In this engaging and well-written book, Mark Reasoner has provided for the biblical specialist and nonspecialist alike a very informative historical sketch of some of the theological disputes that the Letter to the Romans has spawned over the Christian centuries. Reasoner reminds us that we all read the Letter to the Romans with a certain bias, as through a pair of interpretive spectacles formed through two millennia of Christian theology. Thus all of us have joined the conversation in midstream. Reasoner’s insight is that in recent critical exegesis the interpretation of Romans is coming back full circle to that of the early patristic era, especially to that of Origen. To show this Reasoner chooses twelve different “loci” or texts of Romans that have become the centers of major controversies among theologians and other Christian leaders through the centuries. In a chapter for each locus Reasoner presents the thought of a selection of interpreters, always starting with Origen and Augustine. Medieval thought is usually represented by Abelard and Aquinas, while Luther and Erasmus (sometimes Calvin) show Reformation positions. The “neo-orthodox” interpretation of Karl Barth is always given, and the “post-Barthians” consulted are usually N. T. Wright and Katherine Grieb, along with the “New Perspective,” most often that of J. D. G. Dunn. I will have more to say about Reasoner’s selection of these commentators in the conclusion.
In a thumbnail preview Reasoner sketches his thesis that the interpretation of Romans has progressed from Origen’s reading of it “in which Paul is the arbiter between Jews and the ethnē” (xxv), through Augustine who, he maintains, sees in Romans “the pattern for how an individual Christian from among the ethnē reaches salvation” (emphasis added). Luther then radicalizes Augustine “with a faith/works distinction not found in Origen” (xxv). Only in the twentieth century with Barth do we see a return to the reading of Romans “through the lens of the Jew-ethnē struggle over the nature of God’s election” (xxvi). Reasoner groups the post-Barthians Wright and Grieb together as ‘narrative-based approaches’ to Romans,” pointing out that although they disagree at certain points both are representative, along with the New Perspective, of the recent tendency “to minimize the direction in which Luther took the letter and question Augustine’s individualistic reading of Paul’s gospel” (xxvi).

Reasoner’s organization of the discussion in each chapter or “locus” is very helpful. After an apposite quotation from a major theologian, he states the main question(s) that the text has raised for the church fathers and in the history of Western theology. He then presents a (usually one-half to two-page) synopsis of the positions of the theologians he considers to be pivotal in the historical debate and ends the chapter with some contemporary contributors and his own short conclusion on the main questions as he stated them. The presentations are clear and well documented, but Reasoner admits that “It is impossible to be neutral on Romans” (ix). He is not shy in giving what he considers to be the best approaches to the questions, approaches that (1) take into account the whole letter of Romans, (2) are plausible as Pauline thought, and (3) “make most sense for the church who seeks to live in the light of Scripture” (x). One example is his forthright statement that “I favor including both the subjective and the objective senses of the genitive [in the phrase pistis Christou]” (31).

For completeness I list the twelve texts as Reasoner has identified them along with the questions he observes that they have raised over the centuries. I have room to comment only on a few of the more salient of his observations.

Locus 1, “To the Jew First and to the Greek” (1:16–17)—these two verses have become the thesis statement of Romans for many modern interpreters, or, as Luther said, “the whole conclusion of the whole letter” (4). However, neither Origen nor Augustine thought that Romans was primarily about justification by faith. For Origen, Romans was about “the law of Moses, about the calling of the Gentiles, about Israel according to the flesh,” (from Origen’s preface to the Commentary on Romans, cited by Reasoner on 1). Thus Origen’s focus in Romans was squarely on the “continuity between Paul’s gospel and the Mosaic covenant” (2). Although Augustine began to focus on the individual believer in Christ, he maintained that although we are saved by grace, good works are...
necessary for eternal life (3). While the medievals Abelard and Aquinas focus (respectively) on God’s righteousness as just recompense and on the nature of the response of faith, it is Luther who begins the Reformation view that the main theme of the letter is justification/righteousness by faith alone, rejecting the scholastic view of the habitual righteousness of virtue. Reasoner concludes that it is to Luther that we owe the focus on dikaiosunē as God’s remedy for the individual believer’s legal status and the idea that Romans “does not primarily concern” the behavior of Christians as a people (5).

Locus 2, “Natural Theology” (1:19–21), raises the question of what humanity can know about God from nature. Reasoner’s almost complete neglect of social-science criticism is very telling here, where the social location of both Origen and Augustine dictates that they cannot imagine that anyone but a philosopher could possibly know about God from nature.

Locus 3, “Made Righteous by Christ” (3:21–28) concerns, (1) the meaning of pistis Iēsou Christou; (2) how Christ the hilastērion makes people righteous; and (3) how faith and works relate to each other in salvation. The first of these is certainly one of the hottest questions today in Pauline studies. It is refreshing to learn that already in Origen we find an openness to (if not the preference for) the “subjective genitive” interpretation (= “Jesus Christ’s own faith”), even though it seems to have won the day fully only recently in the New Perspective (24).

Locus 4 “All Sinned” (5:12), examines whether chapter 5 belongs to what goes before or after it in Romans. Locus 5, “The All and the Many” (5:18–21), focuses on the question of universalism. Locus 6, “Warring Laws” (7:7–8:4), questions the relation of human experience and the law. Locus 7, “Calling, Foreknowledge, Predestination” (8:28–30), is on providence, the human will, and double predestination. The reader will be quite surprised that Reasoner does not summarize Calvin’s position on these points. Locus 8, “Not Willing or Running” (9:16–19), speaks to God’s hardening of Pharaoh. Locus 9, “Potter and Clay” (9:20–23), is on the Old Testament origin of this image and Paul’s phrase “vessels of wrath.”

Locus 10, “Christ the Telos of the Law” (10:4), questions the status of the Jewish law for Christians: Is Christ the “end” or the “fulfillment” of the law? Here Reasoner adduces Philip Alexander’s sweeping critique of the New Perspective, that it “has uncritically accepted traditional Protestantism’s categories: grace is good and legalism is bad” (119). Since they understand Paul’s use of “law” as merely a boundary marker for Jews, for them grace fulfills the Mosaic law but Christ is “the end” of the separation of Jew and Gentile. What if “legalism and grace were not mutually exclusive” in Paul’s thinking?
After all, Paul never explicitly forbids Jewish believers from keeping the law. Thus, as Reasoner points out, the final vote on the meaning of *telos nomou* is still not in.

Locus 11, “Israel’s Salvation” (11:25–27), asks “Who is the Israel whose salvation Paul predicts?” (121). Locus 12, “Let Every *Psyche* Be Subject to the Authorities” (13:1–7), is Reasoner’s only locus from “outside what is now called the doctrinal section of Romans” (129). He expects to see theological interest grow in future studies “among the *ethne* not constrained by Western individualism.”

In sum, we can say that Reasoner has produced a very helpful book, and we can only hope to see more books like this come to publication. In such a future study I would like to see the conscious inclusion of some more Pauline themes beyond the Euro-American Protestant discussion of “highly contested entry points into long-standing questions” (xxiii). Certainly the almost total lack of social-science interpretation mars even the present study. I have already mentioned the importance of the social location of Origen and Augustine in the discussion of natural theology in locus 2. Perhaps Reasoner unwittingly indicates something about his own social location when he opines that more of Romans needs to be discussed “when read by believers who cannot be completely subject to their authorities” (142). I would be happy to see this kind of historical sketch on the interpretation of some other areas of Romans, such as the sacramentality of baptism in Rom 6, the mystagogy of the Holy Spirit in Rom 8, the ministry of Phoebe and the other women in Rom 16, along with some “ecclesiastical discussions between Catholics and Protestants” that Reasoner merely mentions on page xxiii.

We are indebted to Reasoner for a very welcome new kind of study in which an expert in historical theology can collect and succinctly present the theological discussions that have surrounded certain New Testament texts throughout the two millennia of the Church’s development.