As the book’s introduction recognizes, Rom 9–11 is one of the most debated passages in biblical scholarship. Differing methodologies, perspectives, and agendas have resulted in heated contests regarding Paul’s intended argument in this section that is laden with “election” language. Often the debate results in a lobbing of prooftexts. In *Election of the Lesser Son*, Wallace seeks to cut a different path in the debate by tracing Paul’s larger argument, attending to Old Testament quotations and allusions, and interacting with the genre of the passage. Wallace contends that Paul’s discussion emphasizes the dual nature of election: it is not that the choosing of one group (i.e., Jews) results in the forsaking of the other (i.e., gentiles), but rather that in God’s plan this choice was intended to bring the blessing of the other as well as the humility of the “elect.” Wallace organizes his study by following the order of Paul’s argument through these chapters with a conclusion that offers a summary of the section and the larger picture of how it connects to the letter as a whole.

In chapter 1 Wallace argues that Paul’s lament structure is evidenced in his complaint and intercessory prayer in 9:1–5. This, along with 11:33–36, the concluding praise of the lament, forms the bookends of Paul’s lament-midrash structure. In his lament Paul postures himself as one receiving revelation and thus not simply speaking from experience
or desire but with authority (33–35). Wallace further suggests that Paul’s desire to be accursed from Christ represents Paul adopting, like Moses in Exod 32, God’s perspective on the matter concerning the current plight of his compatriots (38–40). Wallace affirms that Paul’s outlook on Israel here is not completely negative given the benefits that he states God conferred upon them and, in light of the present tense, are still current blessings to them (40–46).

Chapter 2 addresses 9:6–29. Wallace suggests that to understand this section one must trace Paul’s argument and its Old Testament references in their original contexts, follow the logic of the argument as a whole, and recognize his midrashic style and stylistic devices (56). Concerning 9:10–13, Wallace emphasizes that in the context of Genesis the choice of Jacob over Isaac was for the older to serve the younger; thus the elect son is to be humbled by his position (68–69). As such, “God first punishes the “older” son … which is an act that also proves his patience and mercy toward the “younger” son…. God’s choice of Jacob reveals his desire for humble service from both the son in a ‘weaker’ position and service from the ‘older’ son” (71–72). In 9:14–18, Wallace argues Israel’s unfaithfulness cannot be directed at God, who has dealt mercifully with a disobedient people and has revealed his character in the choice of the lesser son. In 9:19–29, Wallace argues that Paul works toward the conclusion that God has called a people both from Jews and gentiles, an argument that forms an inclusio by way of its connected vocabulary to the previous section. He suggests that God’s mercy again comes into focus through the potter imagery in connection with Jer 18:6–10, where God relents of the punishment planned for a nation when it repents, something held out for both Israel and the gentiles (87–88). Paul’s “vessels of mercy” language points, for Wallace, to God’s mercy in proclaiming his name to Moses and to the gentiles (93–95). Ultimately God’s election of the lesser son builds toward Paul’s point that gentile believers must be humble, in particular in their attitude toward Israel, whom God is molding to return to him in repentance.

In chapter 3 Wallace examines 9:30–10:21. Here, Wallace suggests, Paul depicts Israel’s hardening in explicit terms and explains the cause of their stumbling (106). Wallace adds that in this section Paul personifies righteousness, equating it more or less with Jesus, which is why gentiles have attained what Jews have not (114–15, 119–24). In this reading, Paul can affirm the goodness of the law while still charging that Israel has failed to achieve righteousness. Wallace qualifies that Paul here is not targeting all Jews or all gentiles but rather uses them as literary figures (119). Wallace interprets Christ being the “end” of the law in the sense that Christ has supreme authority over the law (123), and thus Israel’s not obeying Christ ultimately means its failure to obey the law. Wallace also sees Paul’s argument from chapter 9 to the present section as a loose retelling of Israel’s story from Abraham to Moses. Wallace sees here no fundamental tension between the law and
Christ, and thus Israel’s failure is specifically a failure to accept God’s Messiah and not a failure to keep an impossible law (130–31). At the end of this section Paul reverses the warnings of the prophets: whereas Israel now stands in the place of those without understanding, the gentiles follow God (146).

Chapter 4 begins to tie together the themes presented in the previous chapters, examining 11:1–32. Wallace begins by suggesting that Paul has used different senses for “Israel” in this section. In 9:6–29, “Israel” is equated with the remnant made up of Jews and gentiles. In 9:30–10:21, “Israel” represents those who heard the message of the Messiah but rejected it. In 11:1–10, “Israel” takes on both of these identities: “remnant” Israel (11:5) and “hardened” Israel (11:6–10) (155). Here, Wallace suggests, Paul becomes explicit about Israel’s hardening, which was alluded to in chapter 9. But Paul merely raises the dilemma of Israel’s hardening here (164–67), which he resolves at the end of the chapter, something Wallace interprets as a revelation of God’s grace to Israel through his present wrath. Thus, as with Jacob and Esau, Paul sees the weakness of the people whom God calls as requiring their humility and inviting the repentance of the other, a part now played by Israel (174ff.). The “all Israel,” then, of 11:26 refers not to all ethnic Israelites but to all Jews who repent and follow Jesus as well as believing gentiles who together make up the remnant of God’s people (198–203). God’s plan is merciful to Israel, since he still extends an opportunity for repentance to them though they are currently disobedient in rejecting Jesus.

Chapter 5 examines 11:33–36. Here Wallace identifies this concluding section as the inclusio that, along with 9:1–5, forms the main lament feature of the unit. Ultimately God’s plans are gracious, extending to Jews and gentiles and offering repentance and restoration to all. Though in the present unbelieving Jews stand under God’s judgment, God is worthy of praise for the unfathomableness of his plan for the world. The final chapter offers a summary of the contributions that the work makes.

There is much to appreciate in Wallace’s contribution. His attention to the structure of Paul’s argument and attempt to weave together the whole narrative of Paul’s thought provides many helpful insights. Likewise, his recognition that Paul’s exegesis is not formal midrash but has midrashic elements and that Paul’s audience is a gentile majority and Jewish minority is welcomed. One of Wallace’s most important contributions is his recognition of Paul’s personification of “the righteousness of God” as a reference to Jesus, the stone upon whom unbelieving Jews stumbled. Wallace also rightly recognizes that part of Paul’s overall point was to call for the humility of gentile believers. Wallace suggests that Paul’s inclusion of Jacob and Esau in his argument is intended to accomplish that very aim. It seems that Paul’s inclusion of Jacob/Esau does intend to convey a counterintuitive principle concerning election. Whether this humbling effect
was likewise intended will need to be determined by readers as they engage the argument. Further, Wallace’s suggestion that Paul has Jews and gentiles in mind in his “all Israel will be saved” statement will also likely not be convincing to all, but Wallace here musters several impressive lines of evidence to support his claim. All in all, this is a worthy contribution both to Pauline scholarship in general and to this debated passage, one that steers the conversation in fruitful directions.