Despite the ever-growing mountain of books about Paul, there are surprisingly few that offer a broad overview of Paul’s ethics, giving reason to welcome this latest contribution. James Thompson’s aim is to “examine the coherence of Paul’s instructions within the context of his theology, calling, and predecessors” (15). In particular, he sets Paul’s ethics firmly within the context of both Greco-Roman and Jewish ethics, seeing Hellenistic (particularly Diaspora) Judaism as the most important influence on Paul’s patterns of moral instruction. That is not to say that Thompson does not see Paul’s ethics as distinctive. On the contrary, while he finds many points of commonality with Greek and Roman ethics, and especially with Diaspora Jewish ethics, he also highlights the particular emphases, characteristics, and concerns of Paul’s ethical instruction.

A substantial introduction (1–18) sets out the agenda and aims of the study. Moral transformation of communities is Paul’s goal, but there are challenges in finding coherence to his instruction. Thompson sketches the importance of both the Greek and scriptural influences on Paul and explains his aim to locate Paul within these formative contexts, outlining the contents of the chapters to follow. The first main chapter focuses on ethics in Hellenistic Judaism, analyzing ways in which texts such as Tobit, 4 Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs
formulate instruction based on Torah (and scripture more generally) to maintain the distinctive identity of Jewish communities in the Diaspora. The second chapter, focusing in particular on the Corinthian letters, considers the ways in which Paul’s moral instruction shapes community identity, distinguishing the Christian groups from those outside through such means as the language of holiness, election, and kinship.

The next chapter (ch. 3) looks at 1 Thessalonians, noting the prominent use of the language of “walking” to refer to conduct and way of life and finding Paul’s emphases (on sexual morality, brotherly love, and manual labor) to derive from the traditions of Hellenistic Judaism. Next Thompson examines Paul’s lists of vices and virtues (ch. 4), noting points they share in common with other contemporary traditions, but again finding the most extensive parallels and influences in Jewish literature. The lists function, he suggests, to distinguish the community from the wider society (88). Continuing the particular focus on the influence of Jewish traditions, the following chapter (ch. 5) turns to assess the influence of the Jewish law upon Paul’s moral instruction. Despite abandoning any requirement for the “badges of membership” required by the Torah (circumcision, Sabbath, food laws), Paul nonetheless derives much of his moral instruction from the Torah, such that scripture is a major influence “in formulating the behavioral norms for Paul’s communities” (113). Concisely put: “The statutes of the law determine Paul’s views of good and evil. He assumes that all humanity is subject to the law’s demands” (133). The focus on the law continues in chapter 6, where the particular topic is the ancient concern with the passions and how they can be controlled or overcome. Again, the most important influences on Paul are seen to be from the Jewish tradition, in which obedience to the law is the means to overcome the passions. Unlike his contemporaries, both Jewish and non-Jewish, however, Paul is pessimistic about the ability of humans to do what is good or to obey the law, though he is optimistic that members of his communities, empowered by the Spirit, can live in the way that is required (155–56).

The next chapter (ch. 7) deals with “the central category in Paul’s moral instruction,” that is, “love” (157). This emphasis, and specifically the focus on agape, Thompson suggests, sets Paul apart from other ancient moralists and from the Old Testament, though Thompson notes the importance of love in the Septuagint and Hellenistic Jewish literature. This chapter looks in particular at 1 Cor 8–14 and Rom 12–15, concluding that “love does not replace the law’s commands, but is the lens for observing them” (180). The last main chapter (ch. 8) turns to the disputed letters of Paul (twice referred to, slightly oddly, as if there were two categories—“either disputed or pseudepigraphical” [17; cf. 181]—when of course what is disputed is precisely whether or not they are pseudepigraphical!). Thompson does not assess the authorship debates directly but treats these letters (Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastorals; 2 Thessalonians does not appear here) as “a stage of the Pauline tradition that is later than in the undisputed letters” (181–
82). After a general overview of moral instruction in Colossians and Ephesians, Thompson considers the household codes in some detail. He rejects the widespread view that these represent a move toward conventional morality away from a more radical and egalitarian Pauline position (190), though he also shows how far these instructions did indeed cohere with “conventional” morality of the time (e.g., 191), again finding the closest parallels to the Pauline material in the Jewish paraenetic tradition. Despite diverse precedents, though, the Pauline form of instruction is “distinctive” (194). In the Pastoral Epistles, Thompson again sees both continuity and discontinuity with the earlier Pauline letters, avoiding any simple either/or in this regard. Finally, a conclusion (207–13) summarizes key points from the preceding chapters and offers some brief reflections on the “continuing relevance” of Paul’s moral instruction—which is pertinent “only for those who live within communities that share the corporate narrative of transformation into the image of Christ” (212).

Thompson’s survey offers a clear, broad, and valuable overview of the major topics and themes in Paul’s ethics. In particular, the book’s strength is its description of Paul’s ethics in the context of other ancient ethical traditions, both Jewish and non-Jewish, giving a more balanced and wide-ranging perspective than in some works, where one or other specific context is treated at the expense of others. While readers will certainly find scope to disagree with some points where Thompson finds Paul’s perspective or emphasis distinctive (Runar Thorsteinsson’s *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism* would be a good place to start), it would be hard to deny the value of locating Paul’s patterns of instruction firmly among the voices of his predecessors and contemporaries. Nonetheless, Thompson’s efforts to do this, and the proposals he makes, are somewhat less original and more dependent on previous work than the book sometimes implies. For example, in arguing for the importance of a focus on Hellenistic Jewish texts, Thompson remarks that “[w]hile [Peter] Tomson and others have pointed to contacts between Paul and halakhic texts, their work is limited to a few texts. I propose that a study of Hellenistic Jewish ethics may provide the necessary background for a study of Paul’s ethics” (16). Quite apart from whether Tomson and “others” (one thinks of Markus Bockmuehl, for example) have been limited only “to a few texts,” it is telling that Thompson makes no reference here to the work of Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, despite the fact that Niebuhr’s work (among others) provides a good deal of the material and perspective for chapter 1, as the footnotes show (incidentally, table 1.4 on pp. 21–22 is presumably incomplete).

The engagement with important scholarly literature is also rather patchy, though the interaction with recent German literature is notable and welcome (there is a fourteen-page bibliography, though it is unnecessarily expanded by listing as individual items all eleven entries cited from Spicq’s *Theological Lexicon*). For example, there is only one reference to Victor Furnish’s classic *Theology and Ethics in Paul*, none to his work on the
love command, and none to Paul Sampley’s *Walking between the Times*, nor to significant works on New Testament ethics such as Allen Verhey’s *The Great Reversal* and Richard Burridge’s more recent *Imitating Jesus* (despite places where this would have been particularly relevant, e.g., 13 n. 61). The sections on the law of Christ (126–27) and on Rom 14:1–15:13 (177–80), among others, proceed with virtually no reference to the scholarly discussions that would suggest alternatives to the positions Thompson sets out. Further, in the chapter on Diaspora Judaism, interaction with John Barclay’s *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora* (not cited) would have helped to nuance and diversify the analysis of the ways in which Jewish authors sought to sustain distinct Jewish identity. The suggestion “that Paul derives the specific vices from the Holiness Code in Leviticus 17–26” (99) does not mention the classic work of Philip Carrington (taken up by E. G. Selwyn), which proposed precisely this source for early Christian catechetical instruction. Elsewhere Thompson is clear that Paul abandons the requirements of the Jewish law that relate to what he identifies as “badges” of Jewish identity, but he regards Paul as deriving ethics from the law in ways that assume its continued validity (e.g., 125). Yet the issues that arise from this complex stance need more probing. When Thompson says that Paul “assumes that all humanity is subject to the law’s demands” (133), it is surprising, given that he cites Bockmuehl’s important work elsewhere, that he gives no consideration to whether this means the law as a whole or those laws (such as those stemming from the Noachide traditions) that were regarded as applicable to all humanity.

Thompson repeatedly stresses that Paul “insists on a countercultural morality” (6): despite points of agreement and shared values, the “moral norms” of the Pauline communities “will separate them from their own past and from the world around them” (43; cf. 46, 53, 72, 88, 170, 205, 211). Yet given that his own work so frequently shows the extent to which these moral values were more widely shared, my sense is that this issue also needs more nuanced and critical probing in several respects. One, related to the focus on identity formation, is that (as has been clear at least since the work of anthropologist Frederik Barth) group boundaries are maintained by distinction in (only) some aspects of practice and values, such that it is important to explore the particular means by which distinctive group identity is maintained alongside ongoing interaction and commonality. Second, it seems to me important to press beyond the strong rhetoric of distinction that Paul repeatedly uses, precisely by indicating, as Thompson frequently does, where a sense of what is good and right is shared with outsiders, but also by taking seriously the implications of this before reiterating the idea that Paul’s ethics are “countercultural.” Third, the Pauline instructions about relating to outsiders, and those that indicate some shared notion of the good, call for more detailed treatment: the short section on this theme (173–76) hardly explores the potential significance of the topic, consisting rather, as often in this book, of a descriptive reiteration of the content of what Paul writes.
There are plenty more points for discussion and debate, a sign of the wide-ranging and stimulating presentation Thompson has provided. It is perhaps unreasonable to expect detailed interaction with existing scholarship in a book that provides a broad-brush and accessible overview of Pauline ethics, in the context of other ancient moral traditions, and within a relatively short compass. Certainly it would be wrong to conclude with a focus on disagreements and possible shortcomings. Even if there are other perspectives to be taken into account and plenty of issues to probe critically and discuss in more depth, this book provides a clear, wide-ranging, and valuable study of Pauline ethics in their ancient context that will be appreciated by students and teachers.