As its title suggests, this book surveys and analyzes modern Jewish interpretations of Paul. The book includes journalism, music, art, literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, but its main focus is on scholarship—what the author refers to as Jewish Pauline studies—perhaps because this is the main arena in which Jews have engaged in a serious and sustained way with the apostle to the Gentiles. As its subtitle suggests, the book situates Jewish reflections on Paul in the context of modern Jewish-Christian relations: modern, because it is only in the modern period that Jews have paid much attention to Paul; Jewish-Christian relations because, as Langton contends, Jews have made use of Paul both to dissociate Judaism strongly from Christianity and to build bridges between Judaism and Christianity. Perhaps the most interesting, and controversial, contention in this book, however, is that Jewish thinkers and artists use Paul not only to situate Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity but also to situate themselves within the diverse and complex Jewish landscape itself.

The book's principal hypothesis is that Jewish readings of Paul reflect the array of Jewish confrontations with modernity and postmodernity from the eighteenth century to the present. To demonstrate this hypothesis, Langton surveys and analyzes in depth the
works of thirty-nine Jewish thinkers and artists, situating them within the specific context of their creator’s historical and social situation and ideological perspective, as well as in the broader context of modernity and postmodernity. He shows that Paul is an ambivalent figure who invites two opposing constructions and responses when analyzed by Jews: as bridge and barrier to interfaith harmony, as founder of and convert to Christianity, as anti-Jewish and as a fellow Jew, as an architect of a “Judeo-Christian” foundation of Western thought and a destroyer thereof.

The introduction addresses directly some of the complicated and sensitive questions that run throughout the book. One such issue concerns whether Jewish scholars adopt a distinctively “Jewish” approach to the New Testament and its key figures such as Paul, or whether their perspectives are ultimately influenced more by their training and by trends in New Testament scholarship more generally. Langton recognizes that current works that he included in the rubric of “Jewish Pauline studies” are written by Jewish scholars who have been trained in New Testament studies alongside their non-Jewish counterparts. While he does not ignore this element altogether, he focuses almost exclusively on the ways in which their scholarship situates them in the discourse on Jewish identity and Jewish-Christian relations. He is careful to point out, however, that a focus on ideology does not criticize the standard of scholarship or the scholarly value of the analysis; showing that the views of a particular scholar are shaped by her or his social location and Jewish identity does not impugn or otherwise pass judgment on the value of the scholarship. As for the difficult question of identifying “who is a Jew?” Langton relies primarily on self-definition: a Jewish thinker is someone who identifies himself or herself as such. He does not, however, restrict himself only to self-identification, for example, in the case of Felix Mendelssohn, who explicitly identified himself as Christian, but rather focuses on the question of how a thinker’s Jewishness affected her or his approach to Paul.

Part 1, “The Apostle Paul and Popular Jewish Cultural Identity,” opens with a chapter on “Paul in the Popular Jewish Imagination,” which approaches the topic from a socio-cultural perspective. In popular Jewish sources, Paul is most often viewed as an apostate and contrasted with Jesus, who is viewed as authentically Jewish. These views are documented by surveying the British Jewish newspaper The Jewish Chronicle, an important vehicle for the development of Anglo-Jewish identity. The excerpts from this publication make for fascinating reading and will strike a chord with many of Langton’s Jewish readers in North America.

Part 2 focuses on “The Apostle Paul and Jewish Religious Identity: New Testament Studies and Theological Approaches.” This section, the heart of the book, begins with a chapter on “Constructions of Paul and Interfaith Relations” (ch. 2). Langton traces two sets of
Jewish treatments: the use of Paul as a vehicle for Jewish apologetics and anti-Christian polemics (Heinrich Graetz, Leo Baeck, Kaufmann Kohler, Martin Buber, Abba Hillel Silver, and Hyam Maccoby) and the use of Paul to build bridges with Christianity (Isaac Mayer Wise, Joseph Krauskopf, Claude Montefiore, and the later work of Leo Baeck, whose positive experiences in postwar England and the U.S. may have encouraged the desire to build bridges with Christian allies). Langton then moves to works by Pinchas Lapide and Mark Nanos, whose recent work on Paul presents the apostle as a Torah-observant Jew who played no intentional role in the parting of the ways or in the creation of a separate Gentile form of Christianity. The question that arises is whether one can speak of a Jewish reclamation of Paul. Certainly the survey suggests that there was a change in the post-War period in Jewish scholarly treatments of Paul and his place in Jewish and Christian history. Langton is not prepared to endorse Pamela Eisenbaum’s attribution of this change to a more rigorous scholarly stance that displaced confessional and apologetic perspectives. Rather, Langton views this change as part of a longer and more gradual process that began with the Enlightenment and that has led some Jews at least to be prepared to examine and attribute some positive value to historically Jewish figures who fall outside the mainstream of normative Jewish observance. He points out that the majority of positive appreciations of Paul were authored by progressives who tend to be less exclusivist in defining Jewishness and more likely to embrace the pluralist assumptions of the modern academy.

Chapter 3, “Constructions of Paul in Intra-Jewish Debate: Establishing Jewish Authenticity,” takes up Jewish Pauline studies as a platform for apologetics in the intra-Jewish debate over authentic Jewish identity, often played out as a face-off between Orthodox and non-Orthodox denominations or subgroups. This contention is documented through analysis of works by Emil Hirsch, Claude Montefiore, Joseph Klausner, Micah Berdichevsky, Hans Joachim Schoeps, David Flusser, Samuel Sandmel, and Alan Segal. One interesting element in this discussion is its use of the binary distinction between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism, which allows Jesus to be seen as a product of the former and Paul as a product of the latter. This distinction, which worked well for scholars in the mid-twentieth century, is now problematic because of the recognition that even Palestinian Judaism was quite heavily influenced by Hellenism. For the most part, the survey supports the view that the scholars most sympathetic to Paul are those who themselves affiliate with non-Orthodox strands of Judaism. The chapter also discusses scholarship as influenced by feminism, which characterizes the work of Pam Eisenbaum, Tal Ilan, and Amy-Jill Levine, and concludes with perhaps the most marginal and controversial Jewish voices, Paul Levertoff, Sanford Mills, and Joseph Baruch Shulam, who represent Hebrew Christian and messianic Jewish perspectives and, not surprisingly, locate Paul and his ideas firmly within a Jewish context.
Chapter 4, “Constructions of Paul as a Dialogical Partner: Transformative Approaches to Jewish Self-Understanding,” discusses the views of a small group of scholars—Hugh Schonfield, Richard Rubenstein, Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, Daniel Boyarin—who approach Paul as a fellow Jew and attempts to discern how their views of Paul relate to or transform their own understanding of Jewish identity. These scholars are passionate in their belief that Paul has been profoundly misunderstood and undervalued by the Jewish community. Langton argues that the primary concern of these authors is to draw upon or develop the views of Paul as a partner-in-dialogue to help meet the challenge of making sense of Judaism in the modern world.

Part 3 turns to artistic and literary approaches to Paul. As its title indicates, chapter 5 focuses on “An Oratorio by Felix Mendelssohn, a Painting by Ludwig Meidner, and a Play by Franz Werfel” and argues that each of these individuals sought to reclaim Paul for a vision of a Jewish-Christian heritage. Fascinating as these portraits are, they did not represent or, indeed, have an impact on the place of Paul within the wider Jewish cultural imagination. Chapter 6 discusses the “Novels of Shalom Asch and Samuel Sandmel”: the 1943 work by Shalom Asch called The Apostle and an unpublished and undated work of fiction by Sandmel called The Apostle Paul. Asch’s work is described as reflecting an ambitious program to promote a shared Judeo-Christian tradition (which would be consistent with his other Christian novels, especially The Nazarene, published in 1939). For Sandmel, on the other hand, Paul represented the North American Jewish Everyman because he confronted spiritual challenges similar to those faced by non-Orthodox Jews in the United States. Both viewed Paul as a spiritually gifted but misunderstood individual and tried to reconcile him with Judaism.

Finally, Part 4 addresses “The Apostle Paul and Jewish Critiques of the Place of Religion in Society: Philosophical and Psychoanalytical Approaches.” Chapter 7, “The Philosophical Writings of Baruch Spinoza, Lev Shestov and Jacob Taubes,” looks at how these three thinkers, all of whom inhabited the “no man’s land of Jewish marginality,” situated Paul in Western civilization and relate his work to rational discourse. Chapter 8 engages in a similar exercise with regard to “The Psychoanalytic Writings of Sigmund Freud and Hanns Sachs.” He concludes that Freud understood the secret of the apostle’s longevity to be his accidental discovery of the dark psychodynamics of the father-son relationship and freedom from a universal sense of guilt, whereas Sachs’s interests in Paul lay in his insights into achieving personal liberation from the anxiety of death.

The conclusion provides a helpful summary of the main findings of each chapter and concludes that, underlying these diverse and often contradictory views, it is possible to see some commonality in that all Jewish thinkers who have seriously engaged with the apostle Paul agree that he is a vitally significant figure for Jews and Judaism. Such a claim
sits uneasily with the fact that Paul barely registers on the popular Jewish cultural radar and that his impact on the Jewish imagination has been a very minor one. Two recurrent themes are the attempt of Jewish intellectuals to map out the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in a context where the centuries-old rules no longer seem to apply and the tension between the need to criticize Christian thought and authority and the desire to demonstrate one’s commitment to Western society. In both of these themes, Paul can be seen as a point of overlap between Jewish and Christian cultural boundaries.

It will by now be clear that The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination is not a book about Paul but about a particular set of constructions of Paul. For that reason, it contributes not so much to the field of Pauline studies per se but to the field of modern Jewish intellectual history. In this context, it makes for a fascinating read; although it discusses the views of almost forty writers and artists, it is neither pedantic nor repetitive. Far from being a mere catalogue of opinions and commentaries, it provides an engaging and trenchant analysis of how Paul has figured in the thinking, writing, and creativity of Jewish intellectuals, rabbis, and artists in the past two centuries. Langton is to be commended for drawing together such diverse thinkers and also for resisting the temptation to impute extraordinary influence to the works of those whom he discusses; at several points he comments that the scholarship and other works that feature Paul have generated very little interest among Jews and therefore have had little impact on popular Jewish views of Paul. (As an aside, this lack of impact is not surprising. Most Jews are not interested in Christianity as such; they do not seek information about the New Testament, Paul, or even Jesus, and they do not use these figures as vehicles for thinking through and articulating the complexities of Jewish identity in general and their own Jewishness in particular.)

As a contribution to Jewish intellectual history, this book shows how constructions of Paul have been used both as a vehicle for criticizing and polemicizing against Christianity and as a way to seek some commonality with Christianity. But it also demonstrates that discussions of Paul, and, one might add, about Jesus, the New Testament, or Christianity more generally, can also be deeply expressive of intra-Jewish issues, especially with regard to the relationship between Orthodox and non-Orthodox strands of Judaism. The arguments are generally convincing, especially with regard to the big picture of how interest in and views of Paul can be related to ideas in the surrounding Christian environment and by broader processes relating to modernity in general.

As a Jewish New Testament scholar, though not a specialist in Pauline studies, I took up the challenge implied in this book to step back from the everyday academic activities of reading, teaching, writing, and lecturing in my field to think about whether Langton’s analysis reflects my own experiences and perceptions. In our postmodern era, one cannot
easily dispute the point that the ways in which Jewish thinkers and artists understand Paul, or, for that matter, Jesus, will reflect, at least indirectly, where and how they situate themselves within the Jewish community writ large. Yet it seems to me that Jewish identity and attitudes toward Christianity do not entirely account for the views of Jewish thinkers on Paul. While Langton may be correct that Pamela Eisenbaum, for one, places too much emphasis on the role of objectivity in modern Jewish approaches to Paul, the academic context of Jewish New Testament scholars must be given its due. Those of us who have received our training in New Testament studies have been influenced not only by the Jewish struggle with modernity but also by the impacts of modernity on the academy in general and in our field in particular. Jewish Pauline scholars, like non-Jewish ones, must sort through the Old and New perspectives on Paul, in dialogue with the work of Sanders, Dunn, Westerholm, and others who represent a broad range of opinion on the matter of Paul’s relationship with Judaism. No doubt Langton is aware of the multiple contexts within which Jewish Pauline scholars operate and the need to somehow negotiate among these contexts, but in my view the book tends to overemphasize the role of Jewish context in the activities of Jewish New Testament scholars.

Overgeneralization is also present in the occasional note of sarcasm with which Langton describes some aspects of contemporary Judaism. Particularly jarring is Langton’s comment that the discovery that many Jewish attitudes and value judgments are “indistinguishable from those of the unwashed world around them” sent some Jews “hurrying off to self-imposed ghettos of strict religious observance” (154). In the very next sentence Langton acknowledges that other Jews had very different responses, but nevertheless the comment, perhaps inadvertently, conveys contempt for newly religious ultraorthodox Jews and a lack of appreciation for the fact that the “return” to religion is a highly complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single factor. Another overgeneralization concerns the description of Jewish theologians, New Testament scholars, and religious leaders as leaders and spokespersons for the Jewish community. It is true that Jewish theologians and scholars of early Christianity are often called upon informally to describe “the” Jewish view of one point or another, for example, life after death or messiahship, Jesus and Paul, and it is true that thinkers such as Leo Baeck and Samuel Sandmel would have been seen as leaders by some segments of the Jewish community, but the majority of the people whose views are surveyed in this book did or do not formally function as leaders or spokespeople of the Jewish community and are not charged with representing Judaism either in the academy or the world at large.

These minor criticisms do not by any diminish the value and major contribution of Langton’s study. I highly recommend The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination to all who are interested in Jewish readings of the New Testament, as well as in their Jewish cultural and historical contexts. It is well-written, very engaging, and a significant
contribution to the field of modern Jewish intellectual history and the history of the reception of the New Testament.