This volume represents the most recent and thorough instantiation of the ever-growing field of postcolonial criticism in biblical studies. The book is narrower in its focus than previous large-scale overviews of the field (e.g. R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed. 2006), however, in that each contribution deals with some aspect of postcolonialism and interpretation of the canonical Pauline letters.

Some of the articles in the collection rely on the tried and true methods of postcolonialism derived from H. Bhabha, which examine the colonial encounter between center and periphery (e.g. hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence). Examples include J. Punt’s article on Paul and agency (ch. 4), G. Zerbe’s article on Paul and politics (ch. 5), D. Lopez’s article on political representations of empire (ch. 6), L. A. Jervis’ article on hybridity and Romans 7 (ch. 7), C. D. Stanley’s article on Paul’s ethnicity (ch. 8), and J. W. Lee’s article on Paul and nationalism from a “Korean postcolonial perspective” (ch. 15). Other articles reflect advances in the field by addressing issues that are tangential to postcolonial criticism, but have been as yet insufficiently explored. In this regard, N. Elliott’s article (ch. 3) on Marxist approaches to the Pauline Letters, and T. B. Liew’s article (ch. 9) on the intersection between politics, ethnicity/racialization, and the body in 1 Corinthians, may both prove path breaking as the field continues to evolve.

The articles on postcolonialism and gender by M. Johnson-DeBaufre and L. S. Nasrallah, and J. G. Bird help to trouble conceptions of Paul as either “hero or villain” in favor of situating him in “the messier political subjectivities” (p. 173) of groups he was engaging, and raise questions about why Paul’s comments about “gender roles” still hold sway “in the church” (p. 185). In both articles, a postcolonial reading confronts issues of power, authority, politics, and identity, providing different lenses through which to examine the data afresh.

Perhaps the two most interesting developments in this field are related to how one’s personal identity can inform one’s reading of Paul, and also how the reception of Paul among particular ethnic groups can provide insights into his rhetorical posture. J. W. Lee’s article (ch. 15) is an example of the former, interpreting Paul through the lens of the author’s “Korean situation today,” and acknowledging that one cannot read Paul apart from one’s own “concrete realities” (p. 223). G. Zerbe’s article investigates the way “Paul has been appropriated in Filipino theology of struggle” (p. 236; ch. 16). Such appropriations highlight the “cosmic and social dimensions of Paul’s salvific vision” (p. 254), which have not, according to Zerbe, been adequately examined in studies of Paul. These two articles provide examples of how postcolonial tools of interpretation help to fill gaps in previous understandings of Paul.

An important contribution of this collection is the tendency to resist some of the older idiosyncratic readings of Paul, which used the bifurcated categories of either affiliation or resistance. Indeed, some earlier forays into the topic of Paul and politics viewed the apostle as an anti-imperial crusader (e.g. R. Horsley; N. T. Wright; N. Elliott). While more recent studies have tempered this former zeal, politically engaged
readings of Paul still persist in the present volume, and demarcate a site of struggle between modern interpreters. On the one side of this struggle are those who use Paul’s letters and the postcolonial posture as ciphers for their own political engagements—scholarship and political action melded together. Examples in the collection can be found in the emphasis on an “ethics of interpretation” (p. 174), the plea to the “Christian Occident” to “renounce its complicity in the colonial and neo-colonial enterprise” (p. 222), and the “lessons that Christianity must learn from Marxism” (p. 50). For theologians and scholars of Paul in theological seminaries and divinity schools this politically interested approach is expected. On the other side of the struggle are scholars of religion in universities for whom this politically engaged approach is regarded as unacceptable, and considered symptomatic of a broader problem in the field of biblical studies, namely, theology masking as objective scholarship. A book review is not the place to adjudicate this issue, except to say that postcolonial criticism can be pulled in either direction: as another interpretive tool to mine Paul’s letters as historical data; or, as another interpretive tool to mine Paul’s letters for homiletic insights. The two are very different.

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Existence and the Good: Metaphysical Necessity in Morals and Politics, the latest book by University of Chicago Professor Emeritus Franklin I. Gamwell, reaffirms and enhances the process theologian’s reputation for analytic power and systematic clarity in service of democracy and human rights. The text—in many ways a comprehensive synthesis of Gamwell’s previous projects—seeks to demonstrate that one cannot identify and justify the existence and nature of the human good, including the goods of human rights and democracy, without engaging in metaphysics.

Gamwell commences by identifying and scrutinizing three foundational theories of morality that, on his reading, all fail to provide a rationally-warranted conception of the good: (1) liberal theories that uphold the existence of universal reason yet reject the possibility of metaphysical inquiry and thus the derivation of morality from the nature of existence itself; (2) classical metaphysical theories that uphold the possibility of deriving a principle of the good from the nature of reality as such, yet allow for the identification of the good by means of negation; and (3) post-modern theories that reject the possibility of universal reason altogether and, thus, the existence of a universal good at all. Gamwell sees Immanuel Kant as paradigmatically representing the first category, St. Thomas Aquinas the second, and Martin Heidegger the third.

Gamwell builds his alternative to these theories atop the foundational insight that the claim “nothing exists” is logically absurd. To argue, for example, that we can only speak of the teleological good by means of negation—as Aquinas seeks to do by establishing an analogical justification for the existence and nature of God—is rationally untenable. If one cannot say something positively univocal about the nature of the good, then, Gamwell argues, one is open to the charge either of articulating nonsense (akin, he says, to asserting the existence of a “colorless yellow rose”) or to claiming, implicitly, that “nothing