The editors state that the goal of this book is “a cross-historical investigation of the esoteric interpretation history of the Bible” (3). This is an admirable goal. The expansion of biblical studies to include the Bible’s reception history is a significant move in recent scholarship, and a focus on the history of esoteric interpretation is clearly needed. However, as is the case with many edited volumes, the articles are very uneven, and as a result the book does not accomplish its laudable goal. An initial problem is that the volume does not present a coherent view of what constitutes an esoteric interpretation of the Bible. The editors do not supply an organizing definition or conceptual framework, stating that the term esoteric “is often used to refer to an inward mode of thinking or being,” but then they quote someone who dismisses the term as “an artificial category, applied retrospectively to a range of currents and ideas that were known by other names at least prior to the end of the eighteenth century” (2). The authors of the essays—and the readers—are left on their own to conceptualize this term, including its potential utility and range of applications. This conceptual gap is never bridged in the course of the essays.

The volume is organized into three parts, focusing on late antiquity, the medieval and early modern period, and the modern age. The coverage is very piecemeal, and, with one notable exception, is limited to Christian texts and interpreters. The first part contains
three essays on early Christian responses to Gen 1–3. The topics addressed are sexual renunciation in the Acts of Andrew, the symbolism of the eagle in the Apocryphon of John, and Origen’s interpretation of the “garments of skin” in Gen 3:21. Each of these is a specialized study of an interpretive crux. As such, they are meant for specialists in Christian apocrypha and patristics and do not contribute to the broad promise of the volume.

The second section contains essays on Jewish and Christian kabbalah and Paracelsus’s alchemical interpretation of creation. The essays on Jewish kabbalah, by Eliot Wolfson, and Paracelsus, by Georgiana Hedesan, are by far the best essays in this book. The authors have a deep understanding of their subjects and convey the riches of the esoteric interpretations in remarkably understandable prose. These two essays are worth the price of admission, but the rest of the book suffers by comparison. The excellence of these two essays shows how hard it is to address such complex modes of interpretation, which are often deliberately mysterious or opaque.

The third section concerns modern times. It is also a hodge-podge, focused on a few modern Christian philosophers and theosophists, including Emanuel Swedenborg, Rudolf Steiner, and several lesser-known authors. This section is a sequence of summaries, with no substantial engagement with the conceptual structure or cultural context or consequences of these esoteric interpretations. Perhaps surprisingly, Suzanne Scholz (one of the book’s editors) argues that Swedenborg and Steiner offer an alternative to the “literal-historical study of the Bible,” which she dismisses as merely “antiquarian” (192). She presents these thinkers as offering a post-postmodern alternative to historical-literary scholarship: “interpreters ought to concern themselves with the inner, spiritual-religious meaning of the Bible” (192). There is indeed a strong dichotomy between critical scholarship and esoteric interpretation, but it is hard to see how the latter can (or should) supersede the former. Swedenborg, Steiner, and the like were not concerned with scholarship; they were concerned with revealing the “secrets of heaven,” usually with the help of angelic mediators. It is not clear how this offers a new model for biblical scholars to emulate, unless and until we each have our own angelic mediators.

This volume suffers from conceptual confusion on several levels. It does not clearly articulate what esoteric interpretation is or how it changes across time and culture. It wants to disavow historical-critical scholarship by advocating the riches of esoteric interpretation, but it fails to distinguish its method—which throughout the volume is historical-critical—from its desire to become esoteric. To my mind, the only effective moment where the book accomplishes this is at the end of Wolfson’s explication of the Zohar’s interpretation of Genesis, where he shifts into a Zoharic mood and gestures toward “that borderspace where there is no other, because there is nothing but the other
that in the absence of the same is not marked as the presence of the other” (114). (It sounds better in context.) This book wants to aim for such a borderspace, but it does not really know how to get there.