Death is not easy to talk about. Our society goes to great lengths to shift attention away from the inevitable reality of one’s own demise. Yet death is a topic with which each culture must grapple, and many of the great philosophers and theologians have attempted to make sense of its certainty. The apostle Paul, too, thought and wrote extensively on the topic of death. In this study, R. Gregory Jenks wades through the Pauline writings and the apostle’s contextual background to address the question of how Paul thought about his own mortality. While Greco-Roman and Jewish thought certainly influenced the apostle, it was the death and resurrection of Jesus, according to Jenks, that significantly impacted Paul’s own view of death. Countless books have been written on Paul’s understanding of Jesus’s death. Jenks asks a different question: How did Paul think about his own death?

The opening chapter offers a brief introduction to the study, laying out its scope and method. Chapter 2 presents the terminology that Jenks will use. He critiques recent work on “noble death” that conflates it with voluntary death and fails to consider issues of motive and morality. Jenks goes on to define noble death as both voluntary and premature. It often benefits others, brings honor, and/or is worthy of imitation. “Martyrdom” shares many elements with noble death and is presented as a narrower category. Martyrdom is defined by its motive to further an ideology or group. Jenks defines a final term, “atonning
sacrifice,” by what it accomplishes. One dying for the motive of atonement does so to bring about reconciliation or the reparation of a wrong (24).

With these definitions in place, Jenks devotes the next four chapters to exploring the conceptual background to Pauline thought. Chapter 3 examines the Hellenistic world of the first-century and how it thought about death and the various categories defined in the previous chapter. After placing Paul within his Greco-Roman context, Jenks explores three areas of Hellenistic thought: mythology, philosophy, and religion. Considerations of death and mortality were prevalent in Hellenistic culture, but reflections on martyrdom or death for atonement are for the most part absent. However, Jenks does identify the concept of noble death as well-attested in Greco-Roman literature and practice. The death of Socrates serves as an example of an honorable, self-inflicted death that embraces mortality and avoids dishonor.

The next three chapters examine the Jewish background to Paul’s view on death and mortality. While the Greco-Roman context is given a single chapter, Jenks devotes nearly a third of his book to Paul’s Jewish context. Chapter 4 focuses on the Torah (mainly the book of Genesis) and its presentation of mortality. According to Jenks, the Old Testament offers three perspectives on death: (1) a consequence for sin; (2) an inevitable, natural phenomenon; and (3) a bridge to postmortem judgment (62). These serve as the “theological roots” of Paul’s understanding of his mortality (96). Looking at the Torah, while focusing on the early chapters of Genesis, Jenks argues that death is seen as a consequence of sin, although disobedience is often disconnected from its result (i.e., death). Interestingly, death is presented as final and inevitable, and, at least in the Torah, nothing is said regarding the afterlife.

The fifth chapter offers a survey of the “rest of the Old Testament canon,” which generally supports the findings of the previous chapter. However, clear developments regarding views on death do appear in the historical, wisdom, and prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible. The historical books generally present death as a natural consequence of the human condition, but examples of noble death, suicide, and even martyrdom do appear. The wisdom literature offers profound reflections upon mortality. Proverbs and some psalms present death as the result of folly, while books such as Job and Ecclesiastes challenge such a notion, viewing death as the inevitable end of all beings whether they are righteous or corrupt. The prophetic books generally support a retributive view with death functioning as the result of wickedness. Interestingly, the postexilic writings (especially Daniel) hint at a view of the afterlife and the mimetic function of martyrdom.

Chapter 6 examines Jewish thinking of the Second Temple period and traces three relevant cultural shifts that likely serve as a backdrop for Paul. First, Jenks argues (although,
curiously, not from any specific literature) that Israel had a crisis of covenant identity after the exile but found a renewed hope for future restoration. Second, Jenks states that by the first century CE there was a widely accepted expectation of a postdeath judgment and, sometimes, an afterlife. This shift in eschatological views led to changes in how voluntary death was perceived. Third, likely due to the shift in eschatological expectation, martyrdom theology developed with exemplars such as the Maccabean martyrs encouraging death for a greater purpose. Jenks argues that the view of martyrdom did not have a vicarious or atoning sense attached to it—at least not like what Paul will later attribute to Jesus's death in his writings. The second half of this chapter shifts to a survey of various ideological factions within Second Temple Judaism to place Paul within his appropriate religious context.

Greco-Roman and Jewish understandings of death certainly influenced Paul’s own thinking, but, according to Jenks, it is the “life, teachings, and death of Jesus that had the greatest impact on Paul” (163). Consequently, chapter 7 looks at the New Testament’s presentation of Jesus and interpretations of his death. The gospels, especially John’s Gospel, present Jesus as teaching and modeling an embrace of death for discipleship, which was motivated by eschatological hope. However, Jesus’s death is unique, and Jenks presents five aspects of what it brought about (drawing mostly from Paul’s own writings): propitiation for a new covenant, a ransom for many, God’s glory, victory over God’s enemies, and ushering in a new order (148). To close the chapter, Jenks examines Jesus’s death through the lenses of noble death, martyrdom, and atoning sacrifice. According to Jenks, the New Testament responds to the shame of Jesus’s crucifixion by infusing it with honor. Jesus’s death is not only presented as noble, but it noticeably shares aspects of martyrdom—especially its mimetic value. Finally, Jenks argues that the New Testament clearly understands Jesus’s death as a unique atoning sacrifice. Important here is that God alone decides whether a death atones for sins and the New Testament presents such a case.

Chapter 8 is a relatively short one, as Jenks examines some key deaths found within the New Testament and how they may have impacted Paul’s thinking. Jenks presents John the Baptist, Stephen, and James as examples of early Christian martyrs. Additionally, Jenks sees examples of death as temporal judgment in the cases of Ananias and Sapphira, Judas, and King Herod Agrippa I in the gospels and Acts.

Chapter 9 offers some prolegomena to his study of Paul, then surveys how the apostle writes about death. Jenks acknowledges that there is much that we cannot know about the historical Paul but demonstrates confidence in the New Testament sources. He embraces the view that all thirteen letters in the Pauline canon were written by the apostle. As such, Paul’s letters alongside the book of Acts serve as reliable sources for Paul’s history and
thinking. Jenks then puts forward the case that death may serve as a centralizing theme in Paul’s theology. According to Jenks, Paul demonstrates a shift from thinking about salvation from a corporate point of view to that of the individual. The individual faces personal death and is therefore in need of salvation. Death is the impetus for the gospel, which ironically centers on Jesus’s death. Jenks notes that in Paul’s letters death is presented as both negative and positive. Negatively, death brings great loss and grief, is presented as God’s enemy, and is viewed as punishment for sin. However, Jesus’s death causes Paul to radically reinterpret death as having positive elements. Paul writes of death as deliverance from a fallen world as well as the pathway toward eternal life and eschatological victory through God.

Paul’s view of mortality and his numerous references to death in his letters are linked together using “imitation” language. Chapter 10 explores how Paul understands his own life and mortality as an imitation of Jesus’s life and death. Further, Paul appeals to his communities to imitate him as he imitates Christ. Jenks argues that interpretation of these passages must grapple with the extent of imitation and how literal Paul is being with death language. While Paul calls his communities to imitate Jesus’s death, Jenks clarifies that Jesus’s death is presented as unique in many ways that the individual’s death would not be. Jesus’s death alone brings atonement for sin while accomplishing numerous other elements that Paul’s or the believer’s death would not. To better understand how Paul discusses death as an imitation or identification with Christ, Jenks clarifies that Paul’s use of death language varies by the situation he is addressing. Jenks then divides the Pauline corpus into three categories according to situation addressed: fractions and opposition (1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians), persecution (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Thessalonians), and practical implications (Romans and the Pastorals). According to Jenks, Paul used death language drawing from the noble death tradition to address community fractions and to demonstrate his own apostolic authority. When addressing persecution, he drew from martyrdom notions of death. For practical implications, Paul used death language correlating to atoning sacrifice.

A final chapter summarizes the study, and an appendix offers a short presentation of traditions regarding the date of Paul’s death. While not coming down firmly, Jenks seems to support a date of 68 CE for Paul’s death after additional ministry journeys.

Jenks has provided a well-conceived and thorough study of Paul’s view on mortality in light of his teaching on Jesus’s death and resurrection. The author holds to several positions that impact his study that many interpreters of Paul will find problematic. This includes Pauline authorship of all thirteen letters attributed to Paul and an assumption of the historicity of the gospels and, especially, Acts. While these are fine, traditional positions to hold, Jenks may not defend them to the extent that will satisfy his critics. It
may have been interesting for him to consider what contribution a Pauline pseudepigraphal letter might offer for this study. That is, can one glean any insight into a Pauline legacy of death if 2 Timothy, in which “Paul” reflects upon his impending death, was written after Paul’s death—possibly with some knowledge of the details of that death?

Jenks devotes much space in his study to the cultural and literary background to Paul’s view of mortality and death. One may quibble with the rubric that Jenks develops of noble death, martyrdom, and atoning sacrifice, as they sometimes seem forced upon the ancient texts. I found them helpful to navigating the literature—although they seemed to fall too neatly into place as Jenks divides up the Pauline corpus according to this rubric. A larger issue is the breadth and content of the chapters devoted to the Greco-Roman and Jewish understandings of death. By the time Jenks gets to the cultural background of the Greco-Roman world, he offers just fifteen pages surveying relevant views. While Socrates is given proper attention, there is much more from Greek philosophy that could bear upon Jenks’s argument. Aristotle lists death as among the things to feared, as it is the end (Eth. nic. 1115a27–28). The Epicureans, as another example, famously viewed death as of no concern, since when one experiences it one no longer exists (Epicurus, Ep. Men. 125).

Jenks argues that the Hebrew Bible was a greater influence on Paul than Hellenistic culture. This explains why two chapters are devoted to the Old Testament, although this could easily have been treated in half the space. A larger issue is the chapter on the “intertestamental period.” Jenks’s argument here is crucial for his thesis (that a view of an afterlife and future judgment radically changed how voluntary death was perceived), yet he relies almost entirely on secondary literature to make his case. The actual literature of the Second Temple period is mostly absent. For example, 1 Enoch describes the various dwellings of the dead organized by their righteousness or wickedness (1 En. 22) as well as where a future judgment will take place after death (1 En. 27; also 2 Bar. 30:2–5; T. Job 4:9). Texts relevant for a discussion of voluntary death might include Tobit 3:2–6, 1 Macc 3:59, 3 Macc 1:29, and Josephus, J.W. 1.650.

The chapters devoted to Paul’s writings navigate well through many of the thorny interpretive issues. This includes how literal or figurative Paul’s message of imitating Christ’s death is to be understood or how Paul understood the believer’s death in light of the uniqueness of Jesus’s atoning death. Jenks offers helpful categories and demonstrates a thorough understanding of Pauline thought. However, the time spent in the Pauline corpus is relatively brief, and more exegetical engagement with the texts would have provided additional credence to Jenks’s argument. These critiques aside, Jenks has offered an engaging study of Paul’s view of mortality that should encourage others to dig even more deeply into this important theological issue.