Readers familiar with the work of Joseph A. Marchal know him to be insightful, creative, and often provocative. In *Studying Paul’s Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, Marchal lives up to this reputation by bringing together ten respected scholars in order to identify the presence and effect of ideologies within the Pauline corpus and Greco-Roman world as well as how contemporary ideologies influence the reader. The contributors do not simply present introductory material but guide both novice readers and seasoned scholars to examine the presuppositions and tendencies that inform their own choice of methodology and, in turn, shape how they read and appropriate Paul’s letters (6). To this end, the chapters do not pit the various methods against one another, nor do they represent exhaustive treatments of each method. Rather, they are a “good faith” effort to demonstrate how each method illuminates different aspects of the text and also of readers as they engage the text (10–11). Marchal hopes that, by foregrounding discussions of method and why readers approach the text the way they do, readers will “become more accountable not only for their perspective or approach but also for the results” (8). This concern for accountability, or understanding the ethical implications of how one reads Paul’s letters, is one of the book’s most provocative and important contributions. It also lays bare the question of why one reads Paul’s letters and the influence that motivation has on the reading process.
In the opening chapter, “Historical Approaches: Which Past? Whose Past?” Melanie Johnson-Debaufr explores ways in which tradition influences how a reader constructs history and how that history then shapes the interpretation of Paul’s letters (14–15). For example, readers within the Christian tradition have often anachronistically read 1 Thessalonians as if Paul were a “Christian” who stood outside the Jewish tradition; this reading has more to do with contemporary frameworks than it does with evidence from Thessalonians or first-century Thessalonica (23–29). This chapter plays a crucial role in the book’s overall project because it problematizes the objectivity of historical criticism, which can create the illusion of neutralizing the influence of the reader’s perspective. Only after a reader has let go of “objective” interpretations can one be honest about the influence of one’s own perspective.

The next four chapters engage topics more familiar from introductions to method, yet each chapter moves beyond obvious points of contact with the text. For example, the chapter on economics discusses not only instances where Paul explicitly mentions money but also texts that reveal the underlying, often unstated, social structures that reinforce economic practices. At times these chapters also address how the application of the methods reveals aspects of the reader’s perspective and how that influences the conclusions drawn from the text. Todd Penner’s and Davina C. Lopez’s “Rhetorical Approaches: Introducing the Art of Persuasion” focuses not on the obvious rhetorical features of Paul’s arguments but on “moving beyond surface appearances of textual rhetoric” in order to uncover how texts can reinscribe ideologies through subtle uses of language and cultural codes (46). Penner and Lopez also address the ethical implications of uncritically adopting arguments and concepts found in a text because these argument and concepts often bring forward assumptions about people and society that are no longer appropriate (42).

In a similar vein, Laura S. Nsarrallah, in “Spatial Perspectives: Space and Archeology in Roman Philippi,” argues that ideology shapes and is reinforced by how a society organizes people in physical spaces (56–58). So as Paul exhorts the Philippians to mimic Christ, who voluntarily moves between the forms of God and a slave, he simultaneously confronts the ideologies and physical spaces of Roman Philippi, which keep the higher social groups separate from the most oppressed (68–69).

Likewise, Peter Oakes, in “Economic Approaches: Scarce Resources,” not only provides a general introduction to how texts provide information about the diverse economic situations within a community but also discusses how economics shape a society through the allocation of resources (77–81). He then applies this understanding to argue that the commands in Rom 12 evidence a social structure that focuses resources toward those who
represent the lower socioeconomic positions instead of the head of the household, which would have been the norm in Greco-Roman society (85–88).

In “Visual Perspectives: Imag(ing) the Big Pauline Picture,” Davina C. Lopez argues that images should not only be used to confirm concepts already identified from texts but also allowed to raise their own questions and present their own perspectives on reality (100–101). The decision by some readers to favor texts demonstrates a preference that skews the way those texts are read by controlling the background against which they are understood (104). Lopez leverages this control of background to show that even establishing the background against which a text is read is a choice motivated by the reader, not the text, and has ethical consequences (113–14).

The final six chapters model how foregrounding perspective can produce startling new insights from familiar texts. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, in “Feminist Approaches: Rethinking History and Resisting Ideologies,” begins with a lucid discussion of the historical reconstruction undertaken by first- and second-wave feminist criticism (120–25). She then applies ideological criticism to demonstrate how the language of freedom in Rom 8:14–39 simultaneously transcends and reinscribes kyriarchal structures that undermine the very freedom and equality the passage espouses (125–31). Kittredge’s chapter also includes a brief treatment of ideological criticism that addresses the interplay between language and power that is foundational for every chapter in the book (125–27).

Pamela Eisenbaum’s “Jewish Perspectives: A Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles” argues that, by adopting a post-Holocaust perspective, one can uncover anti-Semitic assumptions in interpretations of Paul’s letters. This allows her to reread Paul as offering salvation through Christ only to Gentiles without questioning the efficacy of the Jewish covenants. Her discussion offers not only a forceful presentation of the “radical new perspective” (136–40) but also a concise treatment of Paul’s “apocalyptic orientation,” which lends considerable support to her argument (141).

Likewise, in “African American Approaches: Rehumanizing the Reader against Racism and Reading through Experience,” Demetrius K. Williams addresses how assumptions about slavery reinforce reading Onesimus as Philemon’s slave. Williams begins by describing how early African American readings of the Bible self-consciously adopted an interpretive strategy that rehumanized the African American community in opposition to the dehumanizing narratives presented by society (157–59). This part of Williams’s chapter essentially provides a historical precedent for the type of interpretive accountability Marchal hopes the entire volume will engender. Williams goes on to argue that incorporating experiences is valid and necessary for interpretation, since traditional readings are themselves informed by the experiences of previous interpreters.
demonstrate this point, Williams uses Allen D. Callahan’s rereading of the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon, which showed that reading Onesimus as Philemon’s runaway slave was equally based on the interpreter’s experience and assumptions.

Sze-Kar Wan, in “Asain American Perspectives: Ambivalence of the Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner,” takes a slightly different approach by finding a “prototype” for the Asian American experience in the dynamics between Paul and the Jerusalem church. Wan discusses how some Asian Americans adopted a stance of ambivalence, simultaneously rejecting the dominant culture while also seeking inclusion within it, to their role as a model minority. He then argues that Galatians presents Paul in a similar tension with the apostles in Jerusalem as he attempts to validate his ministry to Gentiles.

The final two chapters adopt perspectives that are more theoretical and are therefore able to provide important discussions about the interplay between language and perception. Jeremy Punt, in “Postcolonial Approaches: Negotiating Empires Then and Now,” provides an excellent introduction to postcolonial criticism that describes the way marginalized groups respond to the ideological narratives of empires through various forms of resistance and adoption (191–97). Punt then applies this dynamic to 1 Thessalonians to show how Paul’s language both undermines Caesar’s claims to authority while simultaneously adopting imperial strategies to assert his own authority over the community in Thessalonica (199–205). One of the chapter’s most important contributions to the volume is Punt’s demonstrations that contemporary readers need not choose between abandoning Paul’s writing because he reinscribes oppressive imperial narratives or uncritically adopting those narratives. Instead, Punt provides the reader a way to understand how Paul’s language functioned in a particular context and points toward how contemporary readers can more critically accept or reject various parts of Paul’s arguments.

The final chapter, Marchal’s “Queer Approaches: Improper Relations with Pauline Letters,” focuses on the instability, or queerness, in Paul’s writing and how it provides readers a way to renegotiate some of the troubling uses of biblical language and arguments already highlighted throughout the previous chapters. Marchal reviews the historical-contextual approach and the apologist-affirmative approaches that represent two standard means of countering arguments that use Scripture to affirm heteronormativity (214–17). Although acknowledging their value, Marchal argues that these arguments both fall into the trap of attempting to normalize, or naturalize, performative aspects of identity that, by their very nature, are continually being reappraised and relabeled. Undermining the idea of normalization represents Marchal’s goal in order to make the reader more accountable for how she or he reads and applies the text (218, 224).
The authors of this volume should be lauded not only for the depth and clarity of their contributions but also for their seeking to represent a model for biblical studies on the other side of historical criticism. There are, however, a few questions I wish to pose in the hopes of sharpening the project as a whole. On a structural level, I wonder why Marchal’s chapter comes last. His work most clearly embodies the book’s stated focus on deconstructing normalizing readings and demonstrating the ethical implications of particular readings. Although the volume coheres, the difference between Marchal’s chapter and introduction and the rest of the chapters is palpable. This tension is exactly what the volume is meant to address, but I wonder if it would be profitable to use Marchal’s chapter as a framework for the book as a whole instead of just another perspective among many. Also, although Eisenbaum presents a solid articulation of the “radical new perspective” as set against a “Lutheran” reading of Paul, I wonder if her chapter would be more illuminating if she had set her reading alongside other readings from the new perspective that attempt to take Paul’s Judaism seriously but still understand Jews as requiring salvation through Christ (e.g., Wright, Gaventa, Dunn). In fact, her chapter does not mention these arguments at all, and there are no references to them in her bibliography. The effect is that her chapter appears to present the “correct” reading of Paul, which stands in some tension with the approach of the volume as a whole. Finally, although the chapter on rhetoric by Penner and Lopez addresses the presence and power of ideologies, their discussion does not mention rhetorical approaches that utilize ancient forms of rhetoric such as those by Stanley K. Stowers or Robert Jewett. Granted, attempting to survey the vast array of rhetorical approaches would require its own volume, but if these chapters are meant to introduce students to the field of Pauline scholarship, then it deserves a mention.

*Studying Paul’s Letters* not only offers useful introductions to some of the most important developments and methods within Pauline studies; it also succeeds in creating a space for students and scholars to examine carefully how ideology not only shaped the production of these texts but also guides how they are currently read. Some of its assumptions about the nature and function of language and Scripture may not be accepted by each reader, but that should not prevent the volume from being a useful resource in studying and teaching the Pauline corpus.