What sets this work apart from all other previous commentaries on Romans? *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* provides us with a full-scale sociorhetorical commentary on Romans that has not been attempted until now. First, a rhetorical analysis of Romans is particularly necessary in light of the fact that this letter was written under different circumstances than Paul’s previous ones: it was written to those with whom Paul was not personally acquainted, to those who were not Paul’s converts and were not inherently under his authority, and he was not writing to correct problems or misunderstandings that came with personal involvement in a community. As a result, he had to pick and choose his words carefully and employ a unique method of persuasion, knowing that first impressions were important. Second, new research on the society of the first-century Mediterranean world has put a new perspective on various details found in Paul’s letters. His correspondence to the Romans indicates that Roman Christianity had a varied social stratum. Romans 16 seems to suggest that Paul knew of at least five house churches in Rome sponsored by various individuals. This implies that there had to be some early Christians in Rome of significant social status to have more than just a room in an *insula*. There were most likely patron-like Christians who acted as benefactors and protectors of other believers and who hosted church meetings in their homes. At the same time, Paul’s understanding of the church was egalitarian in character, recognizing both male and female apostles, patrons and co-workers, involving both...
Jewish and Gentile Christians who came together to worship but were still required to respect their differences. Taking all these observations into consideration, Witherington’s sociorhetorical analysis of Paul’s letter to the Romans is an essential source of information that sets it apart from previous commentaries.

In addition, Witherington notes that the interpretation of Romans since the English Reformation has been too heavily influenced by Augustinian/Lutheran/Calvinistic readings of the text. In Rom 8–11 Paul does more than inform his audience that certain individuals have been selected and predestined from before the foundation of the earth to be saved or lost. His original purpose for these chapters has to do with a collective and corporate entity known as Israel, as the people of God. This monograph intentionally balances Calvinistic readings of the text with Arminian and Wesleyan perspectives, being careful to read the text in light of early Jewish theology, the historical situation of Rome, and Paul’s own rhetorical situation. Witherington suggests, “Exegesis should precede, not follow, theological commitments and readings” (xii).

Witherington organizes each section of the commentary around his understanding of the rhetorical structure of Romans. Each section is comprised of a translation of the Greek text, a commentary, further discussion under the heading “Bridging the Horizons,” and an occasional subsection entitled “A Closer Look.” The subsection “Bridging the Horizons” intends to “bridge” the gap between this first-century document and twenty-first-century life in the church. A short but informative treatment of subjects such as “salvation,” “slavery,” “Christians’ response to the authority of government,” “gender equality leadership in the church,” accompanied by relevant and contemporary illustrations, makes this monograph more than simply a detached piece of historical analysis. Paul’s letter to the Romans contains timeless truths that are applicable to people of all ages. Periodically the reader encounters “A Closer Look” at more complex subjects in Romans (e.g., “Righteousness in the LXX, Early Judaism, and Paul”; “The Making of a Diatribe”; “In Christ and in the Spirit”; “The Weak in Rome—Jews, Christians, or Jewish Christians?”). In this subsection Witherington assesses Paul’s teaching in light of recent research, and the result is a fresh and critical appraisal of modern interpretations of these important themes.

Witherington understands the rhetorical structure of Romans (16–22) to revolve around 1:16–17 (propositio), that is, the gospel is for the Jew first and also for the Gentile. Paul stresses this precisely because of the situation in Rome—Jewish Christians were struggling to reestablish themselves in Rome and were being written off by Gentile Christians. All too often interpreters are overly caught up with Rom 1–8, treating the content of Rom 9–16 as an afterthought or appendage. On the contrary, in Rom 1–8 Paul attempts to build rapport with his audience by treading through the common ground, but
already strives to level the playing field between Jew and Gentile and establish the theological underpinnings for what follows in his letter. Romans 9:1–15:13 comprise the refutatio. Romans 9–11 addresses Gentile misunderstandings about Jews and Jewish Christians and about God’s redemptive history as it involves God’s promises to Israel. This is followed by Rom 12–15, where Paul addresses ethics and praxis in Rome (unity among Gentiles and Jews in Christ, witness to authorities, acceptance and not judging other believers). Even in the peroratio Paul takes the opportunity to warn against those who seek to create divisions among the Christians in Rome (16:17–19), reinforcing the arguments for the unity he poses in 12:1–15:13. Thus, Paul wanted to impart his gospel as the basis of unity for the Roman congregations.

One of the key passages to the structure and thought of this whole document is 3:21–31, which repeats Paul’s proposition in 1:16–17. Witherington notes that the term nomos is used in two ways: “Mosaic Law” (3:21) and “law/ rule/ principle of faith” (3:27). There is no definite article in 3:27, making it uncertain which “law” Paul has in mind. It is most likely a reference to the “obedience of faith” (100, 111). Surprisingly, even though this commentary examines Paul’s rhetoric, Witherington does not engage in further discussion on Paul’s use of nomos in 3:27. There is a growing tendency to interpret this word erroneously as an example of homonymy (two words with the same orthographic or phonetic form with no semantic relationship), comparable to sophistical trickery. Paul’s use of nomos is intentionally ambiguous in order to send two separate messages simultaneously. On the one hand, it appears that Paul is defending the Mosaic law for those who favor law observance. On the other hand, it allows Paul the opportunity to maintain his true conviction that the law is obsolete by insinuating that it was replaced by another law (rule, principle of faith) (see J. S. Vos, “To Make the Weaker Argument Defeat the Stronger” in Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts, 217–31; M. D. Given, Paul’s True Rhetoric). However, Paul’s use of nomos is most likely an example of polysemy (different senses of a word displaying semantic relationship), with the common meaning of “existing or accepted norm.” The use of nomos in the phrase “law of faith” (3:27) provides Paul with great utility in saying both “yes” and “no” to the law and covenantal nomism. He understands how faith in Christ provides for the full satisfaction of the demands of the law (“yes”), while at the same time communicating that “a new rule, principle of faith” has replaced the former Mosaic law (“no”). This is Paul’s way of dealing with the complicated relationship he perceived between the Mosaic law and faith in Christ, not an example of his intention to deceive the Roman believers.

Witherington consistently smoothes out some of the textual tensions in Paul’s letter to the Romans rather than deal with them in a forthright manner. One might ask why Paul demonstrates discontinuity between Christ/Spirit and the Mosaic law and then in the very same context goes to great lengths to show continuity between them. For example, in 8:3
Paul emphasizes discontinuity between Christ and the law when he shows how God’s Son succeeded where the law failed in dealing with sin. But in the next verse (8:4) he speaks of continuity between the Spirit and the law by demonstrating how the Spirit fulfills the righteous requirement of the law. Witherington claims this was Paul’s manner of showing how believers conform to God’s will, “pointed to in the Mosaic Law” (214). However, it is more likely that these textual tensions, which appear consistently and often rather abruptly throughout Pauline literature (e.g., 7:1–6 cf. 7:14; 13:8–10; Gal 3:1–5 cf. 5:14), are indications of tensions in the deeper level of Paul’s own convictional world. The textual tensions suggest that Paul is negotiating a conflict between his previous convictions as a covenantal nomist and his current convictions as a believer in Christ.

Apart from the limitations noted above, Witherington’s commentary sheds new light on one of the most studied books in the New Testament. This work moves the conversation in fruitful and fresh directions and can be commended as a necessary reference alongside other notable studies on Romans.