This book represents a synchronic reading of temple practice in the ancient Near East and invites scholarly readers to check the validity of its findings through their own diachronic readings within their preferred methodologies. Hundley’s main premise is that temples reflect human homes, palaces in particular, but also differ from these, and that temple practice demonstrates an understanding of the interaction between human and divine.

Hundley is clear that the purpose of the book is to present a synthetic norm when it comes to ancient Near Eastern temple systems, but it is not to be exhaustive in either methodology or presentation of materials. Thus the focus is on common elements rather than distinctive features. The benefit of this method is that it provides a framework for understanding what Hundley calls “the normative worlds of the temple” (p. vii), which in turn could allow the reader to more aptly see breaks from this norm, and thus better understand the unique theological elements within the various cultures explored (Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Hittite, Anatolian, Syria-Palestinian).

Hundley uses architectural and spatial theory to analyze the remains of the temples. These serve to reveal the psychology and sociology behind the building’s structure. It allows the analyst the ability to access the building’s use and theoretically provide insight into the culture that creates it. Like textual analysis, this method is interpretive. The theory does require some understanding of the culture behind the building, usually from texts. This is because different features may communicate the same use, but the same feature may also communicate different uses. This leads to the same methodological issues that scholars have been wrestling with for generations in one form or another. What if the text represents a different lens on religion than what archaeological findings seem to support (i.e., what if theoretical religion is different than popular
religion, which it almost always is in some way)? Hundley himself points out the difference between the archaeological and the textual when discussing Mesopotamian temples (pp. 60–65). This seems to be the case when it comes to cultic places of worship within Israel in the monarchical period. The interpretative elements required by Hundley’s spatial theory could be considered a flaw in the methodology, though no objective method has been proposed to date that would overcome this avenue for potential misrepresentation.

Hundley examines the temples of the various cultures according to four categories: structure, use, structural communication, and ideology. The first two categories are straightforward data-based categories, whereas the final two are interpretations of the data categories. An example from Hundley is how structure provides the data that a pylon is present, while structural communication explains the significance of it shape and size.

I confess that one of Hundley’s early statements caused me to be concerned about his approach. He states that his intended audience is the scholarly community (though he hopes it is also accessible to the non-specialist). However, he then goes on to say that in his references he focuses on English works as his “primary audience is English” (p. ix). This is contradictory as the scholarly community is much more multilingual, particularly on the issue of temple. Also, since he claims that the majority of his readers will be native English speakers, it is then more important to introduce foreign language texts to which the reader may not have direct access rather than merely detail texts they can read for themselves. In fairness to the author, Hundley does actually include a substantial number of non-English references in his bibliography, which makes the statement even more confusing. Now this might seem to be nitpicking, but since this came early in his explanation of his study, it affected my reception of his work. It made me wonder if his focus on similarities mirrors this preference for language (English), with differences being omitted and left up to the reader (the intentional omission of alternate scholarly languages). The incomplete linguistic landscape made me concerned that the method would also leave the picture incomplete.

Again, in fairness, this book is well aware of its limitations and the author points out throughout his introduction that much of the analysis relies on “circumstantial evidence,” “the superficial,” and “imagination” (pp. 12–13; cf. 49–50, 57, 134, 140, 158, 205, 256). The “Afterword” recognizes that the book does not deal with biblical material and therefore suggests that comparative work needs to be done in response to the analysis presented in the current work. The value of the current work is as a reference on ancient Near Eastern temples. The compilation and descriptions presented are a valuable resource even if one deviates from the interpretations of Hundley. This work serves as a launching