The history of reception of biblical texts is a topic of research whose necessity has been emphasized for several decades. It has been included already in some commentary series dealing with modern exegesis (e.g., Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament), but now it is established in some comprehensive projects dedicated only to this field: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; Blackwell Bible Commentaries; The Church’s Bible; Novum Testamentum Patristicum. The focus of these commentaries is inspired by the increasing insight that the rich variety of interpreting biblical texts in the distinct Christian communities is not an unavoidable evil but a wealth stimulating an ongoing effort to understand the possible challenges of the Holy Scripture for one’s own piety and for the life of distinct Christian congregations. Further, in an epoch in danger of losing its consciousness of Christian history, it is important to keep the roots of our culture in mind.

The specific profile of the Blackwell Bible Commentaries among the above-named series is the presentation not only of the variety of interpretations within Christian communities but also of “the influence of the Bible on literature, art, music and film, its role in the evolution of religious beliefs and practices, and its impact in social and political developments” (ix). Yet “Galatians’ influence is carried predominantly through the
written and preached word. In particular, the literary history which we are attempting to trace is dominated by the commentary form” (2). Adequately to this insight, John Riches, Emeritus Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at Glasgow University, focuses his survey on “the principal commentators” (11): Marcion, Augustine, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, William Perkins, Ferdinand Christian Baur, and Joseph Barber Lightfoot (in his introduction Riches offers useful information on the historical setting of each of these authors). Yet this focus is no strict limitation; Riches also integrates other theologians, such as R. Bultmann or E. P. Sanders (critical remarks on 136ff., 263), and also other traditions, such as the reception of Gal 1:1 by the Anabaptists and Hutterites (74) and the reception of Gal 2:20 in Zen Buddhism (140–41) and of Gal 4:1–7; 5:17 in gnostic and Manichaean literature (215, 265–67). His interest lies with the main theological issues shaping the identity of the distinct (Western) Christian denominations.

According to the general outline of the whole series, Riches briefly discusses issues of modern scholarship (inclusive the New Perspective on Paul) to each segment and then summarizes in a useful overview the segments under their main themes. The selection and formulation of these themes is in any case a proper one, and also here the focus of the work does not imply a limitation: The material dealt within the presentation contains more than indicated in the superscription lines. Sometimes Riches gives hints on Web material concerning other themes that are also important for the reception history of some texts (71, 215). Original quotations (in English) enable readers to hear the voice of the various interpreters.

The following overview can be only a very insufficient attempt to disclose the wealth of material presented in this volume. Galatians 1:1–9 is subsumed under the issues of Paul’s apostolic authority and of the understanding of evil (see Gal 1:4). Riches emphasizes the change of questioning from the patristic interpretation (why Marcion is mentioned at the end of this passage) to the Reformation readings challenging the identification of the Christian preacher with Paul (73). The history of understanding Gal 1:4 is the history of the varying interpretations of the term “world” (77–82).

Commenting on Gal 1:10–24, Riches deals with Paul’s relation to Judaism (properly, he emphasizes the insights of the New Perspective) and the distinctiveness of interpretations on Paul’s conversion and call (83–95). The overview on the relationship of Acts and Galatians shows that at no time was there a consensus in connecting the divergent references of Paul’s sojourns in Jerusalem (97–100). Galatians 2:1–10 has been interpreted as a model for one’s conflicts (Luther; Calvin) and as the basis for the concept of the history of the early church (Baur). Augustine’s debate with Jerome concerning the controversy between Peter and Paul was important for all Western readings of 2:11–14.
Galatians 2:15–21 raises two issues: “the nature of Paul’s doctrine of justification … and the meaning of the language of participation in Christ” (106). In a close reading, Riches presents the understanding of 2:16 with its theological implications and the distinct interpretations of 2:19–20 (here it could be noted that the ascetic tradition influencing John Chrysostom was inaugurated by Clement of Alexandria and Origen with his numerous hints on these verses). A valuable chapter is dedicated to the issue of “Galatians 2:20 in the Mystical Tradition,” including Pseudo-Dionysius, Ubertino of Casale, St. John of the Cross, but also Keiji Nishitani and the Kyoto School of Zen Buddhism (137–43).

Concerning the reception of Gal 3:1–5, Riches demonstrates the shift of interpretation beginning with Thomas Aquinas’s questions “about the nature and extent of the authority” (148) of the ministers of the church. The history of reception of Gal 3:6–9 is the history of interpreting the nature of Abraham’s faith and the meaning of the term “faith” as correlated to justice (Thomas Aquinas), assurance and trust (Luther), virtues (Lightfoot), participation in the Spirit (Baur) or Christ (Sanders) and as interpreted as condition (Calvin) or instrument (Perkins) or the attitude (Bultmann) of receiving the inheritance of Abraham’s blessing (156–70). The reference of the term “law” and the reality of the curse upon Christ are some of the main issues in interpreting Gal 3:13 (170–87). Concerning the role of the law mentioned in Gal 3:19, Riches rightly emphasizes the “overwhelming agreement” (192) of the patristic and medieval commentators that the law should not evoke sins. In the Reformation age, the well-known discussion on the continuing function of the law is theologically the main point of reading Gal 3:19–24; Riches hints also at the different interpretations of the term “covenant” in these times. The religion-historical background for the concept of the inferiority of the law is a main issue in modern readings (201–4). Concerning 3:25–29, Riches focuses on the premodern restraining and the modern ambivalent reception of Gal 3:28 (205–13).

Both Paul’s remarks on “The Former State of the Galatians” (Gal 4:1–20) and the concluding allegory 4:21–31 are interpreted (since Origen, we could add) in terms of salvation history and existentialist theology. The interpretation history of Gal 4:3, 9 offers, to say it with mild irony, some sort of consolation for modern exegetes: The problem of how the Galatians’ turning to Judaism can be seen as re-turning to the weak and needy elements of this world is not merely an oversophisticated theme raised by some modern exegetes but an issue already debated by the church fathers (216). The ambiguity of Paul’s language raises also the different readings on Gal 5:1–15, a text that was occupied by all the parties of the Reformation controversy in order to buttress their own claims.

Galatians 5:17 for a long time has been a basic text for describing Christian existence confronted with sinful inclinations. According to Luther, the sinfulness of Christians is “not merely a matter of sexual abstinence and self-discipline” (273). Calvin emphasizes
the sharp contrast between the old self and the renewed nature of the believer with its "holy affections implanted by God" (275; Riches hints at the difficulty of understanding Calvin properly on this point). Perkins introduced not only the doctrine of election but also notions of perseverance that “allow an appeal to the better nature both of the unregenerate and of the elect” (279). In modern times, apocalyptic (“flesh” as power beyond human beings but warring against the divine Spirit) and existential approaches are to be noted; Riches prefers the latter ones.

Due to the “fairly unsystematic nature” (285) of 6:1–10, Riches focuses his presentation on comments on the phrase “fulfilling the law of Christ” (285). The reception history of Gal 6:11–18 demonstrates a rich variety concerning the formula “boasting of the cross” (Gal 6:14) and the term “world.” With regard to the formula “new creation,” modern exegetes discuss the propriety of apocalyptic or existential approaches.

The book concludes with an exhaustive glossary listing important authors and a bibliography. The well-constructed index of subjects is also useful.

Riches has written an exhaustive and dense book, and his mastery of the endless material in only a few hundred pages is impressive and admirable. This commentary is a valuable invitation to detect the wealth of interpretations on Scripture and the principal open-endedness of the interpretative process. Congratulations on this fine book!