The Archaeology of Israelite Knowledge by Robert S. Kawashima is an endeavor into the history of biblical ideas not often seen in biblical or ancient Near Eastern scholarship. Kawashima relies heavily on a Foucauldian framework, even though he states that he will not always do this within the monograph. The primary threads of analysis carrying through the work are Michel Foucault's concepts of “epistemes” and “archaeology,” focusing on an earlier “episteme of myth” and a later, more developed, “episteme of history.” In an attempt to track the development of these epistemes, Kawashima uses the Foucauldian “archaeological method,” excavating layers away from the text. As expected by scholars familiar with Kawashima's work, he engages in an analysis reliant on comparative literature, exposing his arguments primarily through the use of the helpful framework of “homonyms” and “synonyms”: those that look similar but have a different function compared to those that look similar and have the same function, respectively. The comparative approach is, of course, a common one in biblical and ancient Near Eastern scholarship, but Kawashima's application of new frameworks will certainly prove helpful within future studies. It is worth noting, however, that the focus of this volume is the texts, and a more appropriate title would have been “The Archaeology of Biblical Knowledge.” Rarely, if ever, does Kawashima engage with Israelite history and religion. Kawashima's command of the theoretical frameworks is laudable and will, hopefully, serve as a model for scholars on how to successfully apply theory to their own work.

The success of Kawashima's argument is, however, lost at points due to issues that could have been easily fixed (many of which have been noted in other reviews of this work). First, many in the field will likely be confused by a lack of engagement with any recent scholarship. For example, when discussing such topics as monotheism, the extremely dated works of such scholars as Yehezkel Kaufmann and G. Ernest Wright are prioritized. There is, in fact, no engagement with any scholarship on this topic from this century—and
rarely from the last fifty years—other than brief notes to Benjamin Sommer’s work. The list of recent works on this subject is too large to include here, and lack of engagement with any of these sources paints both an unfair and uninformed picture of the modern state of biblical scholarship. This critique extends to most topics in the book, with references to scholarship largely lacking overall, and especially lacking in regard to recent scholarship. On a similar note, engagement with primary source material from both Greece and the ancient Near East is cursory; Kawashima uses well-known works, such as those by Homer and the Enuma Elish, to make grand pronouncements on Greek and Near Eastern culture and religion. Scholars of these regions and periods will quickly notice the lack of reference to many additional exemplars that must be included for this argument to fully succeed.

Kawashima acknowledges that this book is a project of more than twenty years, which may explain some of these issues. This also may explain the use of terms that no longer find favor in the field and will quickly turn many scholars away from the work, such as “primitive” and “sympathetic magic” (pp. 24, 3). In fact, while the theoretical approach of the work is exemplary, particularly in regard to terminology, field-specific terminology becomes confused in some places. For instance, “pagan’ Israel” is referenced at multiple points within the work—terminology that makes no sense given the historical periods under analysis.

Kawashima’s volume is, certainly, unique and will undoubtedly spark much conversation within the field. Unfortunately, the weight of his creative argument will be lost to many due to easily fixable issues, such as those noted above. I urge readers to focus on the positives within this volume and, particularly, to use the interdisciplinary nature of Kawashima’s work as a model for their own works. In so doing, however, the state of the fields of biblical, classical, and Near Eastern studies should not be pushed to the side.