In this study devoted to the nature and role of the pneuma in the letters of Paul, Troels Engberg-Pedersen analyzes the multiple ways in which the worldview of Paul emerges as a concrete and material cosmology. Throughout the study Engberg-Pedersen demonstrates the cogency of a methodological method that weds the apocalyptic perspective of Paul with the philosophical context of Stoic thought especially. In doing so, Engberg-Pedersen thoughtfully steers clear of posing any sort of misleading dichotomy between Paul’s Jewish and Greco-Roman milieus. The latter is a consistent strength demonstrated throughout the study.

Chapter 1 commences with a synopsis of the materialistic dimensions of the Stoic cosmos as mediated through the writings of Cicero. Occupying the summit of the Stoic cosmos is the concept of aether, conceived as a rarefied fire that informs the material substance of such heavenly bodies as the sun, moon, and stars. Noting the connection that particular Stoic texts make between the aether and the concept of pneuma, Engberg-Pedersen proposes that Paul likewise works with an essentially Stoic or materialistic conception of the Spirit or pneuma.
To substantiate this claim, Engberg-Pedersen offers a compelling exegesis of Paul’s description of the resurrected body as gleaned from 1 Cor 15. Here Paul links traditionally apocalyptic ideas with cosmological concepts more at home in Stoic thought. In particular, Paul shares with Stoicism the idea that the heavenly bodies are material entities. Denying that the resurrected body will be a reanimated corpse, Paul avers that the flesh and blood of the believer will undergo a total transformation into a spiritual or pneumatic body, thereby becoming “an altogether different, new substance” (32). The basis for such transformation will be the life-giving pneuma bestowed by the risen Christ. A crucial difference separating Paul and Stoicism, however, is Paul’s conviction that the flesh and blood of each individual believer, not the soul alone, will be transformed in its entirety into a kind of heavenly, pneumatic body. The provocative reflections in this chapter yield potentially fruitful exegetical insight into other resurrection texts as well, such as 2 Cor 5:1–4.

If the emphasis in chapter 1 focuses on the end-time vision of the transformation of the believer’s body, chapter 2 considers the idea of how the pneuma operates in the present life of the believer. Much of this chapter is occupied with the question concerning what Paul means when he employs the language of participation in Christ’s suffering and death. Engberg-Pedersen proposes that the participation Paul has in view goes beyond a mere metaphorical reading. Instead, the pneuma for Paul is a material entity that from the moment of baptism onward literally invades and indwells the believer in order to accomplish transformation. While Engberg-Pedersen does not employ the following analogy, he essentially conceives of the indwelling pneuma as a kind of beneficent cancer. By virtue of the work of the Spirit, the flesh and blood of the believer progressively atrophies (45) in preparation for the complete spiritual transformation of the flesh and blood body in the heavenly age to come. Such a concrete and literal attenuation of the physical body of the believer in the present is, according to Engberg-Pedersen, precisely what conformity to Christ’s suffering and death means for Paul.

Chapter 3 lays the foundation for a major thematic focus of the three remaining chapters, namely, the cognitive dimension of the pneuma. Throughout this chapter Engberg-Pedersen demonstrates the seamless connections that exist in the areas of human cognition, cosmology, and personalized forces in the thought of Paul. For example, in 1 Cor 7:5 Paul appears to blend the categories of both cognitive and personal discourse by linking the cognitive problem of akrasia, or lack of self-mastery, with the highly personalized agency of Satan. Engberg-Pedersen likewise discerns in the reference to stoicheia in Gal 4:3 a potential illustration of the blending of personal and cosmological discourse. On this reading, the stoicheia may in fact represent not personalized spirits per se but the elemental components of the cosmos that exert negative mastery over the Galatians who mistakenly revere these elements as gods. The chapter concludes with
reflections on the shape of Paul’s anthropology. Notable here is Engberg-Pedersen’s contention that Paul employs the term sarx in a material sense to describe the human person composed of body and soul who lives apart from the influx of pneuma that animates the body of the believer. Hence, Engberg-Pedersen sees the use of sarx in Paul as encompassing far more than an anti-God attitude. Rather, sarx bears a clear connection to both the human body and the “present evil world” (104).

Chapter 4 develops further the theme of human cognition by treating the discrete topic of the relationship between human and divine agency. On the face of it, Paul’s highly personalized language concerning such matters as the existence of demons and the invasion of the pneuma in the life of the believer seems to presuppose a sensibility that understands forces external to the believer as impinging upon acts of ethical freedom. Granted that such a fundamentally apocalyptic sensibility animates Paul’s thinking, is there nevertheless any room for a more philosophical emphasis on human autonomy in Paul’s thought? By referencing the concept of prohairesis, or human choice, found in the writings of Epictetus, Engberg-Pedersen argues that Paul envisions something of an overlap in terms of the balance between human and divine agency that is accomplished within the faculty of human cognition. The overlap occurs when the believer discerns or understands the things of God and as a consequence aligns oneself in freedom with God. While such discernment is ultimately “divinely generated” (130), it still remains that the act of discernment and the consequent alignment with God belong at the same time to the agency of the believer, who genuinely and personally discerns and acts. Engberg-Pedersen later states that, when believers completely give themselves over to God in freedom, they cannot help but do what in fact God desires. In this sense, genuine ethical freedom and divine agency are apparent simultaneously.

Chapters 5 and 6 can profitably be read together in the sense that both chapters reflect on the shape of the religious experience of Paul and how that experience shaped his conception of self. Borrowing insights especially from the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, Engberg-Pedersen illustrates what he describes as the habitus of Paul. The habitus functions essentially as a sociological category that encompasses the experiences and perceptions that inform the core identity of an individual or a social group. According to Engberg-Pedersen, the habitus is inherently social and flexible. Hence, prior to his experience of encountering the risen Jesus, Paul’s primary habitus was that of a Jewish apocalypticist. As a result of his encounter with the risen Jesus, however, Paul cultivates a new habitus that centers on the experience of a renewed sense of self that has been completely taken over by the pneuma. This new habitus, in turn, serves as the primary focus of Paul’s program of identity formation with respect to the church communities that are the focus of his letters.
The concluding chapters of this intellectually stimulating study thus raise the important issue of Paul’s self understanding as an apostle who brought a law-free gospel to Gentiles. Given the evident importance that Paul attaches to his identity as apostle to the Gentiles, I would have liked to have seen more attention given to the arguably exclusive Gentile makeup of Paul’s churches. Such a treatment would have been especially appropriate in chapter 5, where Engberg-Pedersen discusses the identity of the “I” as it appears in Rom 7. While correctly noting that Paul utilizes a fictive ‘I’ in this section of Romans, Engberg-Petersen does not seem to entertain the possibility proposed most recently by Pamela Eisenbaum that Paul employs the literary device of prosopopeia in Rom 7 by speaking under the literary guise of a Gentile dealing with the problem of akasia. Is not akasia, the lack of self-mastery of the passions, a consistent critique on Paul’s part of specifically Gentile irreligiosity?

Foremost among the many strengths of this fine study is Engberg-Pedersen’s insistence that more serious attention needs to be given to the nonmetaphorical dimension of Paul’s thought. Indeed, Engberg-Pedersen is probably correct in his contention that concepts such as the body of Christ, participation in Christ, and even the concept of conformity to the death of Christ, were all likely taken very literally by Paul. In particular, chapter 2 of this study yields a masterful application of this insight in terms of the proposal that Paul envisions a progressive transformation of the body of the believer by the indwelling pneuma.