Ron Hendel and Jan Joosten, the authors of How Old is the Hebrew Bible: A Linguistic, Textual, and Historical Study offer up a concise yet robust description of the state of the study of the Hebrew Bible in its diachronic framework. Reacting primarily against recent works of Ian Young, Robert Rezetko, and Martin Ehrensvärd. The authors seek to provide an entry level (of sorts) glimpse into the trends and research of diachronic investigation into a corpus that is fairly limited in terms of actual, verifiable linguistic strata. They seek to demonstrate that strata can be discerned and that linguistic traits are the result of growing or declining trends in linguistic development. Given the state of the Hebrew Bible and the drawing together of multiple works hailing from varying stages of history, this task is not simple. Hendel and Joosten note the Hebrew Bible is, “a brittle text, fracturing under the slightest pressure.” (ix) The precedence for understanding this is summed up by them when they demonstrate that “any biblical book may turn out to contain strata and fragments composed at wholly different periods.” (ibid)

Whether this is the case or not is still up for debate. The authors attempt to elucidate this premise based on some forms of linguistic change over a diachronic spectrum. They uphold the ideal that the Hebrew Bible is able to be dated based on the present changes evident in language through syntax and shifts in grammaticalization. This process is evident in the Masoretic Text (MT) which allows them to suppose that these texts are able to be dated based on this, contra the recent attempts at upheaval of the paradigm set by Avi Hurvitz in the 70’s. The stated goal of the authors is “to think clearly about some complicated matters and to contribute to a multilayered understanding of the biblical texts.” (xi)

Hendel and Joosten produce a concise volume full of examples supporting their views which are not always in line with some of the past scholarship on the topic. They attempt to trace diachronic change and influence across the text of the MT, citing differences between MT passages and biblical Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) in an attempt to show fluctuation in verbal forms and syntax
across calculable time frames within the same text body across multiple witnesses to the same text. The authors feel this is important to note as any dismissal of change in terms of style and dialect do not account for the obvious time spans and shifts that happen within language, suggesting that time produces the change in a routine way.

The book is organized into eight chapters, with two appendices that supplement a deeper inquiry based on the material of the book. The first chapter gives an overview of the discussion and provides some presuppositions of the book, mainly that change in language can and does happen over a span of time.

The second chapter surveys some features of change, such as the loss of final short vowels which they contend was the loss of the case system (14). Other features traced are consonantal variation and collapse in the form of samek and shin their historical realizations. A brief section on lexical and morpho-syntactical changes aids the discussion, centering on the collapse of the Qal Passive into the Niphal and the shortening of some forms of words, specifically the first person pronoun. While these changes have been argued to support diachronic change within the MT, in regards to any dearth of evidence, Martin Ehrensvärd cautions, “the syntactic features that are characteristic of LBH are almost always a proliferation of syntactic features or usages already attested in EBH.”1 This caution goes to show, any linguistic change will most likely be coterminous, which for some means there is no diachronic layer, but for others it means the change is gradual over time.2 Aspects of language contact and verb tense and aspect round out the chapter with ample evidence for both in favor of discerning diachronic strata.

The third chapter seeks to explore linguistic variation, which is not always due to diachronic changes. The authors are careful to distinguish linguistic variation due to other mitigating factors such as dialect, poetic emphasis, style switching and a convenient category of “other.” They concede that these


factors can make distinguishing diachronic layers difficult but not impossible. They quip, “What makes diachronic study possible is that the linguistic data line up in an extraordinary way, particularly in prose texts” (36). This sets the tone for the rest of the book as the authors shape their discussion around the prose material which is much less susceptible to the issues surveyed in this chapter. A few selections of texts that are separated diachronically by tradition are then surveyed.

The fourth chapter seeks to describe some of the nonlinguistic factors involved in the study, namely the history of the actual consonantal text. The MT is discussed in terms of the Masoretic vocalization system, the actual consonantal skeleton of the text in comparison with the DSS material, as well as facet of later modernization and redaction. These are all external pressures on the text that the authors are careful to point out may affect the study of internal diachronic layers.

The fifth through eight chapters are designed to familiarize the reader with the various time frames thought to be in play as well as introduce the corpus of each time frame. Hendel and Joosten posit the standard Pre-exilic Hebrew, present outside of biblical texts in the form of inscriptions, Transitional Hebrew, present in the biblical literature from the books of Ezekiel, Lamentations, Jeremiah, Second Isaiah, Job, Jonah, Haggai, and Zechariah 1-8, and finally Late Biblical Hebrew, exemplified by all identifiable post exilic books and Qumran Hebrew. In each chapter, they survey what typifies each diachronic C, pulling from the three previous criteria outlined, recognizing outside factors, editing, updating, linguistic and dialectical pressures, as well as internal criteria that may evidence historical plausibility which becomes most important in the discussion of Transitional Hebrew. The authors include a wealth of examples and some dialogue with issues to each diachronic stratum.

The final chapter focuses on one more factor of the biblical texts and discerning diachronic layers that is often overlooked: historical data internal to the text itself. The authors argue that the internal content of the text is a weighty data set to any diachronic study and should be utilized when viewing the prose texts of the Hebrew Bible. They feel the cultural history of the authors of the biblical text is informative and should be evaluated along with the internal linguistics features and the external texts.
In critique, the book itself is relatively short, and only gives a rather cursory glimpse at all facets of the argument. There is an extensive bibliography to supplement, yet the material could be fleshed out more due to the nature of the book being included in a series of reference works for the student of biblical studies. The two appendices are more polemic pieces, designed to argue against the dissenters of diachronic data, and truly do not mesh with the aims and goals of the book as a reference work. They would be better suited as standalone works. The appendices, while informative and well written, do not fully compliment the book as a whole. The authors have attempted to address too much in their work, and should have stuck closer to a tight knit introduction to historical linguistics in the Hebrew Bible applied to diachronic studies.

Ron Hendel and Jan Joosten have presented this compact, yet robust volume to attempt to elucidate their views on diachronic dating of biblical texts. They provide ample material to familiarize the reader with the topic at large, as well as create a frame work for self-study. They have succeeded in creating a starting point for the discussion, but have taken a defensive stance over the field of diachronic research in lieu of providing a full explanation of the discussion at large. Joosten and Hendel should be commended for their work and hopefully this represents the start of many more like it to come.

REFERENCES
