In this volume Paul J. Brown aims to illuminate the situation and argumentative strategy evident in 1 Cor 15. Specifically, Brown argues that the broad influence of Greco-Roman mythology on Corinthian society for both elite and nonelite explains the situation of resurrection denial, the problem of ethical corruption, and Paul’s adoption of a corrective Adam–Christ contrast in this key chapter. The volume is well-written, with a sensible overall structure, clear prose, and helpful summaries throughout.

In the first chapter, the research question is posed: “How did Paul seek to correct the convictions of the deniers of the resurrection so that they also felt a resulting weight of moral obligation?” (2). The approach and methodology are outlined, before a literature review is conducted. This review is helpful, and, indeed, the engagement with secondary literature throughout the book is generally thorough and appropriately nuanced. Brown finds that those who have previously attempted to explore the link between eschatology and ethics in Paul have generally emphasized the important functions of future judgment and/or future hope. The hortatory value of an embodied future resurrection of believers, however, has not been sufficiently explored: What precisely is “the ethical significance of the bodily resurrection” (26)?
Chapter 2 explores “Greco-Roman Afterlife Beliefs and Paul’s Resurrection Convictions.” This is a strong chapter that shows Brown at his best, capably engaging with a significant amount of ancient data, drawing helpful categorizations, and arriving at carefully argued and persuasive conclusions. He considers that the largely nonelite Corinthian church was more significantly influenced by the still-pervasive activities and assumptions of Greco-Roman divine mythology than by the tenets of philosophical schools (although these are not ruled out). According to this influence, the Corinthians were likely to have been used to a pessimistic view of the plight of the (ordinary) dead. The dead were thought to endure in a shadowy sort of existence. This discussion of the Greco-Roman situation of the recipients is longer and stronger than the subsequent discussion of Paul’s own perspective; nevertheless, Brown rightly emphasizes both Paul’s Pharisaism and his Damascus road experience in contributing to his understanding of resurrection.

The third chapter lays out the key thesis: the deniers of the resurrection were able to persist in their pessimism for the plight of the (ordinary) dead even as Christians because their worldview allowed for exceptional afterlife beliefs regarding the special, “heroic” dead. They were accustomed to the idea that, while ordinary people would have a shadowy afterlife, heroes would enter into an afterlife of blessed immortality. Combining these customary assumptions with their Christian convictions, it is feasible that the Corinthian deniers fully affirmed the resurrected immortality of Jesus while denying that this was the destiny of ordinary believers. Brown regards this proposal as more robust than the three usual groupings of views: that the Corinthians held an overrealized eschatology; that the Corinthians denied the possibility of a material afterlife; or that the Corinthians denied an afterlife altogether.

With regard to the relationship between eschatology and ethics, Brown points out that those who were heroized in Greco-Roman culture were those who had accomplished exemplary acts of heroism or benefaction but had not necessarily lived moral lives. In other words, there was a disconnect between ethics and eschatology reflective of a broader disconnect between Greco-Roman ethics and religious practice. This reality would explain why Paul thought that the Corinthians’ lax morality might need to be rectified by a corrected eschatology in which there is continuity between the life lived now and the life to come.

Brown argues that, in fact, Paul sought to induct them into his perspective by drawing on their own cultural estimation of the hero. Jesus is said to be depicted in 1 Corinthians in terms that would have reminded Paul’s hearers of a hero, given that “it would not be surprising for newly converted Gentiles to attach heroic status to Jesus” (104). Paul is said to nuance this sense with scriptural categories and, further, to insist that believers also “shared in Jesus’ hero status” (105). They could therefore expect to share in his heroic
afterlife: corporeal resurrection. Additionally, they should be expected to imitate their hero’s exemplary acts, which amount to a moral life in the present.

This thesis is further unpacked in the remaining three chapters of the book, which conduct exegesis of 1 Cor 15:1–11, 12–34, and 35–58, respectively. In chapter 4 Brown gives a lengthy consideration of Paul’s “gospel” in the opening verses of the chapter. He suggests that a key scriptural background is the book of Genesis, particularly Gen 22, in which Abraham gives Isaac up to (almost) death and has him restored. This is of such interest to Brown because he is keen to demonstrate that Paul is intentionally providing a scriptural undergirding narrative to replace the Homeric narratives of his hearers: “Paul … was making a case that his foundational convictions about the subject were not according to Homer, as were theirs” (128). Brown also argues that, even in this early part of the chapter, Paul is hinting at the ethical burden of his intentions by his use of particular terminology.

In chapter 5 Brown argues that Paul is demonstrating both the veracity of the future bodily resurrection of believers and the fact that this carries ethical implications for the present. This general point is not controversial, but Brown seeks to push further than has been done previously to discern the link between the eschatology and the ethics: he seeks to understand “what connections there are between the ethical imperatives in vv. 29-34 and the preceding discourse” (149). This is indeed a worthwhile question. He argues that those practicing baptism for the dead were influenced by the Greco-Roman practices of heroizing the dead and perhaps thought that they were effecting a better afterlife for the recipient than the shady Homeric postmortal existence that was thought to be the norm. In Paul’s claim to “die every day,” Brown discerns his exemplification of “heroic living” (161). That is, Paul is presenting himself as one who shares in Christ’s heroic status and thus is willing to live as a hero, valiantly giving himself over to danger and death: “Paul … exemplifies the apostles’ noble and sacrificial living, which is reminiscent of the traditional Greek heroes” (163). This way of presenting himself “would have resonated with Greco-Roman cultural sensibilities” (170). The Corinthians should see from Paul’s example that “it is worthwhile to live nobly as heroes for the sake of others” (166), that “life can and should be lived nobly” (169). They themselves should pursue “a noble lifestyle imitating Paul, the apostles, but ultimately Jesus, the Messiah” (173).

In the final chapter before the book’s conclusion, Brown argues that Paul is appealing to “the Edenic narrative” (181) as he demonstrates that the nature of the resurrection body is one that is characterized by (not composed of) the spiritual. He argues that Paul’s reference to the doxa of the earthly man (in contrast to that of the heavenly man) refers to the luminous radiance of the prelapsarian Adam. This is said to be significant for the Corinthians because it continues to replace their Homeric narratives with scriptural ones.
and because it reveals that even the pre-fallen Adam was still in an inferior state to their own destiny in the resurrected Christ. This vision of future resurrected immortality "was a future similar to the beatific afterlife of the heroes, especially those who experienced fleshly apotheosis, except grander. It is this fact that Paul will leverage to exhort the Corinthian believers to live as heroes; more specifically, like the hero Jesus, the Messiah" (199). Thus Brown answers his key question about the ethical value of Paul’s eschatology in 1 Cor 15 by proposing that in this chapter Paul is combining the worldview of his recipients with the convictions of his apostleship in order to urge that those destined for embodied resurrection should live like their heroic exemplar.

To my mind, the key contribution of this work is the demonstration of a cultural milieu in which the nature, behavior, and afterlife of heroes might provide a model for the sort of viewpoints and behaviors evident in 1 Cor 15. Brown’s argument that this milieu helps explain how some in Corinth could uphold the resurrection of Christ while denying the resurrection of the dead seems to me to be persuasive and helpful, even if it is presented as overly certain or sufficient at points. This alone counts the book as a worthy contribution to the study of this key chapter in 1 Corinthians. Other helpful contributions include the consideration of the disconnect between ethics and eschatology in Greco-Roman religion and eschatology and the mention (almost in passing) of the notion of presently possessed immortality (182), which might help explain Paul’s insistence on its futurity.

One hesitation I have about the book is its tendency to divide fairly sharply between sociocultural and theological perspectives, with an emphasis consistently on the former as a sufficient explanation for the various phenomena of the letter. For example, Brown implies at a number of points that Greco-Roman religious assumptions sufficiently explain the Corinthians’ immorality and resurrection denial, as in the quote: “the main problem of prostitution could be caused by the endemic ethical dislocation germane to Roman religion” (99). But surely there is also a religious/theological dimension to the ethical problems in Corinth: the “spiritual” Corinthians make the claims that they are “free” and that “all things are permissible,” implying a quasi-theologically grounded licentiousness that goes beyond an ignorant “ethical dislocation” between religion and morality. Similarly, Brown rejects the possibility of an “over-realized eschatology” (68) influencing the Corinthian problems, because (in part) “the [key] verse [4:8] more probably exposes attitudes that reflect social status-seeking” (69). Must these be exclusive alternatives? Surely the social status-seeking betrays the theologically loaded assumption that it is appropriate to pursue present triumph—an assumption that Paul would certainly regard as a premature realization of their eschatological destiny. As a further example of this tendency, the apostolic ethical counterpart to the Corinthian immorality is presented in rather detheologized terms, such as “nobility” or “morality” or “heroism”
of a sort that appeals to “Greco-Roman cultural sensibilities” (170). But it seems to me that Paul himself uses ethical terminology and imagery that is more theologically/christologically loaded, being evocative of Christ’s cross (“I die every day”), shame (ektroma), and humility (“I labored”).

But this hesitation aside, I reiterate that Brown has produced a worthy contribution to scholarship on the letter, which should be consulted by those working on 1 Cor 15, Paul’s eschatology, and Paul’s ethics.