A revised dissertation written under the supervision of Gordon J. Wenham and Paul Joyce for submission in 1997 to the University of Bristol, this book persuasively argues that the book of Ezekiel should be interpreted as a single rhetorical unit that urges second-generation Judaean exiles to contemplate the fate of Jerusalem, to see their own sins in Jerusalem’s, and, finally, to distance themselves from Jerusalem in order to become the true Israel. Renz develops his case in five extensively researched and generally well-argued chapters. Chapter 1 outlines his methodological perspective and situates it in the context of recent form-critical, rhetorical-critical, and canonical studies of biblical books. His approach, rhetorical analysis, employs several different methods to define the rhetorical unit as a response to a rhetorical situation, defined as a specific cluster of events, persons, and needs. The rhetorical unit is then analyzed by identifying the basic issue at stake in the text, analyzing its stylistic devices, and evaluating the impact of the unit.

Renz tackles each of these steps in separate chapters. Chapter 2 argues that the book’s historical context is the second generation of the Babylonian exile and that the intent of the book is to differentiate its readers from the audience portrayed in the book. Where the prophet Ezekiel’s audience was rebellious and not inclined to hear his message, the book’s readers, the second generation of exiles, are to identify with the prophet, although there is some question whether they will do so (cf. chs. 1-3, 33). At stake for the book’s readers are questions of identity, ethnicity, and leadership. More pressing than differentiating the exiles from the nations is identifying the “true Israel,” or rather, using boundary markers to identify the “enemy within” (contra Smith, Religion of the Landless). It is the aim of the
book to establish such boundary markers by defining the true “Israel” and to persuade the exiles to adopt this identity through repentance and identifying with the purpose of Yahweh in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Chapter 3 argues that the book of Ezekiel accomplishes this aim by increasingly involving its readers in the contemplation of the fate of Jerusalem. By chapter 24, the readers are led to take a stand with Yahweh and against Jerusalem. The remaining chapters depict Yahweh’s reconstitution of a new Israel. Any continuity between past and future rests entirely on Yahweh’s intention for Israel. Chapter 4 is presented as a more detailed exploration of the rhetorical techniques that advance the argument; however, it is less successful than chapter 3 in maintaining its methodological focus. Discussion of stylistic devices, such as the use of metaphor, riddle, and rhetorical questions to involve the reader, are sharper in chapter 3, while chapter 4 is uneven in a number of respects. It is not clear, for example, how the discussion of Ezekiel’s role as watchman, or the otherwise perceptive analysis of Ezek 24, are analyses of rhetorical techniques. Even explicitly identified discussions of rhetorical techniques are not as sharp as one would like. For example, in his discussion of the use of emotion as a rhetorical device, Renz focuses on Ezek 16, when other chapters could illustrate his point as well. Though surely Renz did not intend this, his readers are left to wonder whether strong emotions are experienced only in connection with sexuality. Moreover, he fails to discuss just how the ranges of emotion are manipulated in Ezek 16. By focusing simply on the outrage that the readers are to feel at Jerusalem’s behavior without integrating this with the shame that is commanded for the restored Jerusalem in vv. 59-63, Renz misses a key opportunity to advance one of the central claims of his book: that the exiles are urged both to identify with and to distance themselves from Jerusalem.

Chapter 5 evaluates the success of the book’s rhetoric in addressing the situation. Renz’s main question is whether the book of Ezekiel was an appropriate response to the concerns of the rhetorical situation. In order to answer this question, Renz raises three others: What happened after the exile? Whose interests were served? And, finally, why was the book preserved? Renz concedes that none of these questions is easily answered; even so, his discussion comes off, even to this fan of Ezekiel, as special pleading. The main question is obviously circular and requires a positivistic acceptance that the rhetorical situation as he has defined it really did exist. Moreover, Renz’s answers to the subsidiary questions can as easily lead to the conclusion that Ezekiel was not successful for the rhetorical situation. He did not provide a model for life in the diaspora, as his contemporary Jeremiah did (cf. Jer 29). His vision of a restored Israel, which emphasized the primacy of the exiles over those who remained in Judah, did not contribute to a unification of diverse groups (cf. Ezek 37) during the restoration and may even have exacerbated the contentiousness of that period (cf. Ezra, Nehemiah). What Ezekiel does do, and here I agree with Renz, is to contribute to the identity formation of the exiles (p. 233). But even here the discussion needs to be nuanced further: Ezekiel is only one among
many books produced in exile that shape the community’s identity and contribute to its survival. Moreover, the identity marker that denotes the community’s survival is not the designation “Israel,” which, according to Renz, erases territorial distinctions for Ezekiel, but “Jew,” a term that emphasizes the exiles’ Judaean roots.

A more appropriate question might be, does Renz’s proposal resolve longstanding issues in the interpretation of Ezekiel? His contention that the rhetorical situation of the book revolves around the problems of identity formation in the second generation of the Judaean exile, along with a sophisticated identification of several layers of communication (i.e., Yahweh addressing Jerusalem, the prophet Ezekiel addressing his audience in the book, the book communicating with its readers, pp. 14-19) goes a long way toward resolving many difficulties. These include but are not limited to the presence of restoration oracles among the oracles of judgment, Ezekiel’s dumbness, and his role as watchman. Renz offers creative solutions to these and other problems. Though some may not accept his solutions to these problems, his sophisticated interpretation of the differing rhetorical levels of the book will provide a useful model for further work.

One wishes that Renz had been more explicit about the role of theories from other disciplines in his work. These aid him in defining the shortcomings of current methods in biblical studies and moving beyond them; nevertheless, it would have been useful if Renz had also acknowledged their limitations. An obvious example is his appropriation of classical rhetoric, which is essential to his moving beyond the tendency in OT rhetorical criticism to focus on stylistics. Rhetoric, he insists, functions to advance an argument through a number of different strategies. There is much that is useful in his application of classical rhetorical categories to his discussion; but this reader was often left wondering whether the function of Ezekiel might not be better defined within the rhetorical contexts of the ancient Near East. Even so, the book is a welcome contribution to the study of Ezekiel. In his treatment of the rhetorical complexities of Ezekiel as well as in his imaginative reconstruction of the concerns of the second generation of Judaean exiles, Renz has not only built on past generations of Ezekiel scholarship, he has also defined an approach that will stimulate further investigation for many years to come.