What happened to Paul after Luke’s narrative has met its abrupt and not entirely satisfying end in Acts 28:31? This question has attracted considerable research efforts in the last years.1 Research topics are, among others, the value and/or tendentiousness of the respective sources (e.g., Acts, 1 Clement, Romans, Deutero-Pauline epistles, Acts of Paul), Paul’s legal status (question of Roman citizenship), the place of Paul’s martyrdom and burial, the development of a collective memory of Paul’s martyrdom, and the liturgical reception of said memory. It is in this vibrant field of research that Chantal Reynier positions herself with the book under review.

To be sure, this book seems to be primarily meant for a wider, nonspecialist audience (the cover image suits that purpose well): Reynier has written a fluent, readable narrative,

maybe not exactly entertaining but by all means captivating. It seems advisable to understand her book as a kind of outreach to the educated general public.

Following the introduction (7–10), the book consists of four main parts. The first main part (“Le projet romain,” 11–62) has as its object Paul’s plans for the time after the collection project. Chapter 1 (“Le voyage à Rome: Entre ‘désir’ et ‘nécessité,’” 13–22) deals with Paul’s own plans about coming to Rome as evident in Rom 1:1–15 and Rom 15. Chapter 2 (“La représentation que Paul se fait de Rome,” 23–46) widens this first impression into a broader picture of Roman rule and Paul’s contact with it. Here one also finds some insinuations of what one might call a Pauline Romidee, that is, a view of Rome as providential center of the civilized world. Chapter 3 (“Les motivations,” 47–62), however, comes back to Paul’s concrete travel plans to Spain. Reading Rom 15 and Acts 27–28 together, Reynier leaves open for the moment whether Paul put his plan into practice, but the reference to 1 Clem 5:7 (59) indicates that it is assumed.

The second main part (“Paul et la communauté chrétienne de Rome,” 63–121) gives some insights into the earliest history of Christianity in Rome. It duly begins with a survey of the Jewish community in Rome in chapter 4 (“La communauté juive, terreau de la communauté chrétienne,” 65–76), which informs us in particular about the areas in Rome where Jews probably settled and, more important, about the precarious situation of Jews in Rome in view of repeated expulsions. Chapter 5 (“La communauté chrétienne,” 77–99), then collects the oldest bits of evidence for Christians in Rome—before the fire of 64 CE. From the greetings in Rom 16, Reynier rightly concludes that there existed a number of different Christian groups in the city, apparently without overarching organization. Chapter 6 (“L’autonomie de la communauté chrétienne,” 101–21) then addresses the separation of Christians from the social and religious framework of Judaism, something that, in Rome, must have occurred before 64 CE, when Christians were perceived as a sufficiently distinct social entity so as to be targeted as responsible for the devastating fire.

The third main part (“Paul à Rome,” 123–68) again narrows the focus to Paul. First, however, chapter 7 (“La découverte de Rome,” 125–46) paints a vivid picture of living conditions in the insulae of Rome, informed mostly by the sarcasm of Martial and Juvenal. With chapter 8 (“La résidence de Paul à Rome,” 147–56), we come closer to Paul and the conditions of his Roman imprisonment or, rather, custodia militaris. Reynier here chooses to follow the scenario of Acts 28:16–31 and to explain the bonds/chains mentioned in Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 2 Timothy, and Philemon from within that scenario. However, she wisely refrains from pinpointing the exact place of Paul’s residence in Rome. In chapter 9 (“Audace et liberté de Paul,” 157–68), she then tries to put some flesh on the bones of the raw statement in Acts 28:30–31, drawing together
names of companions from the entire Corpus Paulinum. Here we eventually get an account of the sources used: basically, apart from Acts, all epistles in the Pauline corpus that mention Paul as prisoner: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 2 Timothy, and Philemon. This creates the image of a well-connected apostle closely in touch with the communities founded by him.

The fourth main part (“Le martyr,” 169–232) comes closer to Paul’s death and burial. First, however, chapter 10 with its slightly misleading title (“La fin,” 171–91) attempts to give an account of events after Acts 28:31. Now Paul’s trip to Spain (as first clearly documented in the Muratorian Canon) after the failed first trial comes into view, as does his alleged second stay in Rome (quite the scenario of the Acts of Peter and Simon) and the trial that was to lead to his eventual execution. Chapter 11 (“Le martyre,” 193–207) discusses the circumstances of Paul’s execution, especially its place, with the area of Aquae Salviae (close to the abbey of Tre Fontane) and the Via Ostiensis (the spot of San Paolo fuori le Mura) as possible candidates. Having displayed the evidence, however, Reynier refrains from drawing conclusions. Chapter 12 (“La sepulture et la mémoire,” 209–32) informs us about the archaeological situation in San Paolo fuori le Mura (most recently through the excavations of 2008–2009) and the liturgical tradition connected with Paul’s burial.

Finally, the conclusion (233–43) offers some reflections, among other things, about the significance of Rome for Paul: the center of what he could consider the civilized world but not a holy city at the expense of Jerusalem. The book concludes with notes (245–53), a small map of Rome before 64 CE (255), bibliographies for each chapter (257–88), and indices (289–302).

Reynier’s book with its popular appeal is a good example of how one can write for those outside the guild—although the cover text that compares it to a detective novel seems to overstate the matter. However, the book does not aspire to be a fictional narrative, as the references make clear. That being the case, one should have expected some more systematic reflections about the sources used (Acts, some or all epistles from the Corpus Paulinum, apocryphal Acts of Apostles, other early Christian literature), not just some inconclusive en passant remarks as on page 158. That would have included some statement on the question of pseudepigraphy. As the book presents itself, one gets the impression of somewhat arbitrary maximalism in the use of sources. That criticism, however, does not really diminish Reynier’s merit of having presented a piece of the earliest history of Christianity (and of pertinent scholarship) in an accessible and appealing way.