Efraín Agosto’s foreword sets this book’s mood, measuring the impact of postcolonial biblical studies and its indebtedness to Fernando Segovia. When Agosto discusses the extent to which New Testament texts “show accommodation or resistance” to imperial colonization (xiii), some may wish to replace his “or” with an “and/or,” but he succeeds in helping Stanley to introduce challenging postcolonial concepts to inexperienced readers, without alienating those already familiar with the territory. Agosto also notes resonances between Paul and the “Apostle of Puerto Rican Independence,” Pedro Albizu Campos, by way of broaching the hermeneutical problems of the “ostensibly postcolonial” postmodern world (xv, emphasis original). Stanley, for his part, launches the present series’ first anthology with remarks on the divergent methods, definitions, and goals that make up the conflicted world of postcolonial criticism. Stanley’s definition of postcolonial objectives is normative, even insurrectional: such analysis “seeks to expose the various social and ideological mechanisms that colonial powers use to maintain hegemony” (4). Also intriguing is his description of the postcolonial optic as a vicarious outlook, a comment that reveals much about the relational dynamics between “insiders” and “outsiders” among biblical authors and historical and present-day readers. Such emphases make this a suitable introduction to the book as a whole and the first of its three sections, “What Is Postcolonial Studies?”
That first section continues with three essays. Stephen Moore begins “Paul after Empire” with the multiple origins and originators of postcolonialism, recognizing the equivocation implied by the “pastness” (9) of the term itself and its disciplinary expansion in American imperial contexts. Among postcolonial biblical criticism’s own beginnings, Moore highlights the percolation of postcolonial projects from literary into biblical studies, the editorial influence of Richard Horsley, feminist biblical criticism from the first and the two-thirds worlds, and the differing “liberation hermeneutics” (15–17) of Neil Elliott and R. S. Sugirtharajah. For Moore, reverberations of ambivalence with regard to Paul and imperial Rome should continue to affect engagement with twenty-first-century neo-imperialism and globalization. Susan Abraham’s critical introduction to postcolonial theory complements Moore’s contribution, targeting “binary” frameworks of politicized identity (e.g., race, class, and gender) and simplistic assessments of culture (in exclusively ethnic, political, or geographical categories) that too often serve a neo-colonial status quo. By contrast, a liberating postcoloniality dwells at the intersection of these sociopolitical concerns, searching for context-specific questions and experiential answers, with help from truly differentiated feminist and pedagogical lenses. Closing the first section by correlating postcolonial Pauline studies and Marxism, Elliott forwards Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concerns for “multi-axial” methods, in close parallel with Abraham’s preceding essay. Elliott is primarily concerned with Marxist historiography as a sociopolitical interpretative device, “an understanding of history as the arena of class struggle” (41), ironically marginalized in scholarship but useful on several research fronts.

Section 2 probes Paul’s interaction with ancient colonialisms. The first of its three subdivisions concerns Paul and Roman rule, beginning with Jeremy Punt’s “Pauline Agency in Postcolonial Perspective.” Punt favors postcolonial methodologies that reflect ambivalence and adaptation on Paul’s part, as well as the complexity of hegemonic roles and agencies. Such analyses of textual worlds empower revolutionary change in the real world—though the “revolutionary” aspect is relegated to an endnote (276 n. 25) and the difference between empire-critical and postcolonial criticism is sometimes unclear here and in other chapters. But Punt adds nuances missed elsewhere, as when he references Antonio Gramsci, an important voice that Elliott’s chapter on Marxism neglects. (Elliott does cite Antonio Negri, currently more recognizable than Gramsci as an empire-critical Marxist, but this too could be profitably expanded from the endnotes.) Gordon Zerbe’s first contribution represents the first and earliest of the book’s five reprinted articles. He negotiates a middle way for Paul between supposed counterimperialism and purported sociopolitical conservatism, surveying the apostle’s subsurface “millenarian script” (65–68), his deployment of politically loaded terminology, his Roman and civic mistreatments, and the problem of Rom 13, to which Zerbe suggests 1 Cor 2:6–8 and 15:24–28 as alternative, evaluative pivots for Pauline politics. Davina Lopez’s “Visualizing Significant
Otherness: Reimagining Paul(ine Studies) through Hybrid Lenses” questions monolithic characterizations of biblical scholarship, as well as the objectivity of its traditions. Building upon her own earlier entry in this series—a spatial-semiotic analysis of propagandistic monuments in the Roman/Pauline world—she offers a reading of Trajan’s Column that suggests new questions about Paul’s hybridity. She also promotes the properties of twenty-first-century hermeneutics as more reflexive and its demands as more normative than most will admit: postcolonial questions keep us “honest about our own complicity in a worldwide story of empire that we keep telling ourselves and in which we continue to have faith” (94).

Section 2’s remaining subdivisions address Paul, colonialism, ethnicity (2.2) and gender (2.3). Starting where Lopez concluded, Ann Jervis argues that Paul’s identity-shaping process in Rom 5–7 is hybridized, as are the events in his theology: sin’s invasion of the world can be read analogically as colonization, while the law is likened to the provision of postcolonial aid, an intervention that brings both harm and good. Jervis credibly analyzes what Paul’s rhetorical voice says and what it does not, as when he distinguishes that he is *fleshly* (sarkinos), not *in the sphere of the flesh* (106, Rom 7:14). Next, Stanley’s chapter solicits greater attentiveness to the fluidic, political qualities of interethnic dynamics in Paul’s worldview and self-identification, setting the stage for a critical application of Homi Bhabha’s work on hybridity to Paul’s ethnic labels and rhetorical adoptions of Gentile personae (and for Stanley’s forthcoming monograph on Paul’s ethnic rhetoric). A revised reprint, Tat-siong Benny Liew’s profile of racial-ethnic and religious differences in imperial Corinth, reveals processes of alterity, erasure, and disembodiment, analogous to Asian-American experience and rhetorically pivotal to perceptions of both status and stature. Attendant gender-oriented questions here flow naturally toward the third subsection. Three deliberately unsettling—that is, decolonizing—hearings of Paul and his reception history by Joseph Marchal, Jennifer Bird, and (together) Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre and Laura Nasrallah challenge readers to co-negotiate several convergent yet competitive streams of criticism. Readers might also remember that Marchal’s “postcolonial Paul” is as much a construct as any other and that Paul sometimes fails to fit such analyses: where Marchal sees assertions of Paul’s own advancement in Phil 1:12 (153), Paul insists (however rhetorically) that it is the *gospel* (however imperially phrased) that advances, not he.

The third section, “Paul and Modern Western Colonialism,” opens with Robert Paul Seesengood’s depiction of the co-dependency between Pauline studies and nineteenth-century missiology, expanded from portions of a 2010 monograph. He skillfully applies Bhabha’s underutilized claim that hybridity affects the colonizer (not just those colonized) to the hegemonic “rescript” (191) of civilizing others through mission. Brigitte Kahl administers Edward Said’s rubric of Orientalism to the Western tradition of
domesticating and co-opting the justification theology of Galatians to support colonial identity-formation. Like Lopez, she recommends reading nonliterary sources in order to construct new perceptions of Paul’s world; her rereading of the statue Dying Gaul, in tandem with Paul’s portrayal of Christ crucified, illustrates the extent of the apostle’s noncompliance with Rome’s construal of barbarity. Jae Won Lee reconciles Korean experiences and admittedly anti-imperial hopes of North-South reunification with Paul’s “commitment to his mission to the nations in the context of his commitment to his own nation” (224) and the often anachronistic analogies drawn on the subject. Lee’s otherwise balanced chapter does little to clarify the “contrast” he sees between postcolonial and empire-critical approaches, but if he means that the former meets peripheral, local, and/or concrete concerns as opposed to the latter’s “overarching context” (228), then such locational distinctions might prove fruitful for subsequent studies. The final chapter, another reprint from Zerbe, outlines Filipino reconstructions of Paul vis-à-vis the (liberation) theology of struggle there.

This volume constitutes an important contribution to postcolonial biblical studies. The chapters attest to the field’s diversity, as do their definitions of the field itself, which are ironically but unsurprisingly balkanized. Also encouraging are the range of opinions on postcolonial criticism’s prescriptive aspect and the popularity of Segovia’s “postcolonial optic” and decolonizing goals. In a certain respect, Stanley’s contributors and others who would follow their example face questions comparable to those that attended Bultmann’s project of demythologization: Can scripture be decolonized? Should it be? If so, how, upon what criteria, and under what circumstances?

Finally, two puzzling gaps in the book’s collective analysis should be noted. First, scant attention is devoted to the deeply postcolonial issue of exile; though many of the contributors implicitly consider the diasporic facet of Pauline hybridity, only Lopez (91) and Lee (229, and 233–34, on the exilic shape of Paul’s hermeneutical and linguistic choices) mark exile per se as an influence on Paul’s thought and identity. Second, given Stanley’s background, questions about Paul’s biblical hermeneutics are curiously absent. How, one might ask, did Paul’s appropriation of scripture fund his resistance to and/or his reinscription of Rome’s colonizing narratives? Readers must take up this and other concerns on their own, but Stanley’s book remains an excellent point of departure.