Erleben und Verhalten der ersten Christen [Experience and Behavior of the First Christians] embodies Gerd Theißen’s characteristic blend of astonishing learning, methodological clarity, and far-reaching (hypo)theses. As the subtitle indicates, the work aims to provide “a psychology of earliest Christianity,” yet in doing so it also contributes more generally to the study of the Old Testament, early Judaism, the wider Greco-Roman world, the New Testament, the early church, mysticism, and gnosticism. Accordingly, despite the unfortunate lack of a subject index, it may be profitably drawn upon by a wide range of scholars across several disciplines.

In approaching the 619-page work, a profitable reading strategy may be to begin with the summarizing interpretation (560–73), then proceed to Theißen’s succinct summary of each chapter (537–60), and finally to work through the entire volume with renewed reference to the summary of each subsection.

The introduction begins by identifying and addressing problems associated with a historical psychology of religion. Anticipating opposition, Theißen responds to five potential objections: source deficiency, textual naivety, anachronism, reductionism, and triviality. Positively, he then sketches out five leading ideas: (1) the discovery and renewal of the inner human being in antiquity and early Christianity; (2) the four factors of
religion, namely, experience, myth, ritual, and ethos; (3) the distinction between moderate/normal and extreme/limit forms of religion; (4) the differentiation between high and deep variants of religion or between prophetic-ecstatic (earliest Christianity at the outset) and radical mystical (gnosis) forms; and (5) the decisive and integrating power of the Christ figure, which served to renew the human being, ground experience, myth, ritual, and ethos, and mediate between moderate and extreme religious forms. Finally, Theißen sets forth a pluralistic psychological theory of religion, one that combines insights from learning theory, depth psychology, and cognitive psychology (cf. D. Mitternacht’s discussion of Theißen’s approach in vol. 1 of Psychology and the Bible, ed. J. H. Ellens and W. Rollins). In this context, Theißen discusses both what religion is and what it brings about, while stressing that its proprium lies in its spiritual dimension, that is, in its relation to transcendence. A key insight for Theißen is that religion both crosses boundaries and grounds everyday life; counterintuitive ideas secure attention, whereas their combination with the intuitive and familiar ensures acceptance over time.

Theißen’s five leading ideas are each developed in the course of the book. The first idea (the discovery and renewal of the inner human being) is taken up in chapter 1, “Soul and Body.” The four factors of religion are then discussed in the chapters on experience (2), myth (3), ritual (4), and ethos (5). Chapter 6, “Mysticism and Gnosis,” in turn zeroes in on the fourth idea (high and deep variants of religion). Finally, the third and fifth ideas (the distinction between moderate and extreme forms of religion and the integrating power of the Christ figure) play a key role throughout the work and receive special attention in the final section (564–73). Here the nuance of Theißen’s argument should not be missed: moderate and extreme forms of religion are variants on a continuum with two poles, transitional forms are assumed, and Christology is identified as a complex entity that often serves to mediate and unify (36–38, 571; cf. 115, 162, 187, 228, 259, 326). Also, it is judged characteristic for earliest Christianity that extreme forms of religion were made fruitful for everyday life (570; cf. 201).

Having traced the development of Theißen’s five leading ideas, let me now provide a compact overview of each chapter before commenting further on three important lines of thought.

Chapter 1, “Soul and Body,” discusses the discovery of the inner human as a unified person center in ancient Egypt, Israel, and Greece and the renewal of the inner human in earliest Christianity. A strong point of this chapter is the discussion of Pauline anthropology and especially of body and flesh. Notably, Theißen argues that such terms refer to parts of the human rather than the human being as a whole, with the clarification that such parts can sometimes stand pars pro toto for the whole human being (80–81).
Chapter 2, “Specific Experience and the Processing of Repeated Experiences” discusses religious experience in the following subsections: (1) “pneuma” as a collective concept of religious experience in early Christianity; (2) religious perception: transparence and vision; (3) religious emotion: fear and joy; (4) religious speaking: prayer and glossolalia; (5) religious change: turning back and conversion; (6) religious binding: word faith and miracle faith. Notably, in the section on religious speaking Theißen argues against the eschatological interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer (194).

Chapter 3, “Myth and Wisdom” deals with the cognitive dimension of earliest Christianity. Theißen begins with some theoretical reflections on myth and wisdom before exploring “wisdom” and “kerygma” as lead concepts for religious-cognitive explanations. He then turns to causal attributions of evil and the aporia of the theodicy problem (looking at the balance in the soteriological triangle “God, humanity, and world”), before discussing God-understanding, world-understanding, and human-understanding as explanations of religious aporia. Finally, he examines Christ-understanding as an answer to religious aporia (cf. the volume’s fifth leading idea: the decisive and integrating power of the Christ figure). One of many notable observations in this chapter is that Theißen interprets Rom 3:21–26 in relation to the wrath of God, arguing that in 3:26 Paul combines God’s punishing righteousness (iustitia distributiva) and God’s saving righteousness (iustitia salutifera); in fact, for Theißen Paul intentionally exploits the ambiguity of this word/concept (315–16).

Chapter 4, “Ritual and Community,” is concerned with the social dimension of earliest Christianity. It comprises the following subsections, after some introductory theoretical reflections on ritual and community: (1) “church” as lead concept for the Christian’s community form; (2) entry into the community: baptism for turning back and for rebirth; (3) life in the community: sacred meal and sacramental meal; (4) ruling in the community: charisma and office; (5) life in the community: church and sect. Notably, Theißen stresses the taboo-breaking character of baptism and the Eucharist in their extreme forms (552).

Chapter 5, “Ethos and Praxis,” investigates the practical dimension of earliest Christianity. The chapter begins with a theoretical outline of the meaning of ethos, then “love” is presented as the lead concept of the biblical ethos. Under the rubric of the control of desire, Theißen discusses aggression and overcoming aggression, sexuality and asceticism. Under the rubric of normative orientation, he then turns to law and parenesis, as well as conscience and judgment. Notably, Theißen suggests that in Paul agape is sublimated sexuality (447).
Chapter 6, “Mysticism and Gnosis,” takes up the volume’s fourth leading idea, namely, the differentiation between high and deep variants of religion, or between prophetic-ecstatic (earliest Christianity at the outset) and radical mystical (gnosis) forms. The chapter deals with the transformation of earliest Christianity in gnosticism. Theissen discusses the two base forms of religiosity that he has outlined, as well as the historical conditions for the rise of gnosticism. He includes sections on experience, myth, ritual, and ethos. Notably, he opposes the thesis that the gnostics and their ideas were repressed (569).

Let me now comment further on three lines of thought that I consider to be of particular importance. In chapter I, Theissen argues that four patterns of explaining the causes of human actions can be identified in early Christianity: the image of humans is ethical/auto-dynamic in Matthew and soteriological/hetero-dynamic in John. Paul, in turn, provides a synthesis of the two in his transformation-dynamic, while also developing a deep-dynamic view. A deep-dynamic is also visible in the Shepherd of Hermas and in gnosticism. In my view, the advantage of introducing such categories is that it helps interpreters to specify differences in viewpoint and emphasis. The weakness, however, is that this approach runs the risk of presenting an overly schematic picture, a danger that is only partially offset by Theissen’s careful qualifications (e.g., 72 and 74).

Second, in my judgment Theissen’s nuanced presentation of psychological perspectives on the Easter appearances/visions (140–63) is an especially important contribution that merits close study and debate. Following an overview of key texts and the history of interpretation, Theissen presents an interpretation of visions as nonpathological dissociative human achievements in which images belonging to the inner world are attributed to the outside world—in other words, an interpretation of visions as hallucinations, which intentionally avoids the latter term due to its problematic connotations. Theissen discusses three possible analogies for the New Testament visions: grief-visions, near-death-visions, and illumination-visions. He provides further analysis of the visionary experiences of Paul, which suggests a connection to near-death-experiences. His analysis is interesting not least because he includes a list of difficulties for thoroughgoing psychological explanations. Altogether I appreciated how Theissen combines provocative theses with considerable nuance, including a presentation of what might have caused the earliest Christians to be convinced of the reality of what they saw. He also briefly maps out the relative place of seeing and hearing in the developing Christian tradition.

Finally, for me Theissen’s yes–but critique of the New Perspective on Paul is perhaps his most striking argument of all. It is developed in both his discussion of conversion (203–28, 544) and in his analysis of Paul’s view of the law (467–79, 558). Yes, Judaism was proud of the Torah. But precisely for this reason critical voices were rejected and
repressed (469/558; cf. 472–75). Yes, the pre-Christian Paul was not conscious of sin and persecuted the Christians out of conviction. But this does not rule out the thesis that Paul’s encounter with Christ made him aware of a conflict with the law that he had previously repressed (469/558; cf. 222–25). Yes, it was Paul’s conflict with his opponents that first forced him to formulate his views on the problem of the law. But rather than indicating the secondary character or late origin of this issue, Paul’s confrontation with his opponents is more convincingly interpreted as activating a preexisting conflict with the law that was bound up with Paul’s own conversion (469; 219–21). In other words, this confrontation made his own past alive and forced him to confront and process it (558). In relation to key texts, Theissen argues that Rom 7 can and should be understood in relation to Paul (contra Kümmel, Stendahl et al.), suggesting that it reflects Paul’s retrospective view of his own past in the light of his encounter with Christ, whereas Phil 3 adopts the standpoint of Paul’s pre-Christian consciousness for the purposes of Paul’s argument (223–24).

As a side note, this provocative analysis shows some similarities with Stephen Chester’s argument in Conversion at Corinth (2003) and in Ex Auditu (2009). Given their shared interest in psychological approaches and previously unrecognized sin, I think that sustained interaction between—and with—these two scholars could prove especially fruitful for the investigation of Paul, the law, and conversion (see also Scot McKnight’s contribution in Ex Auditu 2009).

All in all, Erleben und Verhalten der ersten Christen is a powerful testimony to the strength and value of Theissen’s conviction that “religions should be investigated with all the academic methods though which humans today advance their self-exploration” (572), a perspective that does not rule out constructive engagement with dialectical theology (572–73; cf. 238).