Nicola Denzey Lewis (NDL) states that her new textbook is “designed to be a guide to the perplexed, written to help unlock the Nag Hammadi writings” (p. xiii). There are numerous praiseworthy features in the book that contribute to that goal and that also set it apart from earlier introductions to ‘gnosticism.’ Although NDL exposes students to modern discussions of and debates about ‘gnosticism,’ her book is not really organized in terms of the category as such but rather in terms of varied content and genres among Nag Hammadi (NH) tractates.

Chapter one contains an introduction to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts as well as the related Berlin Codex 8502, the Askew and Bruce Codices, and Codex Tchacos. Information about these related manuscripts is helpfully summarized in a chart on p. 7 (though oddly the listing of the tractates in the Berlin and Tchacos books departs from the actual tractate order). Chapter two (‘The Problem with Gnosticism’) offers a brief sketch of debates about the construction of ‘gnosticism’ as a category. NDL is sympathetic with recent criticism of past uses of the category, though she is hesitant about completely abandoning it. Her strategy is to speak “about Gnosticism only very carefully” (p. 19). She states that the “novel point of view” in her book is that it does not treat the Nag Hammadi writings as “a collection of Gnostic texts” but rather as “a miscellany, eclectic mix of documents” (p. 26). Throughout the textbook she does indeed demonstrate ways in which various NH writings complicate or overturn past stereotypes. Chapters three and four present a few basics about social, political, and religious life in the Roman Empire, and regional diversity in the Christianity of the second-century CE.

In the following chapters NH and related writings are treated in clusters “by theme or kind” (p. xiv). The first theme is prayer (Chapter five), and this
opens initial access to ancient persons through a possibly more familiar portal of spiritual practice, rather than the complexities of cosmological myths. The *Prayer of the Apostle Paul* (NHC I,1) is spotlighted, but other examples from the NH corpus and a few from outside it are also discussed.

The next few chapters examine writings often grouped under three ‘school’ traditions: Valentinians (Chapters six-eight); “Thomas Literature” (Chapter nine); and “Sethian Gnosticism” (Chapters ten-thirteen). NDL summarizes (pp. 81–83) criteria that have been used to identify texts as “Valentinian”: (a) elements matching Irenaeus’s description of Valentinian cosmology; (b) evidence of community that thinks of itself as a Christian group; (c) use of New Testament writings; (d) evidence of Christian ritual, and especially the “bridal chamber.” But students may be confused (as was one of this reviewer’s students) when in the chart on p. 83 three of five “certain or very probable Valentinian texts” are indicated as satisfying only criteria (b) and (c), which in isolation are not distinctively Valentinian at all. Chapter ten begins a discussion of “Sethianism,” and a box recounting the stages in “The Development of Sethianism” (p. 118) follows the model hypothesized by John Turner (e.g., in his *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* [Louvain, 2001]). In charts and lists NDL summarizes several doctrinal and ritual features often used to delimit a Sethian taxonomy, and she also subdivides Sethian texts according to predominantly Jewish, Christian, or Platonist “intellectual influence” (p. 123). The only Sethian text actually described in this chapter is the *Steles Seth*, with others treated in later chapters. Chapter eleven covers the *Hyp. Arch.* and *Orig. World*, and NDL uses them as case studies of ways in which such myths engage and reinterpret the text of Genesis; in Chapter twelve she examines the important *Ap. John*; and in Chapter thirteen, the *Gos. Eg.* (= *Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*), is appropriately highlighted for its ritual elements. Chapters eleven-thirteen are for the most part quite useful pedagogically, providing information about textual content as well as thought-provoking questions—for example, whether a given myth is simply an anti-Jewish rejection of Genesis or instead a reinterpretation in which Genesis is still somehow considered sacred scripture.

In organizing the treatment of NH and related writings around themes, NDL situates their analysis within the broader religio-historical context of the period. For instance, Chapter eighteen covers the *Apoc. Paul* and *Apoc. Adam* under the thematic title: “Apocalypse! Visions of the End,” and includes a brief review of modern discussions of the definition and nature of apocalypse, and suggests how some other NH writings might be mapped in terms of apocalyptic genre (Tables 18.1 and 18.2, adapted from studies by Martin Krause and Francis Fallon). Other chapters similarly frame the introduction of NH writings within wider late antique contexts. In Chapter fourteen NDL explores various