The Biblical Refigurations series seeks to present new perspectives on the characters in the Bible. The present volume applies a narrative-critical method to the texts that report the story of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, the first king of the northern state of Israel, a character who appears in a dense, action-packed four chapters of 1 Kings. Bodner carefully situates his study within current scholarship on the book of Kings. Those who receive the most direct attention are Burke Long, Robert Cohn, and Roland Boer. Long’s commentary in the FOTL series marked a shift in the study of this book away from older historical approaches toward those that give more attention to literary aspects of the final form, allowing for greater understanding of how a text such as 1 Kgs 11–14 fits into the whole book. Cohn’s article, “Literary Technique in the Jeroboam Narrative,” provided Bodner with a careful analysis of the internal features of the 1 Kgs 11–14 narrative with which to interact. Boer’s Jameson and Jeroboam utilized insights from Frederic Jameson’s literary theory to demonstrate the complexity of 1 Kgs 11–14, which opens this narrative to a vast array of methodological approaches. Following the survey of these and other works, Bodner emerges from his prologue equipped to examine many aspects of the Jeroboam narrative, particularly the dynamics of power within a complex network of relationships and the varying perspectives on rebellion in the Bible.
Following the prologue, chapter 1, “Ideologies of Kingship: Mechanisms of Power and the Reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon,” explores texts about the origins of Israel’s monarchy as background for understanding the story of Jeroboam as the initial king of northern Israel. A central element in these traditions, according to Bodner, is the role of prophets. The significance of these figures lies in the limits they place upon royal power. The interactions of Samuel and Saul, for example, form part of the backdrop for understanding the eventual meeting of Jeroboam with the prophet named Ahijah in 1 Kgs 11. The stories of Ahijah in 1 Kgs 11 and 14 place a boundary of prophetic actions and words around the story of Jeroboam. The middle of the story is also filled with the actions of various prophets. Jeroboam cannot escape them.

The second chapter, “Souls of Revolt: Solomon’s Adversaries and the Flashback to Jeroboam,” moves to the stories about Solomon’s reign that introduce Jeroboam and immediately precede the narrative of his rise to power. Bodner observes a large number of allusions to other biblical stories of a rise to power. Most important are the connections to the David story, not because David is the father of Solomon, but because, in the wake of his encounter with Ahijah in 11:11–13, Jeroboam is “an underling who was appointed by a prophet of Shiloh to inherit the Israelite kingdom” (35). He is very much like David, and this makes David’s own son, Solomon, a parallel figure to Saul. There are also connections to the Joseph story and even to the story of Moses and the exodus that will become clearer in later chapters. In light of the attempt to assassinate Jeroboam in 11:40, Bodner observes that “Solomon’s career is bracketed with aggressive and vicious political purges” (58).

Chapter 3, “The Politics of Rebellion: The Schism of Shechem and the Resistance to Imperialism,” examines the central text in 1 Kgs 12:1–24, in which the kingdom of Israel divides and Jeroboam becomes the first monarch of the northern kingdom. The connections to the exodus story are numerous here, and, as Bodner contends, it is “a double-edged critique” (63). Both sides have their associations with Egypt, and the story promotes a view of the monarchy grounded in servant leadership, rather than the kind of power that Egypt represents.

“Objects of Control: Golden Calves 2.0 and the Distribution of Power” (ch. 4) comments on a small amount of text, 1 Kgs 12:25–33. These are the verses in which Jeroboam is establishing what Bodner calls “an alternative liturgy” (96). In moving through the discussion of this text, Bodner assiduously avoids a final verdict on this activity, as the text itself does. He opens this chapter with the observation that Jeroboam has not yet spoken in the biblical text and has been, thus, only a supporting character to this point. When Jeroboam becomes a more active figure, the results are ambiguous. His reforms are mostly religious and are a contrast to those of Solomon. “The Jerusalem temple has an
elitist ambience, whereas Jeroboam opens up the priesthood with a far more populist approach” (96). This could be a positive beginning, but the specter of the golden calf hangs over the bulls of Jeroboam.

One of the most bizarre and baffling stories in all of the Bible is the object of study in chapter 5, “Play-within-A-Play: The Altar and the Allegory of 1 Kings 13.” As the chapter title indicates, Bodner reads 13:11–32 as an allegory and insists upon holding the elements of this text together as a unit. This has at least two major effects. First, “the fall of the altar in Bethel anticipates the fall of Jeroboam” (114). Second, “[i]n the architecture of 1 Kings 13, judgment against Samaria provides a counterpart to the Josiah prophecy in the first part of the chapter” (115). Bodner’s analysis is acutely aware of the flow of power, particularly as it relates to human relationships, and he makes his case that these texts carefully display the fractures around Jeroboam pointing toward his approaching collapse.

Chapter 6, “Focus on the Family: The Royal Disguise of Israel’s Queen,” is a close reading of the final episode of Jeroboam’s life in 1 Kgs 14:1–18. The exquisite nature of this story, particularly as at is read with Bodner’s guidance, adds one more piece to the plot that makes a study such as this one so productive. Again, Bodner connects elements in this story, such as the illness of Jeroboam’s son, the disguise worn by his wife, and the gift of ten loaves she takes in her hand, to elements within the Jeroboam narrative and in other parts of the Tanak. Particularly noteworthy are the connections to the story of Eli in 1 Samuel, and the story of Jeroboam and his family comes to an equally painful end.

A few characteristics of this work may limit its usefulness and attractiveness for some readers. There is an annoying tendency to refer to additional scholarship but leave the reader without a reference to follow. I cite two examples. On page 42 we find, “Again, reputable translations make it sound as though Rehoboam is promoted because of his competence in building projects, but it has recently been argued that military expertise is also suggested in 11:27–28”; I can find no note here or nearby directing me to this discussion. Similarly, page 46 has, “Based on these examples, scholars deduce that the phrase refers either to a warrior (as in the cases of Jephthah and Naaman) or a property-owner (as in the cases of Boaz and Kish).” Again, there is no note in the vicinity to lead me to this discussion. In addition, Bodner’s habit of giving cutesy, pop-culture names to chapters and subsections within them (e.g., “You’re Fired,” “Rebel Yells,” “Dressed for Success,” “Rags to Riches,” “Surveillance Footage,” “Twist … and Shout,” “Construction Zone,” “Altar Call,” “Sign Language,” “The Sting”) may appeal to some but may be distracting to others.
This meticulous character study puts on full display the results of paying attention to every detail in the final form of the text, and it also demonstrates the fruits of a keen awareness of intertextuality, particularly within the Deuteronomistic History. The “refiguration” of Jeroboam that it produces is a welcome antidote to the simplistic portraits of characters, particularly in the Bible, as either heroes or villains. Jeroboam is neither. “Jeroboam’s kingship is a solution to Solomon’s corruption, but becomes deeply problematic when Jeroboam himself is corrupted” (151). I felt sympathy for this character who let himself get caught up in the flow of power, perhaps with good intentions, but was ultimately overtaken by events. This is a story that demands infinite attention.