“The Nonverbal Language of Prayer” is an English translation of the author’s revised Hebrew edition (1999) of his doctoral dissertation (1993). The well-structured and richly documented study analyzes rabbinic texts (also including medi-
evival sources in the discussions) that provide information about the non-verbal components of the prayer of the Amida. It discusses gestures (standing, bowing, etc.), the orientation of the body, face, and eyes, the ways of taking leave of prayer, attire and shoes, as well as vocality. The final chapters recapitulate the basic findings of the book, draw conclusions, and point out general tendencies and structures among the analyzed data.

The work is a fine piece of scholarship bringing an important but often neglected aspect of the study of Jewish liturgy (and ancient liturgies in general) to the attention of its readers. Furthermore, the non-verbal elements of the performance of the Amida are an important source for the reconstruction of the Rabbis’ beliefs and their theological understanding of this ritual. The careful discussion of the texts establishes the meaning of elements of the performance within their historical and geographical context.

From the vast repertoire of findings, a few details may be mentioned here. The most important models for nonverbal elements of the performance of the Amida were the adherence to interpersonal patterns of behavior in communication (such as the expression of respect by means of standing), non-cultic, social conventions of the surrounding cultures, and a marked tendency to moderation in gestures.

Thus, the question whether one should wear shoes in study-houses and syna-
gogues is dependent upon the cultural context. In Babylon, one would rather not remove shoes in most situations and hence also enter the study house shod, whereas it was customary in some synagogues in Palestine to enter them barefoot (cf. 162-163). Profane customs are at least as powerful as religious concepts (such as the question how far the synagogues should imitate the temple, e.g., 159-160) in the determination of the proper behavior in prayer. One could ask to which extent the synagogue was perceived in terms of a triclinium where the members of an association or the participants in a meal would have their sandals removed and their feet washed. These customs would not apply to Babylonia (cf. 169), but to Palestine.

The author describes the differences between the normal performance of the Amida and prayer in a situation of crisis that requires rituals of fasting (45-47). In the context of fasting, the performance of prostrations may be the survival of a custom connected with prayer at the Second Temple. It may, however, be dependent upon contemporary customs, too; for wallowing (κυλινδεῖν) in front of the building of the law court (and the application of ash) is mentioned by John
Chrysostom (PG 49.238.34 τῶν πρῴην εἰρημένων/ad illuminandas catechesis 2.4 [but rather part of another corpus of that author’s homilies]) in his description of the mothers and wives of Antiochene men who were indicted after an uprising against the emperor (387 C.E.). Chrysostom describes the women’s public and highly expressive intercession as one of the reasons for their men’s acquittal. Thus, even prostration as a means to enforce one’s plea for mercy has a parallel in interpersonal and political, but non-cultic patterns of behavior within the surrounding society. This does not rule out that such nonverbal elements in the liturgies of fasting have ancient roots. Yet, if they have, they were presumably preserved because they were not perceived as archaic but regarded as normal, even if they were only to be applied in exceptional situations.

As observed by Ehrlich, the system of gestures points to a high degree of innovation in the ritual of the Amida. Hardly any of its features suggest continuity to pre-destruction times (cf. 12, 211-217). This supports the thesis that the idea and practice of statutory prayer developed after 70 C.E. (for the author’s different approach, cf. 190, 193-194 and esp. n. 44). This understanding of prayer and its varying applications in practice was, moreover, for a long time confined to certain groups within Judaism. Furthermore, it may be asked whether m. Ber 4:4 (190-191) must be read as implying aspects of the performance of the prayer (like intonation) and that it cannot point to a non-standardized prayer text. The author adds an interesting text to this discussion (187-189: b. Sot 32b with Shimon bar Yohai’s name mentioned in the context of the tradition). It implies that the Amida was recited silently in order not to “put transgressors to shame,” i.e., people who mention their transgressions in their prayer. It may be remarked that Shimon is quoted with the opposite opinion based on the mode of recitation of the declaration of the firstfruits—as part of the Temple cult like the sin-offering and the burnt-offering—a few lines above. While this text implies that people would add personal elements to an otherwise standardized prayer, it does not exclude the individual worshipper’s power to determine more of the shape of his personal prayer (cf. the general observations by Ruth Langer, “The ‘Amida as Formative Rabbinic Prayer,” in: Identität durch Gebet. Zur gemeinschaftsbildenden Funktion institutionalisierten Betens in Judentum und Christentum [ed. A. Gerhards et al.; Studien zu Judentum und Christentum; Paderborn], 127-156, esp. 132-139).

Based on this repertoire and its analysis, one may ask further questions. In Ehrlich’s study, the gestures of the Amida are, e.g., mainly studied with respect to the individual worshipper. The question of the worshipper’s role as member of a group is neither overlooked nor suppressed (e.g., 62, 98). It may be asked which nonverbal elements of prayer determine the worshipper’s role within his community—even if the communal aspect may be pure imagination in a given situation. Thus, the “short prayers” in a place of danger are worded from a collective perspective of the whole people. Ehrlich observes the marked tendency of the nonverbal elements of the prayer to create an atmosphere of reverence, but not of