“For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). This well-known Pauline adage served as the focus of an intriguing joint study by English and German scholars from the theology faculties at Oxford and Bonn who met together over a three-year period to discuss its meaning and significance. The ten essays that comprise the present volume are the result (an other paper, by John Barton, was published elsewhere).

An introductory chapter by the editors sets the stage for the ensuing discussion. Of particular importance is the fork in the road early in the history of interpretation of this Pauline letter/spirit dichotomy. Augustine sets the interpretative ball rolling in a soteriological direction by viewing the contrast as one of death/life and law (Judaism)/gospel (Christianity). By way of contrast, Origen develops the contrast in a hermeneutical manner that opposes lower or literal and higher or spiritual senses of the text. The plot thickens when one realizes, first, that the two antitheses (soteriological and hermeneutical) get swallowed up in a larger dichotomy that pits God (“Spirit”) against the material world and, second, that the letter/spirit contrast has influenced the way that Western theologians have tended to privilege speech over writing, the immaterial over the material, in theology and beyond.

Whereas the essays in the first half of the book explore the various ways in which Christian thinkers sought to make sense of Paul’s statement, the essays in the second half trace the reversal of spirit and letter in the late modern period, for which “the spirit kills, but the letter gives life.” The target here (“spirit”) is the hegemonic human subject “who tries to comprehend the whole world within the sameness of the self” (9). Postmoderns worry that spirit (speech; voice; consciousness) violently imposes itself on letter (text; writing; world) in an attempt to master and subdue it.

Robert Morgan’s essay, “Spirit and Letter: Mapping Modern Biblical Interpretation,” is representative of the first half of the book. Morgan proposes yet another variation on the hermeneutical way of taking the contrast that applies “Paul’s term ‘letter’ to non-religious (or religiously neutral) interpretations of the Bible and ‘spirit’ to explicitly religious (confessional) interpretations” (47). Here the spirit/letter contrast becomes a useful diagnostic tool for examining the difference between theological interpretation of Scripture and historical-critical biblical scholarship. While a biblical scholarship that is closed in principle to theological meaning (“spirit”) is problematic for Christians, a theological interpretation that is open to “spirit” need not neglect the letter (literal sense);
indeed, it often accords the literal sense priority. Morgan examines Stendahl’s and Wrede’s models of biblical theology as historical description (“pure letter”) and concludes by suggesting that New Testament theology is more properly conceived as an “open to spirit” or “letter intending spirit” form of interpretation.

Paul Fiddes’ “The Late-modern Reversal of Spirit and Letter” is representative of the essays in the second half of the book. The key figure here is Jacques Derrida, who indirectly addresses the spirit/letter contrast in his critique of Western metaphysics. Though Derrida himself never explicitly referred to 2 Cor. 3:6, others appeal to his work to overturn the hierarchical binary opposition that privileges “spirit” (voice; subjectivity) over “letter” (writing; materiality). To deconstruct is to undermine the assumption that there is something (“spirit”) that hovers independently over the signs (“letter”) that indicate it. According to Derrida, “spirit” (Geist; the knowing/speaking subject; voice) is not independent of the sign systems (letters) it employs: “A ‘spirit’ that supposedly exists prior to, and outside, the letter thus ‘kills.’ An appeal to ‘spirit’ forecloses on the richness of the textuality of the world” (106).

What Derrida opposes, however, is not spirit per se but rather the dualism of spirit and letter. Fiddes proposes that we think of the world not as a material “deposit” of signs separated from (and subjected to) God, but rather as a text that is in God, who is himself a network of (Trinitarian) relations: “The world as a network of signs (‘letter’) needs to be placed in the context of the whole Trinitarian event of God as Spirit” (117).

Oliver Davies’s concluding essay “Spirit, Letter, and Body” sets out “a distinctively systematic-theological response” (179) and provides a valuable aid towards seeing how the two halves of the book cohere. Davies distinguishes two kinds of memory or history: (1) intellectual history, in particular, the lived tension between human interpretive freedom (spirit) and textual interpretative constraint (letter) and (2) authorial history, namely, the question of what Paul’s phrase meant in its original context. Significantly, Davies, as a Christian who acknowledges biblical authority, confesses the second history as authoritative for his own reading.

Davies draws upon Michael Wolter’s incisive earlier chapter “‘Spirit’ and ‘Letter’ in the New Testament” which offers a third way, beyond the traditional soteriological and hermeneutical interpretive trajectories. Wolters argues that the background of the contrast is Paul’s defense of his apostolic ministry. “Letter” in 2 Cor. 3:6 literally (!) means “something written.” Paul contrasts false apostles, who present letters of recommendation to the church at Corinth to substantiate their claims to authenticity, and his own apostolic authentication by the Spirit, God’s ink, written on the very hearts of the Corinthian Christians, that