As the title suggests, this book explores the speech of Daughter Zion in Lam 1–2 as a response to her configuration within the prophetic literature. Using a dialogic hermeneutic, Mandolfo’s study contributes to the growing body of research that highlights the polyvalent nature not only of the book of Lamentations but of the Hebrew Bible itself.

The opening chapter outlines the reading strategy utilized within the book. The approach developed is eclectic, drawing on the dialogic theories of Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin, supplemented by the more explicitly political critique of feminist and postcolonial methodologies. The study seeks to apply this hermeneutic to those prophetic texts from Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isa 40–55 that utilize the marriage metaphor and also to Lam 1–2, in order to give voice to the too-often-silenced feminine character. It is argued that, while the prophetic texts tell the story of the divine-human relationship from the perspective of the “husband,” Lam 1–2 functions as the “wife’s” response, a response that provides a counterstory to the more dominant master narrative.

Chapter 2 traces the development of the marriage metaphor as it occurs in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in order to establish the degree to which Lam 1–2 can be read as a response to the prophetic rhetoric of condemnation aimed at Israel personified as the
“adulterous wife of YHWH” (29). Particular attention is paid to the rhetorical dialogism of the texts in order to consider the contours of the relationship between the deity and his “wife.” Attention is paid to both the surface/intended meanings and other, submerged signifiers, that is, “what the woman might have us read if she were given a voice” (30).

The analysis highlights the monologic, one-sided nature of the prophetic material, which silences the voice of the woman. The feminization of Israel provides an effective tool for defending God’s reputation and for justifying divine violence. Reading from the woman’s point of view offers a deconstructive voice that questions divine morality, highlighting the use of coercive and seductive power on behalf of the deity. It is noted that, in the progression from Hosea through Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the woman is increasingly objectified and portrayed as hopelessly perverse and deviant. In terms of a Bakhtinian analysis, it is argued that the prophets/God authors the woman irresponsibly.

Chapter 3 moves from the prophetic literature to Lamentations but changes direction somewhat in its focus on genre. The chapter seeks to demonstrate the ways in which Lam 1–2 fashions a response to the prophets in terms of linguistic and formal structures, specifically in its reworking of the lament psalms genre. Mandolfo draws on her earlier work on the dialogic voice in the lament psalms (God in the Dock: Dialogic Tension in the Psalms of Lament [London: Sheffield, 2002]), considering the impact of the events of 587 B.C.E. and the needs of the postdestruction community on the evolution of genre in Lamentations. She argues that the lament genre is modified in order to craft a response to the prophetic rhetoric played out in the marriage metaphor.

The dialogic reading of Daughter Zion’s speech in Lam 1–2 is introduced in chapter 4. Pages 79–87 provide a convincing rationale for a dialogic reading of this text as a response to the prophetic claims. It is argued that Lam 1–2 provides a counterstory to the prophetic portrayal that questions both the appropriateness and the level of violence against Daughter Zion and shifts the rhetoric from one of guilt and blame to that of suffering. According to Mandolfo, “Zion morally reorients the rhetoric by focusing on herself as bereaved nurturer. In this discourse, she is first and foremost a mother, not a wife—a self-description that eschews the sexualization of her identity in the prophets” (89–90).

The response of YHWH to Daughter Zion within Second Isaiah is explored in chapter 5. As there has been much previous discussion about the intertextual links between Lamentations and Second Isaiah, the discussion focuses primarily on the speech of the characters in the relationship: God and Zion. It is noted that Zion is all but silenced when the divine speech, which is absent in Lam 1–2, resumes in Second Isaiah. The divine voice continues to be a controlling discourse, one that does not ultimately allow others (Zion)
any signifying power or influence. The audience is again called to read with the male figure, moving away from the relational discourse evident in Lam 1–2.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on the reading strategy utilized, arguing that reading for the female voice challenges the “divine/prophetic discursive hegemony” (118). In adopting such a reading strategy, Mandolfo argues that we risk the possibility of forcing a redress of issues of power and raise the possibility of reading against, rather than with, the God of the text.

The study concludes by exploring the ethics of a dialogic reading of the biblical text (ch. 6). Central to the discussion here is the issue of biblical authority. In the opening chapter, Mandolfo states that one of her intentions is to “contribute to the dethroning of biblical authority as it is now construed” (5). In doing so, she seeks not to diminish biblical authority in itself but to emphasize the polyphonic nature of the biblical text as “words of God,” not as “the Word.” In chapter 6 she argues that a dialogic hermeneutic attunes us to the multiplicity of voices within the text, suggesting that in hearing the countervoices in the text the difficult questions of power and abuse in our own context can be brought to the fore.

This study breaks new ground in terms of bringing together a dialogic hermeneutic with feminist and postcolonial political critique. The conclusions drawn are both insightful and confronting. Significant among the findings is the recognition that Lam 1–2 compels a reappraisal of Daughter Zion through giving the female figure subjectivity and thus a voice to express the pain of the community. That the voice of Daughter Zion seeks to subvert the prophetic perspective and that the voice of the narrator in these chapters sides with the perspective of Zion over against the traditional theological perspective is also important. Equally important is the critique of the divine construction of feminized Israel and the subsequent justification of violence as a result of this construction.

A number of methodological issues do, however, arise. Given the eclectic nature of the approach, chapter 1 is, at times, difficult to follow, with the sheer breadth of material covered coming at the cost of a clearly defined line of argument.

Chapter 3 is the least convincing in the book. A range of insightful conclusions are drawn in relation to the changes that occur as the lament unfolds through the speech of both Zion and the narrator; however, a number of methodological limitations are evident. Mandolfo begins her discussion be reviewing the methodology used in her previous work, identifying the frequent use of a didactic voice (DV) in the lament psalms. The DV is a third-person voice that offers speech of and for God. It is argued that this voice is present in Lamentations, but rather than speaking for God it sides with Zion against the deity.
This argument collapses the narrator’s role to that of the DV in the psalms, a move that is not examined, and no justification is provided for this assumption within the discussion. While it is certainly true that the narrator does ultimately adopt an empathetic position in relation to Zion, it is not clear that the narrator plays the same role as the DV in the lament psalms. This role, it would seem to me, is represented by the didactic voice in Lam 3:21–39, a text outside the focus of the present study. In addition, Lam 1–2 is taken into conversation with Ps 22, without this choice of psalm being clearly justified and without acknowledging the exegetical complexities of the psalm. Lamentations 1–2 is also briefly compared with Lam 3, where it is assumed that Lam 3 is a more “pure” form of the lament genre, an assumption by no means universally held.

From my own reading of Lamentations, I am not as convinced that Lam 1–2 has the marriage metaphor as strongly prefigured as is suggested within this study. Israel/Zion is personified as female in metaphors other than the marriage metaphor in the prophetic literature, and I would argue that the response of Daughter Zion is to a wider corpus of prophetic texts than only those that use the marriage metaphor. There is a tendency within the study to collapse the feminization of Israel, the city, and the marriage metaphor into one trope, which neglects some of the complexity of both the prophetic literature and Lamentations.

Finally, more detailed textual analysis, particularly of Lam 1–2, may also have further strengthened the conclusions.

These comments should not, however, detract from Mandolfo’s contribution to this emerging field of study. This book is a helpful addition to the discussion of both Lamentations and the prophetic literature.