Conversations over Paul, the envoy of the Anointed, are often reminiscent of the sad incident in the *Iliad* where various warriors vie to drag off the body of Patroklos. Certainly from the late first century and into the second C.E., the fate and meaning of Paul fell into competitive hands. The subsequent history of Pauline interpretation has often repeated this ghoulish grab-bag. While recent critical scholarship has tried to temper the polemical firestorms of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, this volume offering four views on Paul, despite its irenic attempts, is often less a conversation with Paul than a series of rehearsals with the subsequent traditions. Of course, no interpreter of Paul can escape one’s own horizon, but a conversation among four scholars should help gain through mutual critique some sense of where Paul was going. The historical Paul is often lost in the dust-up over later interpretive and dogmatic traditions.

Michael F. Bird, the general editor of this volume, clearly sketches out the topic of the ensuing discussion: What were Paul’s views on salvation, the significance of the Anointed One, and his vision of the assemblies? Further, what might be the best framework for describing Paul’s perspective? He then briefly summarizes each of the writers’ positions, giving each a sensitive contextual view. At the end of the volume his concluding remarks again nicely sum up the points of contention as well as pointing to some connections
among the contributors. The body of the volume consists of a presentation by each writer followed by responses from the other writers. In many respects, this follows the usual conference format. But here, at least, each writer can take the time to present his consideration of Paul. The responses are respectful, yet divergences and disagreements are brought forward to everyone’s credit.

Thomas R. Schreiner makes the opening presentation. His “Christ-centered” approach to Paul is very much “text-driven,” as he uses the Hebrew Scriptures as a key to the historical context of Paul. His conclusions regarding the four discussion points are predictable. In fact, they illustrate his anachronistic understanding of Paul. The Paul he leaves the reader with is ultimately the Paul of Colossians and Ephesians. Because he does not deal with the critical work of sorting out the Pauline materials (including Acts), he comes up easily enough with a Reformation Paul (although Campbell accuses him of Melanchthonian tendencies).

Luke Timothy Johnson begins at least with considering the problem of the Pauline data base. However, he quickly dismisses as “formally and materially flawed” any attempts to consider some of the data to be not from Paul. He then glibly accounts for any possible differences by declaring that the author Paul in some way “authorizes” what he might not have written. Johnson does see the need for detecting Paul without the use of Acts (although he never locates Acts within the developing traditions). He further notes that one must consider the experience of Paul and that of his audiences. Yet what might have become an occasion to see specific developments or surprises in the Pauline letters becomes lost in what is an assumed unifying web. Johnson scans all of the letters without any subtlety to sketch out his take on Paul. Moreover, in considering the assemblies Paul addresses, Johnson continues to pick and choose from the letters without ever asking what the specific conditions were or even what might have been a development in Paul’s thought. He would also be quite clear that Paul is no social radical in his dealing with the association-like communities. Indeed, for Johnson, Paul’s aim was to speak of “the role of the church” as “the place in the world where the work of Christ in reconciling humans to God should be realized” (Eph 2:1–22). In effect, the historical Paul for Johnson is the harmonized canonical Paul. His article never really leaves that endpoint, summarized by Ephesians. Johnson labors from a perspective that would read Paul in terms of subsequent development instead of asking how Paul was actually moving.

Douglas A. Campbell tries to see Paul from a “post-new perspective.” Suspicious of much of the recent Pauline scholarship, he would establish that Paul’s breakthrough insight was inchoately Trinitarian. He then focuses upon Rom 5–8 to ground his contention. For Campbell, Paul is actually “provisionally articulating a systematic theology” in which an ethics and a vision for community can be derived. He does cogently point out that Paul is
writing retrospectively; that is, his experience does color how he sees the world and history. Campbell’s interlocutors immediately pounce on his lack of thoroughness by focusing so narrowly. But what Campbell has done is at least to make a case for what he would consider to be distinctly Pauline.

Finally, Mark D. Nanos enters the discussion from an entirely different direction. After cautioning his colleagues about the lingering anti-Semitism in the history of Pauline interpretation, he offers a refreshing take on what Paul was attempting. Paul, for Nanos, never stops being a Jew. Paul does, however, argue that the “nations” should not become proselytes, since that would work against the new action of the God of Israel. It is the eschatological time when the nations are called to return to the one God. The phrase “works of the law” in Nanos’s thinking refers to this unnecessary proselyte conversion. Paul was at the edge of imagining a “mixing of multiethnic peoples within a specific ethnic system.” Nanos actually is trying to see how Paul was thinking forward. Certainly he also is aware of the subsequent tragedy of Jewish-Christian relations, often justified by an a-historical reading of Paul.

In many respects one can conclude from this four-way intersection that the future will be filled with more multiple collisions. Paul will remain maddeningly enigmatic, while interpreters will reinforce the assumed dogmatic agenda. Indeed, this volume illustrates the limitations of such an effort. But there may be more to Paul than such fare. First, it would be extremely helpful to place Paul more fully within his time and place. No mention of archeological advancement was made in this volume, nor was there any real sense that Paul was dictating his letters within an empire—in fact, sending one to the empire’s very heart. Moreover, critical work regarding the Pauline data base cannot be cavalierly dismissed (especially if it does not conform to a canonical bias). The work to detect the historical Paul still needs to be done. But it cannot be done by casually assuming a documentary base. Also, the rhetorical and cultural acoustics of the data must be taken into account. Furthermore, the very data base has to be critically evaluated and not by lone individuals but by a collective, critical body that is not governed by an apologetic task. Lastly, interpreters of Paul must face the fact that many are still thinking in an old and often anachronistic vocabulary. Terms such as “grace,” “church,” “sin,” to name a few, allow us to get away without thinking and genuinely reimagining the first century. Because we assume so much and have done so little honest digging, is it no wonder that some prefer the comfort of fitting the historical Paul into well-known latter-day molds?