Kessler’s work is an analysis of the book of Haggai intended to examine prophecy within the historical framework of the Persian period. By his own acknowledgement, his methodological approach is “multi-disciplinary and integrative,” or what may be otherwise termed a multicritical approach, namely, one that combines various critical approaches within a single analysis. Kessler identifies several methods that he uses to achieve his goal and to address the shortcomings of previous approaches that used the book of Haggai as a source for historical reconstruction, that is, redaction, literary, rhetorical, ideological, and text criticism.

This review of the content of Kessler’s work focuses on chapters 1–3. Chapters 4–8 are his analysis of the text, followed by chapters 9–10, the synthesis of that analysis. As to the summary, chapter 1 surveys the methods and questions addressed in the history of research and situates Kessler within that history. Notably, he challenges the scholarship of the twentieth century that evaluates the text as nationalistic and lacking literary unity and illustrates his evaluation of the book in his subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 examines the compositional history of the book of Haggai from two perspectives: the literary development and the significance of the date formulae. First, regarding the literary development, Kessler proposes that the extant form of the book of Haggai is a literary unit whose redactional process took place during the sixth century B.C.E. (i.e., 520–515). He concludes that the oracles are roughly contemporaneous with the redactional framework. This is in contrast to those who date the redactional framework to the fifth or fourth century B.C.E., noting varying perspectives as evidence of that framework vis-à-vis the prophetic oracles (e.g., Coggins 1987 and Sérandour 1995; Beuken 1967).
Kessler denies the viability of using discontinuity of perspectives to distinguish the various redactional processes. Rather, he asserts that the redactional process achieved a unified perspective without discernible distinctions among the elements fused in that process. While his view about the contemporaneity of the oracles and the redactional framework is shared with others, Kessler differs from them in the date assigned to the culmination of the redactional activity. He also differs in his understanding of the literary unity and independence of the book. Thus he posits that the book of Haggai is an independent literary unit, unified in its theological perspective as opposed to a subsection of the Haggai-Zechariah 1–8 corpus (contra Petersen 1984; Meyers and Meyers 1987; Tollington 1993).

Second, he posits that the significance and function of the date formulae (1:1, 15; 2:1, 10, 20) within the book are discerned in light of their production and redaction within the same historical context as the prophetic oracles with which they are paired (1:2–11; 2:2–9, 15–19, 21–23). The formulae are to be seen in the context of the seventh to third centuries B.C.E. in which a notable progression toward a more precise formula is observed in both biblical and extrabiblical sources. After a survey of the date formulae from the eighth (e.g., Isa 14:28; Amos 1:1) and the seventh centuries B.C.E. (e.g., 2 Kgs 25:1, 8; Jer 28:1, 17; 36:9; Ezek 1–2; 20:1), he concludes that those in the book of Haggai are typical of the scribal tendency of the sixth century B.C.E. rather than unique or rare features.

In chapter 3 Kessler examines the Yehud of the Persian period (539–515 B.C.E.). He identifies various methodological challenges, duly noting that the aim of the reconstruction is to achieve greater understanding of the book of Haggai rather than to use the book to understand the Persian period. First, he surveys views about the nature of the “Decree of Cyrus” and attenuated restoration as presented in Ezra 1–3; 5; 6 and 2 Chr 36:22–23, including the date and extent of the return (Ezra 1–3 versus 5). Second, he examines issues about the identity of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel in light of their ethnicity, their participation in building the temple’s foundation, and leadership of the Yehud. He concludes that politically Yehud was an independent province with both Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel as governors. Finally, regarding the dating of the book to the second year of Darius, Kessler concludes that the oracles of the book should be dated to 520 B.C.E. presuming the Babylonian and Persian system of postdating.

An overview of Kessler’s exegetical analysis would be counterproductive in this review. His analysis is noteworthy for its extensive and conscientious observations and incorporation of the scholarship on each aspect of the text. Apart from a few minor inaccuracies, the analysis is exemplary. In chapters 4–8 Kessler identifies the theological concerns and traditions of the four macrounits of the book (1:1–15; 2:1–9; 2:10–19;
2:20–23). For him each of these units consists of several elements: (1) an introductory formula (1:1; 2:1, 10, 20); (2) a dramatic conflict (1:2; 2:2–3; 2:11–13; 2:20–21); (3) a divine response in the form of questions (1:4–7, 9–11; 2:4–5, 14–17; and 2:20–23 an exhortation); (4) a declaration of promise (e.g., 2:6–9, 21b–23). As evident by the fourth element, their presence in each unit is not as clearly delineated in the text as Kessler asserts.

Finally, in chapters 9–10 Kessler concludes that Haggai both systematizes and generalizes the traditions used, such as the eschatological conflict, the representation of Zion, and the restoration community as a continuation of the preexilic community. Likewise, according to Kessler, the book portrays Haggai as a ‘typical prophet’ who acted as mediator of YHWH’s message (1:1, 3; 2:1–2, 20–21a), confronted the people regarding their unfaithfulness (1:1–11, 2:14), and declared YHWH’s blessings (2:18–19). He thus challenges the validity of views that represent Haggai as the ‘father of Judaism’ and as a cultic prophet.

Regardless of one’s conclusions about the book of Haggai and its historical context, Kessler’s work must be acknowledged as an essential part of studies of the book of Haggai. Its significance in the history of research is owing to its engaging and extensive presentation of past research, the methodological and conceptual challenges raised in the study of the book, the redactional history of the text, and the textual, exegetical, and theological analysis of the text.