Ugaritic studies have fallen on hard times in the last few decades. The post–World War II rush of interest in translating known Ugaritic mythic texts and of analyzing their language in order to determine its lexicon and establish its grammar ebbed as the tasks were largely accomplished by the 1980s. Accompanying the inner-Ugaritic work accomplished largely by Semitists was a collateral undertaking by some of the same scholars accompanied by many biblicist-Hebraists that sought parallelisms between the Ugaritic and biblical texts in lexicon, phraseology, rhetoric, and narrative structure. These two undertakings enabled scholars to work out how Israelite religion, known from first-millennium B.C.E. narrative, historical, mantic, and ritual texts, differed from at least one type of Canaanite religion, as known from second-millennium mythic texts. When a sense that all was known about what was important emerged in the late 1980s, interest in Ugaritic studies flagged: sessions dedicated to Ugaritic were no longer guaranteed fare at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature or the American Oriental Society, fewer articles on the topic appeared in American journals, and in some Ph.D. programs training biblicists, when the number of required courses in Hebrew was reduced as theology was deemed more significant that philology, Ugaritic fell by the wayside also. The book under review may revive interest because, if anything, it indicates that much is not known and has yet to be discovered about the cult practiced at Ugarit.
And, if that be the case, the application of the newly published, the not yet understood completely, and the still to be discovered material may have important bearings for understanding the origins, history, development, meaning, and interpretation of Israel’s cult.

Dennis Pardee’s important volume can be of significant use to biblicists interested in Israelite religion. It will be necessary, however, for them to take time to read Pardee’s general introductory (1–8) and extensive concluding comments (221–43), to peruse or read through the sixty Ugaritic texts that he presents in transliteration and translation (11–220), and to think through how what has been learned can be applied. Though not a particularly easy read because of the state of the texts, uncertainties surrounding their interpretation, and the legitimate differences that Pardee notes between himself and other respected colleagues, this is a pedagogically self-conscious book. Pardee, knowing that most readers will be unfamiliar with the texts and lack easy access to studies underlying his state-of-the-art discussions, provides introductions to each category or genre of cultic texts, introductions to most texts, and a generous philological commentary aimed at a rather sophisticated “general reader.” When more is called for than the parameters of the Writings from the Ancient World series allows, he refers readers to his fuller discussions in Les textes rituels (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 2000). Aware that many problems remain to be solved, Pardee cautions “future researchers” about the tentative nature of some conclusions (see 222).

Pardee divides the large text section of the book between texts relating to the sacrificial cult directly and those referring to ritual activity outside the sacrificial cult. Biblicists might compare this to temple or holy site-based rituals and others not so localized. In the latter category are found incantations against snakes and scorpions, sexual dysfunction among young males, and the evil eye; divine drinking rites; and rites involving royal ghosts. Pardee also includes three administrative texts in this division: “Wine for Royal Sacrificial Rites,” “An Oil-Tax for Ba’lu of Aleppo,” and “A Contract for a Marzihu Meeting Place.” I mention these first because even as they help locate certain types of cultic rituals away from a central shrine and from the gaze of its officials, they beg for additional consideration as subjects of comparative studies.

Pardee’s first, and by far the largest, category, contains seven sections: deity lists, prescriptive sacrificial rituals (subdivided into seven subsections), descriptions of sacrificial rituals, memorials of a sacrificial rite, divination texts (in two subdivisions), and prayers. As a group, these texts are largely prescriptive. However, because they were excavated at different loci in Ugarit and nearby Ras Ibn Hani, they cannot be considered a canonical library and hence suspected as being “theoretical,” or derived from the musings of a priestly class, as many scholars assume to be the case with biblical rituals.
Rather, as Pardee observes, they reflect quotidian concern with and for the correct execution of proper sacrificial rituals at Ugarit (2–3). Insofar as much of what is prescribed was most likely executed in the city and its immediate environs, and because the king is involved in many of the rituals, it is likely that royal interest in maintaining the cult equaled that of the priests. Furthermore, since no rules dealing with the manipulation of blood are found in these texts—in contrast to the legislation in Leviticus that informs about what priests did with a small measure of the blood but not exactly how—it is possible that these texts were oriented to the lay sponsors and beneficiaries of the rituals. These texts do not present esoteric priestly lore, though some do embed rituals in mythopoeic contexts (192–213, 231–32).

One part of the concluding chapter lists four questions that remain unanswered about cult and ritual in Late Bronze Ugarit: (1) What was the precise form of each cultic act? (2) Who really received what from the offerings? (3) Since most ritual/cultic texts reflect the interests of royalty, what was the form of the nonroyal cult? (4) What meaning did Ugaritians as a body politic comprising all classes and stations ascribe to the rites in which they participated or that they witnessed? (232–33). I cite these in this review, which will be read primarily by biblicists, because it might be interesting to explore how back-reading answers to these very questions from the Torah’s P document into the Ugaritic context may suggest probable answers. Although working through this exercise would involve a number of problematic assumptions, the exploratory enterprise may be justified initially by pointing to the fact that Israelites (or P) and Ugaritians (or the texts), though separated by at least five hundred miles and six hundred years (minimally), shared a relatively similar, transparent technical vocabulary, used blood offerings, and preferred “kosher” flock and herd animals. If all known Israelite cultic rituals are included, including those proscribed by P, D, and Dtr, an additional similarity would be that each religion, in its full complexity, served many deities and some of the same deities in many different ways (see this reviewers, The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches [London: Continuum, 2001]). From the point of view of biblicists, such an undertaking is worthwhile because of its potential for enriching understanding of Israelite religion. For the sake of the initial exploration, I recommend ignoring the dissimilarities between the biblical and Ugaritic systems listed by Pardee on pages 235–41, though they would have to be factored into any final conclusions.

Pardee’s book has appeared at a particularly opportune time. Jacob Milgrom’s magisterial commentary on Leviticus is now complete with its rich exploration of what Second Temple and rabbinic literature contribute to our understanding of cult. David P. Wright has recently explored how Ugaritic rituals are described and function in narrative contexts, using the Aqhat text as a test case (Ritual in Narrative: The Dynamics of feasting, Mourning, and Retaliation Rites in the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat [Winona Lake,
Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2001]). Wright’s transparent methodology is easily applied to other Ugaritic narrative texts and provides a bridge to biblical narratives in which rituals are described, rituals that may be compared to P and D’s descriptive and prescriptive rituals and to the Ugaritic prescriptive texts. Recent work on Hittite religion and that of the Aegean during the Late Bronze period may also prove relevant.

This very competent book concludes with a concordance of the Ugaritic text numbers (which concord the three systems by which texts have been cited), a bibliography, a glossary of English cultic terminology used in the translation and the Ugaritic terms that they translate, a glossary of deities, indexes of “deities and other extraordinary beings,” personal names, place names and gentilics, subjects (which can function as an abridged English-Ugaritic dictionary of terms), and biblical references. Hopefully, it will catalyze new, innovative research in American Ugaritic studies and stimulate fresh undertakings in biblical studies.