J. Albert Harrill’s latest book, *Paul the Apostle: His Life and Legacy in Their Roman Context*, moves from his scholarly focus on monographs about slavery (1995, 2006) to a popular evaluation of the significance of the apostle Paul’s life in its Roman context. This “overlooked facet of Paul”—his Roman identity—provides continuity between the “Jewish Saul” and the “Christian Paul” (3). The book is intended to bridge the “divide between professional historians and non-academic audiences” (2), a divide that Harrill very successfully spans. He writes the book from a non-denominational perspective and, in his personal case, aims to avoid faith-based presuppositions (2).

The historical methodology that undergirds Harrill’s argument is spelled out in the introduction (1–20) and expanded in the appendices. The latter delineate the chronology of Paul’s authentic and inauthentic letters, air the vexed issue of the unity of 2 Corinthians, and summarize the Pauline traditions and legends within the apocryphal writings and church fathers. It is worth remembering that in the appendices Harrill argues in more nuanced manner for his conclusions (e.g., “all the scholarly proposals are tenuous,” 169), lest one thinks that he is overly prescriptive earlier on regarding the composition of 2 Corinthians (16). Harrill sets out the arguments for several of Paul’s
letters being pseudonymous (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus), backing up his arguments with examples of the genre in the Greco-Roman and Jewish literature (4–7). Somewhat playfully, Harrill highlights evidence of the phenomenon within the New Testament itself, where, in his view, a “pseudonymous” letter writer protests about the circulation of other “fake” Pauline letters (2 Thess 2:1–2).

Not unexpectedly, given these premises, Harrill argues that Acts itself was not composed by Luke but by an anonymous author (9), considering that the “we” source is either a “pseudonymous” touch or fragments of a prior source. He also follows in the footsteps of Donald W. Riddle and John Knox from a previous generation in making a sharp distinction between Paul’s letters as a “primary sources” and Acts as a “secondary” source for Paul’s life, providing a useful test case for readers to consider (8). While recognizing the importance of the distinction, I would add that designating Paul as a “primary source” does not necessarily solve the historical problem. Paul presents everything from his own perspective, and, as John Barclay and many others have reminded us, the task of “mirror-reading” the arguments of Paul’s opponents from his letters with any accuracy is a perilous exercise. In other words, we can all too easily retreat into a type of historical “agnosticism” regarding the “reliability” of our sources if we push these categorizations of the evidence of Acts and Paul too sharply. Probably it would be wiser to treat both sources with equal rigor in their Greco-Roman and Jewish historical and rhetorical contexts and just see where the judgement of “accuracy” happens to fall. It may well be ambiguous and uncertain in certain instances, but it allows evidence to stand on its own merits without prior historical judgement.

The task of writing “biography,” Harrill argues, involves a demanding journey to its ultimate destination: a recoverable, objective, and knowable portrait of the “self” of any individual. Rather than pursuing (what in his view is) an unobtainable and idealistic construct, Harrill offers us “many different Pauls rather than “the” Paul” (3)—in his words, an “antibiography” as opposed to a traditional biography. Harrill delivers upon this promise in the structure of the book. In part 1 he discusses the life of Paul in the first three chapters, (1) focusing in chapter 1 on the “calling” of Paul from Pharisee to an apostle (23–45), diverging thereby from the traditional understanding of “conversion” (pace A. F. Segal, Paul The Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990], overlooked by Harrill), (2) outlining in chapter 2 Paul’s establishment of communities in the eastern Mediterranean (46–75), and (c) unpacking in chapter 3 the Roman context of Paul in a refreshing way that challenges recent studies on “Paul and empire” (76–94).

Some interaction with one aspect of Harrill’s arguments in chapter 1 is apposite here. Harrill’s analysis of Paul’s early life in the diverse currents of Greco-Roman society and
his deep immersion as a Pharisee in the LXX, the oral tradition, and Second Temple Judaism is very well presented (23–31), as is his discussion of Paul’s “prophetic” calling at Damascus and his conflict with the “circumcision” party throughout his ministry. But Harrill does not sufficiently pay attention, in my view, to Paul’s experience of divine grace in this process, irrespective of whether Paul’s transition to a believing apostle is understood as a “calling” or “conversion” or, indeed, as both. This overlooks important studies of Paul’s language of “grace” and his understanding of “conversion” in the context of ancient patronage and euergetism (e.g., J. R. Harrison, Paul’s Language of Grace in Its Graeco-Roman Context [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003]; Z. A. Crook, Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004]). Further, it does not reckon with works such as F. Thielman’s New Testament Theology: A Canonical and Synthetic Account (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), which proposes that grace is the central leitmotif of the apostle’s thought. Instead, the centrality of “grace” in the Damascus encounter is largely overlooked in Harrill’s discussion, only occasionally surfacing in the law/grace antithesis (19, 58), or in the debates of the church fathers on the same issue.

With the historical context of Paul’s life and ministry established, part 2 proceeds to discuss the “legendary” Paul. This section of the book (1) recounts the contradictory stereotypes of Paul in late antiquity (ch. 4, 97–119), (2) explores the appeals made to Paul as “scriptural authority” in the early church (ch. 5, 120–37), and (3) analyzes the misinterpretation of Paul in the West (ch. 6, 138–62). In sum, the sweep of the book is beautifully conceived, and Harrill presents many of the critical issues of Pauline scholarship in digestible form but without compromising rigorous analysis. Furthermore, the extensive citation of ancient sources throughout the book, as well as the summary of points of detailed argument in boxes, adds to the enjoyment of the reader. In sum, instead of an “anti-imperial” Paul, Harrill presents his readers with a “Paul” who frames his apostolic discourse within the conventions of Roman cultural identities (165). In a manner similar to Augustus (80–85), Paul promotes his auctoritas (“influence”, “clout” [Harrill’s translation]) over against his official rank in countering his rivals, as well as envisaging his mission, again Augustus-like, according to the geographic term of ethnê. This “Paul” stands in contrast to the contradictory portraits of Paul in the writings of the church fathers and the misrepresentations of Paul in the West.

Again, some comment on these later chapters is warranted. Chapter 4 is a tour-de-force for the uninitiated reader in its coverage of the paradigms assigned to Paul by later generations (model citizen, martyr, ascetic, orthodox apostle, deceiver, magician, etc). The reader would be able to proceed confidently to weightier studies such as those of R. Pervo and D. L. Eastman (2010 and 2011, each noted by Harrill). The same may be said about chapter 5. After being introduced to the later rivals of Paul (Marcion, Valentinus),
the reader is plunged into the patristic interpretations of Paul (Irenaeus, Origen, John Chrysostom) and is exposed to the ecclesiastical meta-narratives for understanding Paul (the “rule of faith,” the “inconsistent” apostle, the “anti-Jewish” Paul, etc.). Again, in light of such a fine discussion, the beginner may well be emboldened to read some of the church fathers in translation. Additionally, Harrill puts to rest the facile assertion of some scholars that the church fathers, over against the scholars belonging to the “Paul and Empire” juggernaut, did not understand Paul to be endorsing opposition to Rome and its rulers. However, Harrill highlights the evidence of Origen that anticipated “modern attempts to find hidden transcripts” (133), even if, in Harrill’s view, Origen violated the clear understanding of Romans 13 (132–33).

Furthermore, in chapter 6 Harrill argues that the West “got Paul wrong,” illustrating his argument by reference to Mani, Ambrosiaster, Augustine, Pelagius, Luther, Harnack, and, intriguingly, Nietzsche. Disappointing was the omission of other “giants” of Pauline interpretation (e.g., Calvin, Melanchthon, Schweitzer, Deissmann, Sanders, Dunn, Wright), as well as the many Jewish interpreters of Paul (e.g., Montefiore, Schoeps, Segal). The coverage is therefore truncated at the modern edge of the debate. Moreover, given Harrill’s (legitimate) preoccupation with investigating how the West misinterpreted Paul—which, in Harrill’s case, is largely viewed through the lens of Stendahl’s “introspective conscience” construct—we do not gain any indication from the author where the West, in his opinion, may have (if only occasionally!) “gotten Paul right.”

Last, there is need to respond to Harrill’s stimulating and nuanced argument in chapter 3, which is critical of the construct of Paul as “anti-imperial.” Only relatively recently has there been a serious and carefully articulated challenge to the “Paul and empire” coalition in the works of John Barclay and Seyoon Kim and to the idea of “hidden transcripts” (on all of which, see J. R. Harrison, Paul and the Imperial Authorities at Thessalonica and Rome [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011], 5–8, 28–33, 313–316). A collection of essays espousing a more cautious approach has just appeared (S. McKnight and J. P. Modica, eds., Jesus Is Lord: Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2013]). Even the consensus that the “peace and safety” motif espoused by the Julio-Claudian (?) clients at Thessalonica (1 Thess 5:3) represents a well-known imperial slogan has been comprehensively challenged (J. R White, “‘Peace and Security’ (1 Thessalonians 5.3): Is It Really a Roman Slogan?” NTS 59 [2013]: 382–95). Thus Harrill adds another important voice to this group of scholars calling for a reassessment of Paul as “anti-imperial.”

Harrill cuts an independent path through the maze of “empire” scholarship, though one would have wished that he had engaged, if only critically at least, with (1) the methodologically ground-breaking Fortress publications of Neil Elliott on Romans
(2008), (2) Davina C. Lopez and Brigitte Kahl on Galatians (2008, 2010), (3) the excellent Mohr Siebeck monograph of Justin Hardin on Galatians (2010), and (4) the exegetically rigorous analysis of Paul's “lordship” language in its imperial context by Joseph D. Fantin (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011). Some of the best scholarly literature on “Paul and empire” in recent years is simply bypassed. Is Harrill aware of these works and deems them unimportant, or is he simply not up-to-date in the debate? As noted, Harrill helpfully situates Paul's rhetorical discourse of authority within the conventions of Augustus's Res gestae. However, Harrill's overly positive assessment of Augustan rhetoric in relation to Paul now needs modification in light of J. R. Harrison, “Augustan Rome and the Body of Christ: A Comparison of the Social Vision of the Res gestae and Paul's Letter to the Romans,” HTR 106 (2013): 1–36. Furthermore, Harrill's simplistic dismissal of “coding” and “ambiguity” in Paul (93) needs further engagement with Harrison's wide-ranging coverage of the issue rhetorically (Paul and the Imperial Authorities, 28–33, 46–69, 177–83, 271–323). Finally, if 2 Thessalonians is considered an authentic Pauline epistle (pace Harrill), then we have to account for another Pauline major passage (2:3–4) that potentially has strong imperial resonances (Harrison, Paul and the Imperial Authorities, 71–95).

This is one of the very best books to appear that situates Paul's ministry in its historical context with subtlety and rigor across many disciplines of Pauline studies. It comes at a very opportune time, when new currents of scholarship are reassessing the Roman context of Paul. That Harrill does this in such an accessible, lucid, provocative, and entertaining manner makes the book an indispensable read for all audiences, whether seminary students, pastors, scholars, or the general reader.