Joseph A. Marchal has drawn together an impressive team of Pauline scholars in this collection of essays dealing with the question of how best to approach the letters of Paul. The project is driven by two crucial commitments: a commitment to read Paul’s letters critically, paying careful attention to the ideological texture evident both in the texts and in their reception history, and a commitment to providing students of Paul with an introduction to a range of newer approaches that do not rely on toeing a particular traditional or confessional line.

Written by scholars who bring a wealth of research and classroom experience to bear on the reading of Paul’s letters, the collection goes beyond simply providing students with an introduction to a range of interpretational frameworks. Readers are invited to engage in critical conversation with “this fine collection of scholars, teachers and people” (ix) in the contact zone where scholarship intersects with contemporary society.

The essays follow the same format: an explanation of the approach followed by an example of how the approach may be applied to one of Paul’s letters (limited to the undisputed letters: Romans, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philippians), a very useful
annotated bibliography directing the reader to critical sources for engagement at a deeper, more substantial level, and a glossary of key terms (229–33).

In the introduction, Marchal unpacks the questions that underpin this project. The questions reflect a scholarly worldview interested in wrestling with Paul (and his interpreters) not for the theological or confessional legacy of these writings but for how they (and Paul) function as part of a larger meaning-making enterprise evident both in the academy and the church. Marchal is thus able to suggest that “this book will ask you to think some more and, at one or several points, in different ways about how to approach these letters. Anything worth thinking, believing, or doing is worth further thought and reflection, particularly when it is related to something with so great an impact personally and publicly” (2).

Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre takes the lead in her essay on the historical approach to Paul (ch. 1). Tracing the changing landscape in biblical studies, Johnson-DeBaufre reframes the question of what constitutes a historical reading of Paul’s letters by outlining three foundational principles for a “critical practice of history” (15): (1) reality is constructed through/with language; (2) perspective (read: location) changes the outcomes of our interpretations; and (3) history is an interpretation of the past rather than the past itself. She then moves to unpacking three trends in Pauline historiography: de-Christianizing Paul; politicizing Paul; and, decentering Paul (18–23). The essay ends with a reading of 1 Thess 2:14–16 through the lens of a critical practice of history.

In chapter 2 Todd Penner and Davina C. Lopez wrestle with a rhetorical-critical approach to reading Paul. This approach attends to the question of “how rhetoric forms the very fabric of our communicative practices” (34). Penner and Lopez are interested in Paul’s rhetorical maneuvers as a means of inviting the reader to reflect self-critically on the role of rhetoric in constructing our realities (49), proposing that the study of Paul’s rhetoric challenges us to “engage our world” (49). They present a rhetorical critical reading of the Christ hymn in Phil 2:6–11 (43–48).

Laura Nasrallah argues in chapter 3 for a spatial reading, both noting how place and space are constructed and inviting us to consider how power is mapped spatially. Nasrallah presents the contours of place and space in Roman Philippi, carefully providing the lay of the land (literally and figuratively), as she looks at buildings, bodies, and otherness.

After working through questions of definition and scope vis-à-vis economic realities, Peter S. Oakes proposes three types of economic approaches to reading Paul’s letters: economics as analytical framework for interpretation; economics as aim of interpretation;
and economics as resource for interpretation. He then applies them to a reading of Rom 12.

Visual literacy takes center stage in Davina C. Lopez’s essay on visual perspectives (ch. 5). Here Lopez is concerned with a kind of decentering of textual authority, arguing that “visual representations have been subordinated to literary representations” (94). She thus proposes to “critically appraise the (non-)use of images in New Testament studies, asking what it could mean to position ’Paul’s letters’ and ‘images’ as interconnected sites from which to think about power relationships and constructions of knowledge” (95).

In chapter 6 Cynthia Briggs Kittredge presents a feminist approach to studying Paul’s letters that “takes as its starting point a commitment to the well-being of all wo/men” (117). This approach explores a feminist historical reconstruction that focuses on the communities rather than on Paul and ideological criticism, an exposition of the “symbolic and ideological structure of the texts themselves and their effects in the history of reception and interpretation” (125). Briggs Kittredge presents a reading of Rom 8:14–39.

Pamela Eisenbaum offers in chapter 7 an approach to Paul that takes his rootedness within the Jewish tradition seriously. Her essay elaborates on five commitments that guide her reading of Gal 3:6–14: (1) Paul does not convert from Judaism to Christianity; (2) interpreting Paul must be based on a fair and historically plausible presentation of ancient Judaism; (3) Paul’s rhetoric is directed toward Gentiles; (4) Paul’s apocalyptic orientation informs the question of Gentiles and the practice of Jewish law; and (5) Jesus saves, but he saves only Gentiles.

After delineating the goals of contemporary African American biblical interpretation and following the trajectory of this scholarship, Demetrius K. Williams presents a rereading of Philemon that focuses on three of the five goals or strategies present in African American approaches to Paul (ch. 8). The three goals are: (1) exposing racism in the history of interpretation (163–64); (2) exploring the tradition and history of biblical interpretation in the African American Christian community (164–67); and (3) using African American story and experience for reading the text (167–69). This reading approach notes the importance of social location and attempts to rethink the role of biblical interpretation towards rehumanizing the other.

In chapter 9 Sze-Kar Wan seeks to relocate Paul within his setting as a “member of a model minority and a perpetual foreigner, first in the diaspora then as a member of the Jesus movement” (175). In so doing, Wan casts Paul as belonging to a hyphenated community negotiating identity in the shadow of the empire. Proposing ambivalence as a reading strategy for making sense of Paul, through Asian American eyes, Wan is able to
draw attention to the complex power differential produced in contexts of imperial hegemony (of one kind or another). In the end, Wan seeks to read Paul against this backdrop so that Asian Americans may find in Paul a “prototype of their experience” (181).

Jeremy Punt provides a helpful synopsis of postcolonial biblical criticism in chapter 10, noting its indebtedness to postcolonial thinkers such as Said, Spivak, and Bhabha (192). Along the way he notes the convergence of multiple factors that play into the construction of colonial identity (gender, politics, sexuality, economics, religion, etc.). He writes, “Interacting with colonial history and its aftermath, a postcolonial optic focuses on histories of repression and repudiation, but through exposé also engages in restoration and transformation” (195). He offers a postcolonial reading of 1 Thess 4–5, noting the ambivalence of Paul as a colonized individual who can simultaneously subvert the empire and support and reinscribe its power.

In the final essay of this collection, Joseph Marchal orients the reader to a queer approach to reading Paul’s letters (ch. 11). This approach seeks to destabilize all attempts at constructing a naturalizing and normalizing interpretation of Paul (or any other texts that make the claim to be authoritative and therefore normative, normalizing, and naturalizing). Marchal employs queer theories to respond to three kinds of approaches often put into action as a means of knocking down any attempt to question the authoritative biblical text: “historical-contextual approach, an apologist-affirmative approach, and a queerly resistant approach” (214ff.).

Each of the essays call for a greater sense of critical, reflexive engagement with Paul. The collection as a whole represents reading strategies that go against the grain of traditional theological or confessional readings of Paul. Thus while the collection evidences a deconstructionist trajectory, in varying degrees, it is not antithetical to or dismissive of theological or confessional approaches to Paul or his letters. Instead, Marchal’s team seeks to introduce students in an invitational way to current perspectives and methods for studying Paul without endorsing any one particular approach. Then again, the approaches that are presented share a visible parentage, so one can hardly expect the need for any of the contributors to persuade the reader to buy into his or her approach. Nonetheless, the approaches offered in this collection contribute to a more thickly textured understanding of Paul’s letters, contributing in depth and complexity to a range of interpretive possibilities.

Beyond making sense of Paul’s world and letters, the collection encourages the development of critical thinking skills that enables students not only to read Paul but also to engage in the important task of reading their own world. The book succeeds in
providing students access to contemporary scholarly approaches without dumbing down the content. The essays are written with clarity and depth of thought. Having used the text in one of my undergraduate classes, it is clear to me that Marchal has succeeded in drawing students in the twenty-first century into the world of the first century in ways that invite fresh questions and new wrestling with the range of challenges facing students of religion today.