With this book, Martin Kessler intends to move away from the relatively dead end of historical-critical, positivistic readings of the text of Jeremiah toward the more fruitful directions of rhetorical and canonical analysis, which are more appropriate for this unquestionably literary work with a theological goal. However, this collection of fourteen essays, including contributions from some of the biggest names in Jeremiah studies as well as some new voices in the discussion, has left me with my own “search for coherence.” Although one may be tempted by the title of this book to entertain a hope that these essays would resolve at least some of the difficulty in locating the organizing principle behind this longest book of the Bible, alas, it is not to be. The variety of suggestions—at times even contradictory—proffered in these essays leads to the ineluctable conclusion that the battle is lost and the troops are scrambling in confusion.
That is certainly not to say that this book has nothing valuable to contribute. Although most of the essays fail to suggest directions for coherence, several do, and even those that do not still provide some food for thought—even if that food is at times almost unpalatable to me. A detailed analysis of each essay is out of the question, but a few remarks should suffice.

Klaas Smelik proposes some general connecting themes for the book of Jeremiah that demonstrate a coherent theopolitical vision having continuing relevance to our day. In a later essay, he argues for the integrality of chapters 50-51 to the book as whole by demonstrating the logic of Jeremiah’s seemingly contradictory stances toward Babylon.

This good start is followed by the equally helpful effort of triliteral A. J. O. van der Wal, who attempts to prove the alliterative thesis that the book is a “carefully considered, coherent composition” (with the exception of chapter 52). This coherence, he argues, is found in the antipodal themes of judgment and deliverance, coming to a focus in chapters 24-31.

After these essays, one’s soaring optimism for coherence hits some significant flak. Joep Dubbink begins his essay with the insightful and correct assertion that the biographical sections of the book of Jeremiah are necessary to the prophecy inasmuch as Jeremiah’s life is a paradigm of the message he proclaims. So far so good, but this valuable insight somehow leads Dubbink to the unorthodox (or, perhaps more correctly, neo-orthodox) conclusion that, for Jeremiah, “‘no truth in solidified form,’ whether it be the stones of the temple, the gold of the royal crown, or even Holy Scripture, is adequate to express the truth of the word of Yhwh. True wisdom is only to be gained in repeated questioning for an actual word of God in a given situation” (27). This, of course, leads one to question how such “an actual word of God” could be recognized when it finally came, beyond the criterion of one’s own subjective judgment. Add to this the Lord’s own words through Jeremiah, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9), and we are left with nothing but “repeated questioning” regarding how our subjective judgment could possibly decide what is the word of God.

We pass from this dismal terrain to the welcome essay of Louis Stulman, who is able to expand on the notion of Jeremiah’s representative character without tailspinning into Dubbink’s non sequiturs. Ronald Clements similarly finds coherence in the book of Jeremiah by virtue of its being a documentation of Jeremiah’s tumultuous spiritual journey from despair to a refined hope—a journey the reader is bidden to follow.

Martin Kessler suggests that coherence can be found in a scaffolding consisting of three columns upon which the entire composition rests. The scaffolding he proffers is merely a three-point outline that seems to fall well short of the adjective well-structured that Kessler believes his essay demonstrates the book of Jeremiah to be.
In an essay considering the place of the reader in Jeremiah, C. R. Seitz concludes (unsurprisingly for those of us who hold to the inspiration and authority of Scripture) that the intended readership does not exclude, but rather transcends, the historical audience so that the message of the book has continuing application to readers of all ages. Well, yes indeed.

For his contribution to arguments for coherence, Robert Carroll is only able to offer the opinion that the person of Jeremiah (if he even existed) is simply a convenient mouthpiece for a concatenation of voices. This seems to be arguing for coherence by saying there is none.

J. G. Amesz argues from the presumption that Jeremiah himself is a “literary creation.” Why this is necessary for his argument remains unclear. Nevertheless, he does find that there are so many similarities between the Lord’s dealings with Judah and Babylon in the book of Jeremiah that we have to conclude a coherent view of God on the part of the authors. However, a coherent view of God and coherence for the book of Jeremiah are not the same thing. Perhaps we can resolve the confusion in Amesz’s essay by asserting that it is the literary creation of a concatenation of voices.

Sitting as uneasily in this collection as car keys in a pants pocket—a little irritating and begging to be placed somewhere else—is the essay by Walter Brueggemann. It seems that there is only a tangential connection, at most, between his thesis (“when Israel’s speech about Babylon is drawn into Israel’s speech about God, the power of empire is envisioned and reconstructed around the issue of mercy”) and the subject of coherence in the book of Jeremiah. The essay is further muddled by a sprinkling of some postmodernism and reader-response theory. Of course, this may only be true for me.

John Hill suggests one way the book of Jeremiah may have been subsequently interpreted, but offers no help in determining the organizing principle for the biblical composition.

While Bob Becking’s demonstration of the literary unity of several passages within the larger unit of Jeremiah 30-31 is certainly helpful, his synecdochical argument that these smaller coherences therefore prove the coherence of the entire unit is questionable at best.

Finally, J. W. Mazurel reminds us that “in the Synoptics and the Pauline letters, citations that are introduced with reference to the Scriptures must not be considered separately from their context” (189). This sounds suspiciously like that old principle from Hermeneutics 101: “Don’t take Scripture out of context.” My only quibble with Mazurel is that surely we do not want to limit this maxim to the Synoptics and Pauline letters!

The effort to locate the organizing principle of the biblical book of Jeremiah is an ongoing scholarly endeavor that has been approached in a variety of ways. Martin Kessler has attempted to broach the issue by assembling these scholarly efforts by those who are willing to deal with the book of Jeremiah on its own terms, in its final form, from a synchronic perspective. However, as this collec-
tion shows, even steering clear of the hazards of source and historical criticism does not guarantee successful exegetical motoring. With the notable exceptions of Smelik, van der Wal, Stulman, and Clements, these essayists have provided little here to advance the search for coherence in the book of Jeremiah and have, instead, introduced a little incoherence of their own.

—Michael J. Williams