using historical-critical tools.

Historical minimalism is increasingly influential in modern studies of ancient Israel and the Bible. I find this new approach to be problematic on many levels, and for that reason I am always pleased to find scholars who are looking anew at the data with a judicious approach.
rather than skeptical eye. Stephen Cook is one of those scholars, and I profited from reading his book, not only because he has added new strength to conventional views of Deuteronomic theology but also because he has challenged us anew to consider the possibility that this “northern theology” had genuine roots in the south. Moreover, by setting our sights on the sociological and anthropological evidence, Cook has made it more plausible to imagine how certain aspects of the Yahwistic faith might be more ancient than the Bible itself. Readers will appreciate these insightful aspects of Cook’s thesis.