Having just completed, in the form of a summer term class, another attempt to wrestle with the complexity—and, at times, apparent impenetrability—of Paul’s thought, I found myself drawn to the title of this work. The book is one of the more recent offerings in T&T Clark’s Guide for the Perplexed series. There could hardly be a more apt subject. As any who have wrestled with him know, Paul can indeed perplex, and even vex.

The layout of the book is straightforward. An introduction deals with the question of sources and method, and a second chapter provides an overview of the letters, highlighting the particular situation of each. The rest of the book deals with Paul’s thought itself: its basic structure (ch. 3), and several prominent themes: “The Cross and the Spirit,” “Paul and Judaism,” “Salvation, Paul and Women,” and “Politics and Religion” (chs. 4–8). There is no concluding, synthesizing chapter.

Gombis states his purpose and, to some degree, situates himself in contemporary Pauline studies in a preface, in which he notes that—in keeping, apparently, with the format of the series—he will be presenting his “take” on Paul without extensive reference to secondary literature (though he acknowledges, in a general way, his indebtedness to the work of other scholars). In other words, it is not an introduction to Pauline studies but is...
meant to be an unpacking of the apostle’s thought—an “advanced introduction”—by a scholar who describes himself as “an orthodox Christian person who … eagerly and fearlessly embraces a critical approach to studying Paul” (ix). The two commitments, he maintains, are not “in any sense incompatible” (ix).

From some points of view, the approach the author takes to the critical issues involved in interpreting Paul in his introduction might be seen as challenging this assertion. In the opening paragraph, Gombis gets off to a perplexing start by describing Paul as “the popularizer of the Christian faith, the one who brought it to a wider audience”; he is “responsible for ‘internationalizing’ Christianity” (1). I do not think it picayune to suggest that most scholars would find these statements inaccurate, or at least misleading. Paul was hardly the first to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to a wider audience, and what he brought can only anachronistically be called “the Christian faith.” Were these statements subsequently qualified and explained, they could be seen as heuristic or rhetorical hooks; however, although the author does go on to situate Paul in the historical setting of the early church, there is insufficient attention either to the fact that Paul continued to see himself as a Jew, not a “Christian,” and that he was part of a broader movement of the church into the Greco-Roman world.

Gombis’s treatment of the question of the sources for interpreting Paul is also a bit perplexing, not because of the conclusions he reaches—that all of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament were, in fact, by the historical apostle and that “there is very little reason to doubt the historical reliability of Luke’s account” of Paul’s life in the Book of Acts (8)—but due to his rather dismissive attitude toward the history of scholarship on these issues. For example, scholars who doubt or contest the Pauline authorship of the Deutero-Paulines (Ephesians, Colossians), the Pastorals (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus), and/or 2 Thessalonians are simply following “a consensus [that] has developed over the last two hundred years that has taken on a life of its own” (6–7); further, “Scholars have grown so accustomed to thinking in these terms that to think otherwise is simply unimaginable,” akin to “swim[ming] against an overwhelming current” (7). Again, my point is not that a critical examination of the letters attributed to Paul must result in doubting their authenticity, but the only actual argument Gombis offers is to instruct readers to “review four or five of your recent emails from your ‘sent’ box” (6). There is no engagement, in other words, with the real tensions that give many thoughtful readers of Paul—even nonscholars—genuine pause. Not even in the chapter on “Paul and Women” does the author mention one of the most challenging verses, that women, who are responsible for sin, will be saved through childbearing (1 Tim 2:14–15; more on this below).
A sketch of Paul’s life concludes the chapter, drawn largely from Acts and supplemented by the letters. In Gombis’s view, Paul “converts” from a Pharisee whose life “involved intense involvement in a national campaign for the honor of the God of Israel, advocating for faithfulness to the Mosaic Law” (10), and thus one for whom it would be natural to persecute a movement centered around a Messiah executed on a Roman cross, to an ardent missionary to the Gentiles. He adopts Luke’s basic three-missionary-journey framework and the final journey to Rome to appeal to Caesar after his arrest in Jerusalem. Gombis speculates, though, that perhaps Paul was released from prison in 62 CE and traveled to Crete and Ephesus, where he left Titus and Timothy, respectively; the Pastoral Epistles fit neatly into this scenario: Paul wrote Timothy and Titus on his way back to Rome, where he was rearrested, and wrote a final letter to Timothy from Jail (19–20).

Chapter 2 examines how best to conceptualize Paul: “Theologian, Missionary, or Pastor?” The thrust of this chapter is to argue that Paul was anything but an abstract theologian but one whose thought was expressed through intense, passionate engagement with his communities and his coworkers. Gombis maintains that Paul would have seen himself as “a herald of the Kingdom of God and of the victory and Cosmic Lordship of Jesus Christ” (23, emphasis original), an intensely “political” vocation that involved a pastoral task, namely, to bring about and nurture “Kingdom of God communities throughout the world” (23). The bulk of the chapter interrogates each of the letters in terms of the contingent situation that formed its occasion—again, the principal point being that Paul’s thought emerges from precisely these situations; he is a “pastorally engaged” theologian (24).

There is much that is helpful in Gombis’s overview of the letters, and his insistence that they be taken in all their concreteness is appropriate; still, the terminology he employs at certain points is unfortunate. In Galatians, for instance, he explains that “Paul’s strategy … is to marginalize Jewish identity relative to the new creation people of God in Jesus Christ” (25). Of course, he means this in terms of Paul’s overall concern to move his communities to see beyond ethnicity in general as a marker of identity, but the formulation needs to be much more precise to avoid misunderstanding. Further, his characterization of Paul’s mission in terms of establishing “outposts of the Kingdom of God” falls a bit short of his goal of describing Paul in his own terms; the phrase “Kingdom of God” is employed relatively rarely by Paul, and it conveys a far too static sense.

The chapters on Paul’s thought itself are the book’s strongest and most helpful. Chapter 3 describes “The Structure of Paul’s Thought,” outlining the narrative that gives it its shape: it is the story of a “Creator God who aims to enjoy his creation along with his creatures and to see them flourishing in his redeemed and renewed creation,” a narrative that
“finds its climax in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, along with the sending of the Spirit” (45). Though Gombis is, for the most part, not breaking new ground here, his highlighting of the role of the Spirit as the vehicle through which Paul’s communities experience the reality of the New Age in the present is a helpful corrective to the neglect of this motif in much scholarship.

Indeed, his chapter on “The Cross and the Spirit” is by far the most helpful one in the book. Here he investigates how Paul envisioned “Christian conduct” and finds that “Paul’s ethical vision is shaped by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and the sending of the Spirit” (62). The pattern that emerges is clear and powerful: the cruciform structure of Jesus’ own life, expressed especially in the Christ hymn of Phil 2:5–11, reveals “the cruciform character of God” (65). This same pattern is embodied in Paul’s own life—in his weakness, lack of eloquence, in his “thorn in the flesh”—and is that which he exhorts his communities to emulate, through the help of the Spirit: “[T]he Spirit is working among the people of God to conform them into God’s own character so that the cruciform life of Jesus will be embodied by churches throughout the world” (78).

The only real perplexing aspect of this chapter is its placement; that is, Gombis does not make it explicit why he chooses to place the chapter on ethics before the one on salvation (ch. 6), and, in fact, he intersperses a chapter on “Paul and Judaism” between them. This structure most likely represents an attempt to reconfigure the long and torturous history of the question of the relationship between salvation and ethics in Paul, in which case some “justification” or explanation would be helpful. In these chapters—on “Paul and Judaism” (ch. 5) and “Salvation: Divine and Human Action” (ch. 6)—Gombis clearly wants to contribute to the loosening of the grip the Reformation has exercised on Paul’s thought. He does so in chapter 5 by arguing strongly (and clearly) for the appropriateness of the “New Perspective on Paul”: Paul was not attacking Jewish legalism—not, in other words, juxtaposing salvation by proudly doing something versus salvation by passively receiving—but rather contrasting a relationship with God based on one’s ethnicity with one based on the transcendence of such earthly markers (97); Gombis finds this reading much more “faithful” to Paul than the Augustine-Luther tradition.

In the chapter on salvation, Gombis explores the apparent tension between Paul’s statements about agency in salvation and concludes that, in fact, “[t]here is no final tension … between justification by faith and judgment according to works in Paul. These two dynamics are actually synonymous in that the outward and visible component of faith is a life of good works done in love” (106).

What is ironic and unfortunate in these chapters is that, on the one hand, Gombis describes Paul in very Jewish terms, in which there is no essential tension between faith
and works, and in which God’s plans for the redemption of all creation come to fruition through God’s promises to Israel, yet connotations of supersessionism still seem to emerge. In some sense, his approach merely replaces one way of using Judaism as a foil for Christianity—its supposed legalism—with another—its “ethnocentrism.”

The penultimate chapter, on Paul and women (ch. 7), defends the idea that there is no essential contradiction between the Paul of the undisputed letters—characterized by remarkable, even radical mutuality and egalitarianism between men and women and by a clear conviction that, in Christ, “there is no longer male and female”—and the Paul of Ephesians/Colossians and the Pastorals, in which a more conservative Paul objects to the complete abandonment of traditional gender roles. First, Gombis argues that this tension simply reflects the already—not yet structure of Paul’s thought. The form of this world may be passing away, but it has not yet, and neither should a structure that, though a reflection of the fall, nevertheless plays a necessary role in the present. Second, he invokes other scholars who read the household codes of Ephesians and Colossians as “radical critiques” of the structures in the wider culture. Finally, the infamous passage in 1 Tim 2 can be understood as dealing with a very particular situation in Timothy’s community, not as a general reflection of Paul’s views about women. There are problems with each of these views, but, as I noted above, the failure to deal head-on with the way the author of 1 Timothy grounds his admonition to women (well, to Timothy about women)—in Eve’s role in bringing sin into the world—and the author’s statement that “she will be saved through childbirth,” greatly jeopardizes any argument offered in favor of Pauline authorship. In my view, this chapter clearly reflects the logical contortions necessary to maintain the notion that Paul authored all thirteen letters attributed to him and thus, ironically, offers support to the opposing view.

The final chapter, “Politics and Religion,” continues the pattern of attempting to resolve apparently contradictory ideas in Paul’s thought, here between the “pietistic” Paul, concerned with individual holiness and salvation, and the “political Paul,” whose thought contains within it a clear and strong challenge to his contemporary political realities.

As noted above, there is no concluding chapter, which is unfortunate. Not that the book has failed to provide a clear enough sense of Gombis’s take on Paul, but what is most sorely lacking, as may be clear from my comments above, is some substantive attention to the broader interpretive issues raised when trying to make sense of Paul. It would, of course, be easy to get sidetracked and lose the clear line that characterizes the author’s perspective on Paul. Yet, for example, by providing very little, if any, context for the interpretive trajectories that exist, one risks leaving Paul in a first-century box and missing what has made him most interesting and significant. For example, what did Augustine and Luther find in Paul that so powerfully changed their lives, and history?
What have been the consequences for Jewish-Christian relations of seeing the problem with Judaism as “legalism”? In another vein, what does it mean that Paul expected the consummation of the ages in his lifetime (something that, as far as I could tell, is not broached at all)? A concluding chapter that addressed some of these issues—which a thoughtful reader will no doubt already be pondering—would be very helpful.

So my “take” on this take on Paul is that, while it has much to offer the perplexed reader who wishes to be guided through some of the thornier tensions in Paul’s thought, it is not without some perplexing features of its own.