Riemer Roukema
Kampen Theological University
Kampen, The Netherlands

It is remarkable that currently three series on patristic interpretation of the Bible are either produced or in preparation. First there is the American series Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, edited by Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, which consists of short extracts from patristic interpretations. The book under review here is the second volume of a more recent American series, The Church’s Bible, edited by Robert Louis Wilken; its volumes will contain translations of far longer and sometimes of shorter passages of patristic interpretations of Old and New Testament books. Moreover, there is the German and Austrian project Novum Testamentum Patristicum, led by Andreas Merkt; its volumes will present discussions and analyses of patristic interpretations of the New Testament. The two American series can be positioned in the ancient catenae tradition, which means that they consist of a “chain” of selected texts of patristic exegesis.

Judith Kovacs’s volume on Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians is introduced by a preface and a general chapter on patristic interpretation of the New Testament by Robert Louis Wilken. He utters the hope that the patristic passages may be suitable for private devotional reading and for spiritual reading in religious communities, in Bible study groups, and in prayer circles. Then Judith Kovacs gives an introduction to 1 Corinthians and discusses the extent and nature of patristic commentary on this epistle. Her first extracts from the fathers are on Paul and on his first epistle to the Corinthian church in...
general. Next, the organization of this book is that each chapter of 1 Corinthians is introduced by a general outline, after which shorter pericopes are translated, followed by translations of patristic passages. Here we find the comments by, for example, Origen, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Theodoret of Cyrus, Ambrosiaster, and Augustine. The fathers writing in Greek are represented more prominently than their colleagues writing in Latin; fathers writing in Syriac and other languages have not been included. John of Damascus (seventh–eighth century C.E.) and Photius (ninth century C.E.) are the latest fathers of whom extracts are presented.

Although there were several fathers who wrote running commentaries on 1 Corinthians, only a few of these have been preserved in their entirety; noteworthy are those by Theodoret and Ambrosiaster. Moreover, we have John Chrysostom’s forty-four lengthy homilies on this epistle. Other running commentaries (e.g., by Origen and by Cyril of Alexandria) have been preserved only in fragments. Yet for digging up interpretations of Scripture one can also turn to passing comments or allusions in a wider range of works by patristic authors. This implies that Kovacs included many patristic extracts in which texts from 1 Corinthians are interwoven in the train of thought of the respective fathers, although they do not always explicitly interpret the passages to which they allude or refer. Sometimes isolated elements of the patristic texts are explained in short footnotes. The volume closes with a list of sketches of the authors of the excerpted works, an acknowledgement of the sources, a glossary of proper names, a bibliography of editions of patristic texts, and indexes of names, subjects, and Scripture references. It should be noted that, barring two titles, the volume does not refer to secondary literature on patristic interpretation of 1 Corinthians; even the author’s own studies on this theme are not mentioned.

It must have been a tremendous work to read the relevant patristic writings and to select and translate the passages that have been included in this volume, and for this reason we may be grateful that Kovacs made these sources accessible for a wide audience. Although we have translations of a large number of patristic sources, many of the texts presented in this volume have now been translated into English for the first time. One cannot but praise the readability of the translations, which are fresh and fluent.

It is inevitable that this collection is an anthology of patristic comments on 1 Corinthians, which implies that a very different selection might have been made as well. One may ask oneself what was the leading principle for the selection presented here. My impression is that patristic texts have often been selected according to the general editor’s hope that they may serve devotional and spiritual reading. For that reason it seems preferable to read the book piecemeal and to ponder the passages in meditation. The effect is that one gets in touch with the fathers’ spirituality and that one may experience the communion of
faith that transcends the ages. It is indeed still worth reading what John Chrysostom and Augustine wrote, for example, on Paul’s encomium of love in 1 Cor 13. Of course, these premodern texts have only few things in common with modern historical-critical commentaries, although the selected passages do often contain interpretations that coincide with present-day views or give interesting information about ancient Christian beliefs and practices.

The consequence of the selection principle is that this volume is less suitable as a source book of the fathers’ scattered philological and grammatical interpretations of Paul’s Greek text or its Latin translation. As a matter of fact, 1 Corinthians contains many passages that have been read and interpreted quite differently or that remain puzzling, and one of the reasons why one may consult patristic exegesis of Scripture is that the fathers sometimes shed light on such difficulties. However, this volume has apparently not been composed for this purpose. The textual and exegetical difficulties of the Greek text are not highlighted, and as far as the volume contains translations of patristic passages that do shed light on a textual variant or an exegetical difficulty, the various choices of the fathers are not made explicit, or only one of their readings or interpretations is selected. In this context it should be noted that on page xxvi the author mentions Origen’s comparison of two different Greek translations of the quotation from Isaiah in 1 Cor 14:21, whereas the particular passage has not been included in the volume.

However, this volume deserves to be welcomed warmly, since it allows a wide readership to gain access to ancient biblical interpretations that are either difficult to find or that are so numerous that one easily drowns in the material. Moreover, this anthology will stimulate further interest in patristic interpretation of Scripture, which may complement the historical-critical approach.