J. Albert Harrill’s recent volume argues that “situating Paul in his Roman context finds continuity between the Jewish ‘Saul’ and the Christian ‘Paul’” (3). This book grows out of Harrill’s overarching research agenda and contemporary debates in Pauline studies. Harrill developed his reputation as an authority on Paul by conducting interdisciplinary work in fields traditionally separated into discrete disciplines: “These contexts include other early Christian literature, ancient Mediterranean religions, Early Judaism and Roman history—professional academic fields not normally combined” (166). Harrill’s work (The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995]; and Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006]) consistently situates ancient Christianity as part of its Roman context. The second area that this volume grows out of is contemporary debates within Pauline studies (more on this below). Harrill’s most recent volume paints a vivid picture of Paul’s biography and the manner in which ancient authors appropriated Paul and his teachings in order to craft a Paulusbild.

The book, far from following the narrative arc found in many traditional biographies, contextualizes Paul in ancient Rome to cover many Pauls: the historical Paul of Tarsus...
and the later legends about him and his teaching. Harrill calls his book a form of antibiography, defining it: “In contrast to a traditional biography, an antibiography abandons the traditional quest for the essential self (a fixed identity) in a linear chronology (the typical chapter-by-chapter march from birth to death), in favor of decentering the subject into multiple selves and developing more open-ending narrative structures” (3). This antibiography makes its case in two parts: three chapters on the life and times of Paul in the Roman Empire of the first century; and three other chapters on the competing legends of Paul in late antiquity. There are three appendices: (1) a chronological catalogue of writings attributed to Paul; (2) a reconstruction of the Corinthian correspondence (more on this below); and (3) an extensive catalogue listing every ancient Christian work containing a Pauline legend or tradition.

Part 1, “The Life” (chs.1–3), illustrates the ways that we can recover the life and letters of Paul in his Jewish and Roman contexts of the first century. Numerous scholarly and popular books have covered this material. Harrill’s volume, however, makes several original contributions by offering a nuanced understanding of the Roman political environment. This volume maps the ways that Paul acted as a unique messenger in the Roman world, whereas others unnecessarily make Paul an adversary of the Roman Empire (contra John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, In Search of Paul: How Jesus’ Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom [San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2004], Harrill’s third chapter astutely makes this observation). Harrill argues, correctly in my view, that Paul employed Roman systems of authority such as patronage in his missionary activity.

Part 2, “The Legend” develops the second part of Harill’s thesis that the elaboration and embellishments of legends surrounding Paul’s life and letters by later interpreters qualifies him to be one of the key figures in classical antiquity. This section of the book maps the various ways that ancient Christians crafted a Paulusbild. The different incarnations of Paulinism interpreted Paul in provocative and at times contradictory ways as a Roman citizen par excellence who is a hero of the imperial order (97–106), a paragon of sexual ethics (106–15), a buffoon (115–19), and a prototypical religious convert (ch. 6). Harrill discusses the distinct claims of early Christians such as Marcion and Valentinus on how to correctly understand Paul’s teachings. Harrill also offers clear and concise discussions of how the intellectual giants, Origen and John Chrysostom, treated Paul; for instance, John Chrysostom portrayed Paul as a holy figure (133–37). In this section Harrill forays outside his native discipline of New Testament studies into early Christian studies to make a persuasive argument for the inclusion of Paul as a key figure of classical antiquity.
By way of evaluation, I make three observations. First, Harrill in some places could offer a more precise historical reconstruction (61–68). Harrill’s second appendix (169–70) attempting to untangle the chronology and literary relationship of the Corinthian correspondence illustrates the problem. Building from a provocative argument from Margaret Mitchell (“Paul’s Letter to Corinth: The Interpretive Intertwining of Literary and Historical Reconstruction,” in Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches [ed. Daniel N. Showalter and Steven J. Friesen; Cambridge: Harvard University Press], 307–38), Harrill presents a case for seven separate letters: (1) a lost letter mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9 about ethical matters, circa 52; (2) the entire letter of 1 Corinthians in which Paul urges the Corinthian ekklēsia to reconcile the internal conflicts of status, circa 53/54; (3) a fragment of a letter in 2 Cor 8 about the Jerusalem collection, circa 54/55; (4) a fragment of 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 (omitting 6:24–7:1), circa 55; (5) a fragment extant in 2 Cor 10:1–13:10 excoriating the Corinthian ekklēsia for receiving the authority of rival missionaries whom Paul calls the “super apostles,” circa 55; (6) another fragment (2 Cor 1:1–2:13; 7:--5–16; 13:11–13) reflecting that the Corinthian ekklēsia had accepted Paul’s leadership because Paul writes about the theme of reconciliation using honesty and goodwill, circa 55/56; (7) and another fragment (2 Cor 9) showing Paul writing about the Jerusalem collection, circa 56. Indeed, to be fair, Harrill admits that his reconstruction is “only a hypothesis, and competing theories are also plausible” (61). I, however, would have liked to see a more precise argument for the contextual settings of the letters to Corinth. If one were to apply Ockham’s razor, how many partitioned letters do we find? L. Michael White, for instance, offers a persuasive reconstruction for 2 Corinthians with information about specific settings and letter carriers (From Jesus to Christianity [New York: Harper Collins, 2004], 204–7). According to White (I agree), 2 Corinthians is partitioned in this manner: (1) 2 Cor 10–13 functions as a letter of reprimand following Paul’s painful confrontation with rival missionaries he labels “super apostles” in Corinth; (2) 2 Cor 1–7 works as a reconciliation letter anticipating Paul’s next visit to Corinth; (3) 2 Cor 8 is an “administrative letter” about the Jerusalem collection; (4) 2 Cor 9 is a further “administrative letter” concerning a collection from the churches in Achaia. In sum, Harrill is to be commended for tightly arguing and presenting a complex problem that has vexed scholars for centuries; nevertheless, it would have been helpful, especially for beginning students, if Harrill contextualized the letters to Corinth more precisely.

My second observation places Paul the Apostle within the larger field of Pauline studies. Harrill, while mentioning a number of prominent scholars associated with the New Perspective on Paul, such as E. P. Sanders and Krister Stendahl, never uses the phrase New Perspective in this book. Readers can only speculate as to why Harrill avoided the label New Perspective, even though he offers a sophisticated discussion of the introspective conscience of the West (149–56) and in other places the New Perspective’s
history after the cultural turn (see “Paul and Empire: Studying Roman Identity after the Cultural Turn,” Early Christianity [2011]: 281–311, esp. 283–85). Nevertheless, Harrill’s work concerns itself with placing a Jewish apostle in the Roman world, one of the enduring concerns of the New Perspective. Magnus Zetterholm’s Approaches to Paul: A Student’s Guide to Recent Scholarship (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) is instructive in this regard. Zetterholm surveys the field of Pauline studies by identifying three trajectories—my words, he calls them “three different schools.” They are that of a traditional reformation perspective, which Harrill thoroughly critiques; the New Perspective; and the Radical New Perspective. In the first two groups, “normative theology,” according to Zetterholm, dominates the scholar’s reconstruction of Paul’s life and legacy, whereas the Radical New Perspective offers the most explanatory power in order to reconstruct the life and times of Paul the apostle (127–64, 195–240). Harrill’s volume falls within Zetterholm’s expansive category of the Radical New Perspective, which “emphasized historical New Testament interpretive investigations, challenging the bases upon which Christian theology draws” (Zetterholm, 163). My sense is that Harrill would want to evade others from labeling his work as New Perspective or Radical New Perspective, but they can function as useful categories for teaching undergraduate students. Indeed, Zetterholm’s three categories alongside Harrill’s volume would provide advanced undergraduate students an excellent introduction to critical issues in the study of Paul and his legacy.

My third observation concerns the importance of using robust theoretical frameworks to teach students about Paul and his legacy. Dale B. Martin recently (Pedagogy of the Bible: an Analysis and Proposal [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008]) argued that the historical-critical method is often taught as the theory rather than one among many theories for studying biblical and early Christian literature. The greatest strength of Harrill’s volume lies in its rigorous approach to the historical contexts of a Jewish apostle in the Roman world. However, Martin reminds us that contextual interpretation of biblical and early Christian material requires a solid theoretical framework. Therefore, I propose that instructors consider using collections of essays that introduce students to the various modes of interpretation such as auto-biographical, feminist, ideological, postcolonial, queer, and rhetorical approaches (i.e., Joseph A. Marchal, ed., Studying Paul’s Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012]) alongside a historical-critical approach such as Harrill’s. Robust theoretical frameworks encourage students to think beyond their own contexts, which is especially important for a religious studies educational setting.

All in all, Harrill has produced a persuasive argument for including Paul among the key figures of antiquity and his Jewishness in a Roman context. This rich and lucid book will
be a resource for graduate and undergraduate libraries alike. Indeed, Harrill is at his best conducting interdisciplinary research into the contexts of the early Jesus movement.