In nine chapters devoted to Jer 50–51, Kessler reviews the history of scholarship; analyzes the literary forms that comprise the oracles against Babylon; deals with a variety of literary issues, especially the problems associated with segmenting the text; offers text, translation, and commentary; and contextualizes the oracles in relation to Jeremiah’s oracles against other nations, to the book of Jeremiah, and to Isaiah’s oracles against Babylon, before comparing the portrayal of Babylon’s fate found in the oracles to history and concluding with a series of select observations. Kessler deals with the canonical text and “make[s] a serious effort to ‘hear’” the text as it stands. Kessler’s review of scholarship yields three categories of outstanding questions. Historically, the authorship of the oracles against Babylon is at issue. Kessler notes that the book of Jeremiah seems to make a deliberate effort to emphasize not the prophet but the word of God mediated by the prophet, thereby deemphasizing historical matters such as date and justifying a literary reading of the oracles against Babylon. In all, Kessler hopes to accomplish an analysis of the text that balances diachronic and synchronic approaches.

Beginning with a general classification of prophetic oracular material along two axes, by addressee (Judah or the nations) and by tendency (judgment or celebration), Kessler initially notes that Jer 50–51 contains promised oracles addressed to Judah embedded
within the dominant oracles to Babylon. Further, these promise oracles evidence “no independent existence apart from the framework into which they have been placed”; that is, they are literary constructs (41). Similar observations with respect to the doom oracles—for example, that they generally lack the messenger formula, are often interwoven with one another and with other motifs, frequently refer to the addressee in the third person, and regularly “recycle” language from oracles against Judah in the first half of the book—suggest that they, too, function primarily “as building blocks of a literary composition” (44). Finally, other miscellaneous motifs, such as the various calls to battle scattered throughout the Babylon oracles, have no Sitz im Leben but function only in their literary setting. In sum, Jer 50–51 is a rhetorical composition.

Preliminary to a close reading of Jer 50 (ch. 4) and 51 (ch. 5), Kessler proposes segmenting the Babylon material into the following units: 50:1–3 (introduction); 4–10 (a triptych addressed to Israel and Judah); 11–16 (a taunt and warning for Babylon); 17–20 (a flashback concerning Israel’s past); 21–28 (the ban on Babylon); 29–30 (Babylon faces total war); 31–32 (YHWH is Babylon’s enemy); 33–46 (another flashback concerning Israel and Judah); 51:1–6 (YHWH “arouses” Babylon’s enemies); 7–10 (a flashback concerning Babylon as YHWH’s instrument); 11–14 (call to war); 15–19 (a doxology on the mighty acts of YHWH); 25–26 (a reprise of 51:1 and 50:31); 27–33 (a universal call to war); 34–40 (Zion’s lament and YHWH’s response); 41–46 (a dirge over Babylon); 47–53 (war against Babylon); 54–57 (the sounds of war); 58 (Babylon’s fall reaffirmed); and 59–64 (a concluding narrative). Kessler observes that, in general, unlike other addressees in Jeremiah’s oracles against the nations, Babylon never receives a promise of restoration, that, indeed, the promises issued to Israel/Judah figure much more prominently in Babylon material as an element of its” Great Reversal” theme, and that the vocabulary of Jer 50–51 evokes pathos and violence. These observations are borne out in the detailed literary commentary (chs. 4 and 5) and summarized in the rhetorical analysis (ch. 6) of the rich rhetorical, structural, and key-word artistry of the collection and of the centrality of the “call to flee” motif. Addressed primarily to Israel, they call for her to return home, there to celebrate YHWH’s mighty works of salvation (= destruction for Babylon).

Kessler concludes his study with examinations of the oracles against Babylon in their literary and historical contexts. He notes that oracles addressed to Israel’s most significant historical oppressors, Egypt and Babylon, frame the oracles against the nations collection. This establishes a historical analogy between exodus and new exodus. Babylon differs, however, from Egypt in terms of the severity and finality of God’s judgment against her. A comparative inventory of motifs found in the Jeremian oracles against the nations reveals that, with the exception of a promised restoration, all appear in the Babylonian oracles. Within the book of Jeremiah, the oracles against Babylon are
most noteworthy for their reversal of attitude toward Babylon in comparison to earlier portions of the book. YHWH’s instrument, even his servant, Babylon is now doomed precisely for executing judgment upon Judah. The fulcrum point for this reversal in the book, of course, is outlined in Jer 25. In the context of other anti-Babylon material in the Bible, specifically in Isaiah, Jeremiah’s oracles evidence a fundamental historical orientation over against Isaiah’s “day of YHWH” apocalypticism, although, historically, Kessler can, in fact, find no point of contact for Jeremiah’s oracles against Babylon.

The study concludes with remarks concerning the role of Jeremiah as mediator in the struggle between Babylon and YHWH, the new exodus and the fate of the exiles, the characterization of Babylon as God’s ultimate enemy, a characterization that extends into the New Testament book of Revelation, the denigration of Marduk, and YHWH’s role as Israel’s hero and steadfast covenant partner.

Kessler’s study displays remarkable self-awareness in terms of method, thorough analysis, and admirable caution with respect results. There is little here with which to quarrel and much with which to agree. In fact, Kessler’s study will likely neither evoke controversy nor inspire creativity. Despite its competency, it lacks, in other words, a promising research question that could, given an appropriate methodology, drive analysis toward intriguing, enlightening, novel conclusions.