This book is a revision of Kathleen Rochester’s PhD thesis at Durham University in the U.K. The study consists of a comparison between some aspects related to the ministries of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The key word in the title of the book, which is a reflection of the focus of the study, is the word “ministry.” The term serves the purpose “to indicate service of a subordinate to a divine superior where divine purpose and commands carry authority for the shaping of each man’s life and work” (1). This quotation also reflects to a large extent Rochester’s approach to the study of these two prophets. These two prophetic books have overlapping historical contexts, and the fall of Jerusalem is a shared focus in their ministries.

There are six chapters in the book, of which the first is an introduction and the last a conclusion. Chapters 2–5 contain the various texts that were chosen for comparing the ministries of the two prophets. The introductory chapter clearly directs the reader to what the positioning of the author is in terms of the trends in research of Jeremiah and Ezekiel studies and what to expect in this study. Rochester is well-informed about the intricacies and complexities in engaging the texts of these two prophetic books. She had to make choices and decisions that would enable her to achieve what she had set out to do in this writing project. She indicates that her approach is theological and thus that the final form
of the text that was received serves as basis for the research. She acknowledges that the identity of the authors of the texts is uncertain and that we can only work with the implied authors of the canonical texts. The texts of the two prophetic books imply certain historical circumstances and also settings for the ministries of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and this is honored in the theological reading of the prophetic texts. Rochester’s view is that the canonical text is the result of theological interests and reflects divine-human interactions, which is the interest of this study. Rochester acknowledges that what the texts offer are portrayals of the two prophets because it is not possible to access the historical figures. She explains, “what we do have in these texts is a portrayal of events, circumstances and society that the text considers important in relation to the ways in which these prophetic vocations unfold” (7). Rochester makes the following important observations: (1) the communication between Jeremiah and Yahweh is intimate and close, and the spoken word is prominent in this regard; communication between Ezekiel and Yahweh is more distant, and the visual side of his ministry enjoys prominence; (2) Jeremiah’s setting is reflected in the text to be primarily in Judah, whereas the text places Ezekiel in Babylon among the people in exile; the different settings have the implication that different perspectives in their ministries of the two prophets can be noticed.

To serve the purpose of making comparisons between the ministries of the two prophets and to do justice to the theological aspects of the two ministries, Rochester had to choose which aspects are “profitable” to compare. She decided on the call narratives of the two prophets, on worker images of prophetic ministry (assayer, potter, and watchman), on sections that relate the prophets to the temple, and, finally, on the matter of deviant prophets. Her method entailed first exegetical studies of the chosen texts from both prophetic books related to the aspects mentioned above. After doing thorough exegesis, comparisons are drawn between the chosen texts.

As mentioned, the call narratives in Jer 1:1–19 and Ezek 1–3 constitute the first aspect chosen for comparison (ch. 2). The exposition of the mentioned sections is done comprehensively and shows Rochester’s competence in analyzing texts. At the end of the chapter the comparison is narrowed down to the following aspects: introductions (words in the case of Jeremiah, visions in Ezekiel), settings (Judah with the temple still intact for Jeremiah, exile after the destruction of the temple while God is perceived to be distant in Ezekiel’s case), priestly backgrounds (Jeremiah from a priestly background but not named a priest, Ezekiel called a priest). It is clear that the ministry of Ezekiel is much more entwined with various priestly aspects than that of Jeremiah. A further aspect highlighted in the comparison of the call narratives of Jeremiah and Ezekiel is the portrayal of Yahweh (for Jeremiah he is known through his word, whereas the presence of his glory is prominent in Ezekiel; Rochester notes the aspect of a near conversational partner for Jeremiah over against a more distant experience of the partner’s presence by Ezekiel).
Another aspect examined is the response of the prophet (word-dominated experience by Jeremiah, overwhelmed by divine presence in Ezekiel’s case). The prophetic role is the last aspect of comparison highlighted (Jeremiah appointed as prophet, Ezekiel as watchman; Jeremiah to speak to his people and the nations, Ezekiel to the house of Israel). The conclusions drawn by Rochester are interesting and engaging, differing as they do due to the different circumstances and settings.

In chapter 3 Rochester discusses what she calls worker images. In Jer 6:27–30 Jeremiah is seen as an assayer. This is followed by a discussion in 18:1–12 of Yahweh as potter. When it comes to Ezekiel, the section referring to him as a watchman (33:1–20) is analyzed. Of importance is the point that these metaphors further contribute to the understanding of what the prophetic ministries of these two prophets entail. Rochester therefore attempts to investigate the “multiple lines of association and manifold worlds of meaning” (69) these metaphors provide. The discussion and presentation of the various passages from the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel is done thoroughly and proficiently. Rochester believes that the metaphors function as part of the “outworking” of the prophetic roles. All of these metaphors function within a climate of societal change heading for the worse, but also signaling the possibility for rebuilding and survival. In the section where comparisons are drawn, the following main points are addressed: the prophet in relation to Yahweh, the prophet in relation to the people, working for response, tools of the trade, destruction and hope, and working with perseverance. The matter of closeness and distance is important for Rochester’s argument. In this chapter she again emphasizes the closeness of Jeremiah to Yahweh, claiming that the metaphors of the assayer and potter support this. She argues that the watchman metaphor distances Ezekiel in a way from Yahweh, because the watchman also has to watch out for Yahweh. The point is taken, but she seems to overstate her conclusion by saying, “Ezekiel’s work is not identified with the work of Yahweh, although he needs to listen for and watch for Yahweh” (103). She is correct in stating once more that the context of the prophets is the determining factor.

The next chapter concerns the prophet in relation to the temple. The passages under discussion are Jer 7:1–15 and Ezek 8–11. It is clear that much more material is available from Ezekiel and indicates the priestly sentiments of Ezekiel. In the Jeremiah passage it is clear that falseness prevailed and that the people of Judah had a misplaced trust in the temple, the land, and the monarchy. The central theme in Ezek 8–11 is the departure of the glory of Yahweh from the temple. Rochester has done a comprehensive study of the Ezekiel unit and has skillfully presented her views in dialogue with the views expressed by other commentators. In comparing the relation of the two prophets to the temple, the reality of the existence of the temple plays an important role. In the case of Jeremiah, with the temple still in existence, false proclamation and false security are matters of concern. In the case of Ezekiel and the people in exile, matters such as loss of Yahweh’s presence in
their midst and grief are of concern. In Ezekiel the holiness of Yahweh is emphasized and therefore also concerns of cultic cleansing. For Jeremiah judgment is imminent, whereas Ezekiel has the ability to see hope for his people beyond the destruction.

Chapter 5 deals with deviant prophets. For this purpose Jer 23:9–32 and Ezek 13 are the texts under scrutiny. In her discussion of Ezekiel, Rochester discusses male prophets in 13:1–16 and female prophets in 13:17–23. Although there are many more passages in Jeremiah that deal with this matter, for the purpose of comparison Jer 23:9–32 is suitable. I beg to differ with Rochester that 23:33–40 should not be regarded as part of this cycle, but that would not make a difference for the purpose of the discussion in the book. As in the previous chapter, the Ezekiel material is discussed in greater length. An interesting observation is the addressing of the issue of female prophets as a separate group. Other passages where this is the case are Isa 3:16–4:1; 32:9–12; and Amos 4:1–3. Rochester’s discussion in this regard is engaging and worth reading, since it highlights surprising elements. In the comparison important matters such as the gender of the prophet, the heart, the divine council, visions and dreams, divination, objects associated with prophecy, lifestyle, role, standing against opposition, deception, and matters of language of emotion and metaphor are discussed. In the concluding part Rochester summarizes both the similarities and differences between the views of the two prophets on deviant prophets. She once again emphasizes the aspects of “word,” relational language, emotional expressions, and Decalogue transgressions with Jeremiah, whereas visual language, metaphors, and cultic matters are distinctive traits of Ezekiel. In chapter 6 Rochester offers her final conclusions.

This book makes good reading and is well-written. The layout is done well, and there is a logical progression from one chapter to the next. The chosen themes serve the purpose of sufficiently comparing the ministries of the two prophets. The point that context is of utmost importance is well-demonstrated by looking at the differences between the ministries of the two prophets. A question that arose while reading the book was why a comparison is needed, because the same conclusions can be drawn from treating the prophets separately. After reading the book I admit that the comparison serves the purpose of emphasizing the distinctiveness of each prophet more clearly. It also illustrates the determining effect of radical societal change on perceptions of Yahweh and relating to him. As a theological reading of the canonical texts of the two prophets, the results are satisfactory in terms of the approach. A remaining question is, however, whether a theological reading should not also be conscious of the ideological issues that informed the particular theological presentation of the text material and also that of the author who presented this theological reading. All in all this is a book worth reading.