Celebrating Paul is a Festschrift honoring Catholic scholars Joseph Fitzmyer and Jerome Murphy-O’Connor (now deceased) together, both highly respected in New Testament studies for their many contributions, especially in Pauline studies. A note in the editor’s preface explains that the title of this volume was inspired by Pope Benedict XVI’s “proclamation commemorating the second millennium of the birth of the Apostle Paul beginning June 29, 2008 and ending June 29, 2009” (xviii). Villanova University began the Jubilee Year with a symposium honoring Murphy-O’Connor and Fitzmyer (September 9–10, 2008).

Peter Spitaler’s preface also contains short academic biographies of both honorees, but I was particularly interested in the personal statements made by one of the essay contributors, Robert Jewett, at the beginning of his chapter on Rom 13 and its context:

The two colleagues being honored in this volume demonstrate a self-critical spirit that has served as a model for many of us. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor’s fearless and fair-minded weighing of evidence encouraged me to follow my own judgment in controversial aspects of biblical history and interpretation. Joseph Fitzmyer’s exhaustive catalogues and analyses of scholarly investigations, including
numerous items written outside of the North Atlantic arena, were invaluable resources in my study of Romans. I have cited their work in hundreds of footnotes over the last several decades. (265)

I am sure many New Testament scholars, including myself, would offer the same kind of sentiments regarding the contributions of these two men.

In the more than four-hundred pages of the monograph, there are nineteen chapters. Fitzmyer and Murphy-O’Connor each offer their own contribution. Fitzmyer presents a broad snapshot of “The Significance of the Pauline Writings” as a whole, recognizing in Paul’s uncontested letters ten different “effects” of the Christ-event: justification, salvation, reconciliation, expiation, redemption, freedom, sanctification, transformation, new creation, and glorification. While Fitzmyer has clearly chosen ten key results of the work of Christ according to Paul, I found his brief discussions of the sources of these metaphors and ideas too one-sided. For example, when it comes to “transformation,” Fitzmyer traces this idea to “Greco-Roman mythology,” where shape-shifting is a rather normal occurrence. Be that as it may, when Paul refers to transformation with “unveiled faces” (2 Cor 3:18), he seems to be drawing from Old Testament imagery. Later Fitzmyer links “glorification” with God’s kabod in the Old Testament. This is almost certainly a key association, but it should not exclude the very Greco-Roman identification of doxa with the social value of honor. Nevertheless, one can hardly deny the importance of the concepts Fitzmyer identifies as central to Paul’s theology.

Murphy-O’Connor focuses on a single verse (1 Cor 11:19) in the second essay, entitled, “Divisions are Necessary.” This verse has perplexed interpreters because it appears that, in a letter so focused on unity, Paul appears here to promote divisions. Finding most commentators’ exegetical explanations wanting, Murphy-O’Connor tries to develop an idea found in Thiselton’s commentary, that the phrase “divisions are necessary” is Paul’s redeployment of a Corinthian slogan. Murphy-O’Connor argues that the Corinthians probably promoted a very general maxim (“There must be divisions in order that those who are tired and tested may be recognized”), and Paul added “among you” in order to focus the spotlight on their own acts of immorality and competitiveness. While I am not as confident as Murphy-O’Connor that Pauline redaction of Corinthian slogans are as easily identifiable as he suggests, his rhetorical reading of this verse in light of 1 Corinthians as a whole is quite convincing.

Most of the contributors chose to focus their essays on Romans. Mark Nanos (“Paul and the Jewish Tradition: The Ideology of the Shema”), working with Paul’s interpretation of the Shema, adumbrates how Paul conceived of the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God (as Gentiles, not proselytes) as a sensible eschatological result of the work of the one
living God over all humanity. Stanley Stowers (“Paul’s Four Discourses about Sin”) reads Romans very differently than scholars such as Nanos, who focus on the Jewish background and context of Paul. When it comes to Paul’s discussion of sin, Stowers finds the “thought world” of Hellenistic moral psychology more plausible regarding Romans than the common appeals to Paul’s apocalyptic “sin as [cosmic] power” viewpoint. I find Stowers’s case highly dubious, however, especially in light of Paul’s frequent association between sin and Adam and sin and the Jewish law.

Jan Lambrecht (“Ecocentric or Anthropocentric? A Reading of Romans 8:18–25”) reexamines a key text used in recent years to give theological attention to ecological concerns. Lambrecht ultimately finds an “ecocentric” view of Rom 8:18–25 an overcompensation, as Paul did not view the world as having significance apart from humanity: “most likely it exists for human beings” (185). Ekkehard Stegemann (“‘Set Apart for the Gospel’: (Romans 1:1)” explores how Paul introduces himself and explains his gospel to the Romans. Brendan Byrne (“Adam, Christ, and the Law in Romans 5–8”) draws attention to Paul’s discussion of the Jewish law in chapters related primarily to righteousness and Christian obedience. Paul is trying to convince the Torah-sympathetic Romans that the Spirit will guide them through their new life morally and that the Torah should be set on the Adam side of the Adam-Christ equation, as it cannot lead to righteousness. Gregory Tatum offers a remarkably different reading of Romans in his own chapter (“‘To the Jew First’ (Romans 1:16): Paul’s Defense of Jewish Privilege in Romans”), where Paul appears to Tatum to be quite sympathetic to the Torah-observant Christians. Tatum discourages interpreters from reading Romans with Galatians in mind (as a comparative text). Rather, underscoring the differences between the two letters, Tatum sees Paul blaming the flesh for the problem of sin and extending a place of respect and honor for the Torah and other “privileges” that God gave to Israel.

In Jean-Noël Aletti’s essay (“Interpreting Romans 11:14: What Is at Stake?”), attention is paid to the word parazēloun and Paul’s desire to provoke Israel to jealousy as a key part of the wider plan to bring the nations to Christ. Robert Jewett (“Reinterpreting Romans 13 within Its Broader Context”) attempts to read Rom 13 in view of two polarized politics attitudes toward Rome among Christians: zealot desire for the subversion of the state, or unqualified support for imperial leadership. Making connections to the problems of pride and greed found in Rom 1:18–32 as well as Rom 7, Jewett argues cogently that Paul encourages respect toward governing authorities with a view toward the loving God who stands over them, the deity made known to them in the crucified Christ.

It is no wonder that so many essay contributors chose to write on Romans, as Fitzmyer has influenced the study of Romans in numerous writings, particularly with his Anchor-Yale commentary (1993). Fitzmyer also wrote, more recently, the 1 Corinthians volume.
for the Anchor-Yale series, but Murphy-O’Connor has left a stronger mark on the study of that epistle (see Thomas Martin, “Augustine’s Pauline Method: 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 as a Case Study”).

Another group of contributors examine broader themes in the study of Paul. James Dunn (“In Search of the Historical Paul”) sets the apostle within his early Jewish context and briefly explores his role as messenger and proclaimer of Jesus Christ. Also paying very close to attention to Paul’s first-century context, Helmut Koester (“Nomos, Agapē, and Charismata in Paul’s Writings”) attempts to read Paul’s nomos language in light of how Hellenistic diaspora Jews tended to associate the Jewish “law” with both the “law of nature” (Philo) as well as “existing Roman political and social order” (see 234). From this perspective, Paul’s rejection of the “law” would relate to a wider circle of ideas than simply Jewish Torah. Alternatively, Paul was promoting the unifying and sanctifying guidance of love and the gifts of the Spirit. While I think one can learn much from Koester’s positive conclusions about Paul’s ethics, I am unconvinced that writers such as Philo supply the best contextual clues for making sense of Paul’s nomos-language.

David Aune (“Paul, Ritual Purity, and the Ritual Baths South of the Temple Mount [Acts 21:15–28]”) offers a close look at historical evidence for how the rites of the Nazirite vows would have taken place in Paul’s time. Paul’s view of his former life of Judaism is a matter taken up by William Campbell (“’I Rate All Things as Loss’: Paul’s Puzzling Accounting System. Judaism as Loss or the Re-evaluating of All Things in Christ?”). Campbell makes the important case (especially in view of Phil 3:2–8) that Paul’s main point was not to undermine Jewish values but to reject any sense of worth outside of Christ.

John Pilch tries to analyze Paul from a sociological perspective in his contribution (“Paul, Change Agent: Model for the Twenty-First Century”). While there are some advantages to viewing Paul as someone who “functions as a communication link between two or more social entities” with a view toward applying “innovation-decisions,” I doubt that many readers will find convincing Pilch’s argument that Paul’s ministry was focused on Hellenized Jews among Gentiles rather than Gentiles themselves (see Nanos’s essay as a nice counterperspective to Pilch’s argument).

While the subject of Adam is a rather frequent occurrence among the essays in this volume (see especially Stowers and Byrne), Pheme Perkins’s essay is a broader and more synthetic discussion of this primal figure (“Adam and Christ in the Pauline Epistles”). She proves herself to be a minimalist by arguing that there is no good reason to import an Adamic “back-story” every time one finds Paul comparing Adam and Christ. If it is true that the Adam-Christ discourses are contingent and not consistently part of a wider theological narrative, Perkins urges that, while Adam-Christology is present in Paul’s
letters, it hardly generates any real insight. Perkins has made a strong case for her “contingent” view with regard to texts such as 1 Cor 15:20–22 and Rom 5:12–19, but how might the landscape change if texts such as Rom 1:18–32 and Rom 7 are included, where Adam may be present (with a story behind him) more allusively?

Frank Matera offers a sustained discussion of ethics (“Living in the Newness of Life: Paul’s Understanding of the Moral Life”). Matera appeals to the Bultmannian paradigm of the indicative (of salvation) and the imperative (of behavior and obedience). Looking at Rom 6–8 in particular, he underscores the Pauline imagery of baptism as death to self as one is buried in baptism into the death of Christ. Matera also points to the importance of the Spirit for Paul vis-à-vis the life of obedience to God in Christ. He concludes with three theological implications: Pauline ethics is Trinitarian, sacramental, and Spirit-empowered (see 167–68).

If there is one weakness to this Festschrift as a whole, it is in the arrangement of the essays. There was no clear ordering to them, and I would have appreciated a division of the essays into section groupings (perhaps splitting those on Romans/1 Corinthians from those on broader themes). This organizational matter notwithstanding, each of the essays in this volume proved stimulating and was carefully written. The variety in subject matter, while sometimes overwhelming, offered a salutary reminder of the broad impact on Pauline studies of the work of Fitzmyer and Murphy-O’Connor. The honorees’ contributions to scholarship have, indeed, made a lasting impact.