In these two rich volumes, Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck have tried to inaugurate a different way of engaging the work of a scholarly career. As they put it, “[T]his is no Festschrift, the personal tribute, through scholarship, of scholarly colleagues and students” (xii). They have chosen a two-fold path of continued dialogue with George Nickelsburg’s “scholarly heritage.” First they have collected Nickelsburg’s most important articles that represent the wide range of issues he has tackled over his career, and for each they have asked a noted specialist to write a response. Nickelsburg is then afforded an opportunity to reply to his respondent. Second, they have included reviews of Nickelsburg’s three major scholarly books to which he again has the opportunity to reply. The editors call this format Auseinandersetzung, since they find no English term that expresses what they intend to do. The results of their efforts reflect an intellectual confrontation in the style of the classical rabbis, one the editors characterize as “intellectual confrontation for the sake of purifying truth and extending learning, broadening its scope and deepening its grasp” (8). Yet even more, because of the importance of Nickelsburg’s work over the last thirty-plus years to defining the study of Second Temple Judaism, we see in these scholarly conversations much of the current state of the discipline—both what scholars have learned and what questions remain central to the discussion.

So even though the editors did not envision these volumes as personal tribute, these books do constitute a telling testimony to the work that Nickelsburg has done and continues to do.

In keeping with my charge “to read the two volumes and assess the oeuvre seen whole and not in bits and pieces,” I want to comment on the value of the format, but also on some of the specific themes of Nickelsburg’s work that continue to bear on how we study Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity.

Perhaps these books reinforce most clearly the ongoing nature of
the scholarly enterprise. To think that we scholars have it all completely correct at any point or that we do not need to reassess continually those things that we think we know reflects a kind of hubris that prevents understanding. The article-response-reply format used here provides not only the more usual scholarly habit of article-critical response, but it incorporates what I find to be the most useful aspect of every productive scholarly conference I have attended, the opportunity for the author to consider the response and reply. So often it is in the reply that we can begin to see the value of the critical response and the questions that it raises. In Nickelsburg’s case, we get to have this “scholarly conference” experience with material that spans his entire career. It is fascinating, for example, to “listen” to him re-engage earlier articles and give the reader a sense of how his mind has changed or remained the same.

Much more than in a traditional collection of articles, I found that the format of these volumes illuminated several main themes and issues in Nickelsburg’s work. Although each respondent was ultimately concerned with one article or book, a number of emphases emerged and then reemerged, emphases that Nickelsburg could pursue further in his replies. When I began to make a short list of these themes and issues, I found that many of them still stand at the center of our scholarly efforts to understand ancient Judaism and Christianity. Foremost on this list is the diverse nature of Second Temple Judaism. Nickelsburg has repeatedly focused scholarly attention on this fact, and the implications of this realization are profound. The argument for the diversity of Judaism is nowhere more important than on discussions of Christian origins. This topic surfaces repeatedly in this collection, but I want to highlight only a couple of examples. In Chapter Three, “Salvation without and with a Messiah: Developing Beliefs in Writings Ascribed to Enoch,” Nickelsburg concludes that the evidence of the various strata of 1 Enoch demonstrates that “First, belief in a Messiah [defined as an anointed royal figure] was not a sine qua non for Jewish theology in the Second Temple Period ... Second, speculations about such a king where they occur, often differ greatly from one another” (82). These two “general implications” reveal an important subtext to the article, even though it specifically treats the Enochic corpus. What is often portrayed as a general feature of Jewish eschatology, turns out not to be such. Jews, including those early followers of Jesus who thought him to be God’s anointed, held a range of beliefs about an agent from God who