With this book Leander Keck has given us a masterful brief commentary on Romans, constantly challenging and thought-provoking, forcing its reader to reexamine and rethink the words of the apostle Paul. After a succinct introduction, situating Romans in its literary, historical, and theological context, Keck offers his interpretation of the letter. The commentary is not verse by verse but passage by passage, making it easier to follow conceptually but of course difficult to find what Keck has to say about a particular verse. There is no translation of Romans provided. Instead, Keck frequently comments on a very wide range of contemporary translations and sometimes offers his own.

On Keck’s reading, the Epistle to the Romans provides a Jewish answer to a Greek problem. The problem is the human condition. Human beings are not autonomous but controlled by their own passions and desires, and they cannot escape the tyranny of death. Paul rejects the Greek view that right knowledge leads to right deed. Instead, the solution is Christ, interpreted within the categories of Jewish apocalyptic. Jewish apocalyptic is perfectly fitted for this purpose, because of its emphasis on the universality of God’s rule and his judgment. In the Christ-event, Paul sees the inbreaking of the new age into the present age and God’s dealing with human beings as based on a logic that breaks
completely with the logic of the law of Moses. God now rectifies the ungodly—and only the ungodly.

Keck emphasizes that faith means to trust in God who rectifies the ungodly. Some of the best parts of Keck’s book are where he develops this theme and explains how Paul radically rules out any thought of rectification on the basis of one’s own godliness. Keck sees this principle carried out in the salvation of Israel in chapter 11 as well. He also includes some contemporary application, warning against understanding faith itself as a quality that leads to justification. In Keck’s words, “had Paul been interested in the power of faith … he would have said that God justifies the godly” (133).

One of the challenging claims in Keck’s commentary is how he maintains that 5:12–8:39 further develops the thought of 1:18–4:25 (building on his SBL paper, published in *Pauline Theology*, vol. 3). Whereas 1:18–4:25 has stated that Christ is the answer to the human plight, 5:12–8:39 is necessary in order to explain the nature of the human plight so that the need for Christ’s answer becomes evident. (The passage in 5:1–11 is transitional.) To this end, Paul introduces a new set of vocabulary in 5:12–8:39. The human plight, previously described in a Jewish fashion as the dilemma of not measuring up to the norm set by God (unrighteousness), is now portrayed as the condition of bondage to sin and death. In Paul’s description of this condition, he sounds very much like the Greek moral philosophers, as both he and some of them despair in their inability to carry out their good intentions. It is the Adamic self—not the Christian—that is pictured in 7:7–25.

This reading of 5:12–8:39 is certainly intriguing, but not immediately convincing. The questions that drive Paul’s logic in these chapters have to do with objections, actual or anticipated, raised against Paul’s gospel: Does his message not function as an occasion for sin? In the course of this discussion, the topic of chapter 7 appears not to be specifically the human condition but rather the role of the law, exemplified by the tenth commandment. This discussion may indeed deepen one’s understanding of the human plight, but Paul’s own questions concern inferences drawn from his gospel, not the need for it.

It is perhaps symptomatic of Keck’s reading of 5:12–8:39 that he finds chapters 9–11 to be a relatively independent unit. His first two reasons for their inclusion are related to Paul’s circumstances (he was accused of driving the Jews away from accepting the gospel, and Gentile Christians in Rome believed God had rejected the Jews), not the internal logic of the letter.
Nevertheless, throughout the commentary Paul emerges as a Jewish theologian whose chief concern is to bring people to a right relationship with God. Keck’s take on the new perspective is insightful. Whereas earlier scholars tended to make Paul be about getting right with God, scholars within the new perspective maintain that he is about getting Jews and Gentiles to get along. For Keck, this is a false alternative. The former is the presupposition for the latter (130). In his commentary on 9:30–10:3, he denies that “legalism” was the Israelites’ problem but goes on to affirm that “their effort was based on the wrong assumption that the goal could be reached by doing what the law requires rather than on the basis of faith” (244).

A major strength of Keck’s work is his attention to Paul’s use of Israel’s Scriptures. Inspired by Richard Hays, Keck repeatedly shows how Paul’s quotations are not there for show but actually drive his argument. One could only wish that he would have been able to take account of and respond to Francis Watson’s impressive work, Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith. Watson argues well that Rom 3:21–22 should be understood as Paul’s continued exposition of Hab 2:4, an interpretation that would rule out Keck’s claim that Hab 2:4 is quoted as a messianic prophecy. It would also render problematic Keck’s view that “the faith of Christ” is a subjective genitive, referring to Christ’s faithfulness.

Keck writes exceptionally well. Commentaries often make for tedious reading, but this one is a joy to explore. When he refers to comparable material in Jewish and Greco-Roman sources, Keck normally quotes the relevant parts in full, and these quotations always shed great light on the text. While Paul was a child of his time, Keck also shows his originality.

The editor’s preface promises that the book will be accessible to the reader without any knowledge of Greek. All Greek words are consequently transliterated (and there are quite a few of them). I found it a little inconsistent, therefore, that this commentary assumes considerable knowledge of grammar and textual criticism on the part of the reader.

Nevertheless, the target audience—seminary, university, upper-level college students, pastors, and church leaders—will greatly benefit from this commentary, as will scholars. It is a model in demonstrating how paying close attention to the logical structure of the letter provides exegetical payoffs. If intended as a textbook, one might have wished for more discussion of different views on exegetical difficulties, such as for example the identity of the “I” in chapter 7 and the meaning of “righteousness,” which Keck understands simultaneously as being in a right relation and as conformity to a norm (cf. Ziesler). To be righteous means to be in a right relation to the norm, namely, God. On the whole, Keck is to be commended for offering an insightful and judicious Romans
commentary, not easily labeled as belonging to a certain school of thought but demonstrating a constant concern to listen to the voice of the apostle Paul.