This book is the culmination of a decade's worth of thinking and writing about 4 Ezra by Hindy Najman. A major strength of this book is that it looks beyond biblical scholarship for analogies and tools for analyzing 4 Ezra. For example, Jonathan Lear's book Radical Hope, about the way that writing helped preserve the memory of Crow Indian culture after their exile from their ancestral lands, serves as a touchstone for Najman's discussion of 4 Ezra's strategy for helping the Jewish people survive the destruction of the Second Temple by encouraging its readers to focus on scripture rather than rebuilding the temple.

The first chapter, entitled “Reboot,” uses that term (in a sense borrowed from superhero comics) to describe the way that the author of 4 Ezra reinvents the figure of Ezra and imagines an alternative history of Israel in which the Second Temple was never built (17). Najman claims that the most striking difference from Ezra-Nehemiah is that in 4 Ezra, “Ezra does not engage in the rebuilding of the Temple or the reestablishment of Jerusalem” (17, cf. 62). While those two activities are the focus of many of the chapters of Ezra-Nehemiah, they are not the particular concern of the biblical Ezra, who arrives on the scene after the dedication of the Second Temple. Although he does bring with him donations for the Temple from King Artaxerxes, his main commission is to teach the laws of God to the people of Judah (Ezra 7:10, 14, 25), leaving the rebuilding of Jerusalem to Nehemiah. Nevertheless, Najman's larger point is well taken: 4 Ezra “creates its own precursors” (20, quoting Borges) by rewriting the past and imagining a new, prophetic role for Ezra in a new setting, the Babylonian exile.

Chapter 2, “The Past and Future Ezra,” is ostensibly about how the protagonist is formed by combining the scribe and teacher of Torah in Ezra-Nehemiah with other scriptural figures, especially Ezekiel, Daniel, Job, and Moses (23). The bulk of the chapter (34–62), however, is devoted to two issues on which Najman has published extensively: pseudepigraphy and exemplarity. Here, they are framed somewhat differently, through sustained engagement with Nietzsche's reframing of the “Homerica question.” The portrayal of Ezra as a prophet via implicit comparisons to Ezekiel and Daniel is addressed in four pages, including a page establishing the prophetic identity of Daniel in ancient Judaism. The chapter concludes without elaborating on the protagonist's similarity to Job or Moses, although there are passing mentions of those figures in later chapters.

The third chapter, “The Memory of Scripture,” examines the motif of the burned scriptures (4 Ezra 4:23; 14:20–22), arguing initially that it is “a figuration
of the problematic status of scripture and its need for renewal" (71, emphasis original). This is a valid understanding of the way the burned scriptures motif functions in 4 Ezra, but Najman also ties the motif to what she perceives as a “de-textualization” of scripture in 4 Ezra, by which she means that while scripture is frequently recalled, 4 Ezra does not “rewrite” or “interpret” scripture in a way that addresses “problems” (lacunae, anomalies) in the text (77). Numerous other ancient Jewish texts, however, engage in a selective and “theologically guided presentation of remembered traditions” (77), without claiming that the scriptures have been destroyed. Compare the summary of the covenants from Noah to David in 4 Ezra 3:9–27 or the list of intercessors from Abraham to Hezekiah in 7:106–110 with the Praise of the Ancestors in Sir 44–49 or the interpretation of the Vision of the Clouds in 2 Bar. 56–68.

Chapter 4, “Re-centering the World,” returns to the theme of the loss of the temple, focusing on the central episode of 4 Ezra. Najman helpfully explains the change of the seer’s location to uninhabited land (9:24) as preparation for revelation, tied to the wilderness motif in the Bible. She persuasively argues that the vision Ezra receives in that episode is the heavenly temple revealed on earth, for which she claims that the closest parallel is 2 Bar. 4, even though the ultimate revelation of the heavenly temple on earth is not explicitly mentioned in 2 Baruch (122); but cf. 2 Bar. 6:8–9, 32:4. A close parallel for the revelation of the heavenly temple on earth in Rev 21:2–3 can helpfully be added to Najman’s discussion.

The final chapter, “Radical Hope and the Revitalization of Scripture,” crystallizes Najman’s argument for 4 Ezra’s shift of focus from temple to Torah. Here the originality of her reading of 4 Ezra becomes clear: the difference between Uriel and Ezra is not a theological disagreement, but one of “attitude and pathos” (135). Ezra needs to acknowledge God’s justice by shifting his focus to the world to come, but at the same time, he was not wrong to mourn for the earthly Zion and sinful humankind. Uriel acknowledges in 10:50 that the revelation Ezra is receiving is “in reward for his lamentation” (149). It is Ezra who initiates the restoration of the Torah in the final episode, in order to enable Israel to “resume its covenantal life with God” (153). By focusing on the affective dimension of 4 Ezra, Najman shows how Ezra’s questions are answered to his satisfaction, providing a model for the reader to emulate.

At times, Najman’s privileging of the Syriac version (from which she consistently quotes, in her own translation) is problematic, when she makes arguments based on readings that are found only in that version. One example will suffice: “the language of ‘being clothed in an evil heart’ [3:21 Syr.] suggests not so much an internal tempter as an external and inauthentic guise, perhaps freely adopted but hard to shed” (84). This conclusion about the “evil heart"