Paul’s travel from Antioch through Mira, Sidon, and then Tyre were also edited together. These sequences continued to interact with individual episodes, hence the prefixing of the Philippian episode and 3 Corinthians to the Passion Narrative and the interpolation of the APTh into the Antioch-Tyre sequence in the Heidelberg manuscript and the addition of the Ephesus episode onto the Passion Narrative in the Hamburg manuscript. Though it can be difficult at times to keep track of all the various episodes, their witnesses, redactional layers, and portraits of Paul, Snyder is able to construct a fairly convincing sketch of the development of the Acts tradition that accounts for the diverse and somewhat fragmentary manuscript evidence.

One of the strengths of this work is the treatment of independently-circulated episodes, with an effort to contextualize the earliest forms of their circulation and textualization. However, some of these efforts more relevant than others and some discussions were entirely lacking. Too much attention was devoted to relating Paul’s martyrdom stories with early traditions of apostolic martyrdoms, while the codicological context of the earliest form of 3 Corinthians was quickly dismissed, in spite of the significant body of scholarship devoted to the question of the collection and contents of the Bodmer codex.

One additional criticism should be directed toward Snyder’s occasionally incorrect use of standard bibliographic terminology. A portion of this book treats the material features of the various codices and fragments that contain the Acts and requires detailed description of those manuscripts. Unfortunately, incorrect terminology, such as mixing up the distinction between folio and leaf, makes his description of P. Hamb., for example, very confusing. This reduces the readers’ ability envision how the codex was put together and thereby follow Snyder’s argument about what may or may not have been included in that collection.

Snyder provides a major overhaul of traditional approaches to the Acts of Paul and its composition and development. His overall argument that Acts of Paul was a title for multiple independent traditions that were variously reworked into larger collections is convincing, even if one wants to dispute some of the more minor source-critical proposals. This new compositional hypothesis should prompt further work on the assembling of early Christian “Acts” literature and the relation of independently-circulated episodes to the rest of early Christian literature.

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Nicola Denzey Lewis’ book, Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Under Pitiless Skies, offers a much needed look at fate and how Christians and non-Christians were able to free themselves from the “enslavement of fate”. This book is divided into nine chapters, including an introduction and conclusion, addressing (and readdressing) various texts from the Nag Hammadi Codices, the Pauline corpus, as well as non-Christian sources, with regard to how they understood the concept of fate and how “Gnostic” texts did not address fate in a dissimilar way to other second century texts.

Denzey Lewis’ introduction states her goals for the book: to illustrate how a number of second century Christian writers thought and wrote about the cosmos in similar ways. First by investigating heimarmene (Greek for fate or “enslavement of fate”) and astral fatalism in the first and second centuries;
second by looking at how some “Gnostic” authors did not agree with the concept of fatalism though they still offered an escape from the bonds of fate; and finally putting forth an argument to destabilize the constructed difference between different kinds of Christians and non-Christians by looking at their ideas surrounding heimarmene (9).

In the first chapter Denzey Lewis addresses whether the idea of “Gnostic cosmic pessimism” is useful to the study of fatalism in the context of antiquity. The Gnostics have often been thought of as the movement that introduced the notion of a hostile cosmos, but Denzey Lewis argues that these groups should not be understood as being enslaved by fate, as in a “Gnostic” worldview, fate enslaves the Other (28). Chapter two focuses on two Nag Hammadi cosmogentic treatises—the Apocryphon of John and On the Origin of the World—and their use of the concept pronoia (Greek for providence). This chapter also focuses extensively on Hans Jonas’ work on pronoia, as he states that the Gnostics borrowed this concept from Stoics and had ensured that pronoia was abandoned as a positive concept (29-30). Denzey Lewis opposes Jonas’ idea and argues that the Gnostics and Middle Platonists actually had similar ideas about pronoia. Chapter three focuses on Pauline literature and Denzey Lewis shows that these writings are significant to understanding Christian “cosmic pessimism”. She claims that Gnostic Christians used Pauline literature as a lens through which they interpreted the concept of heimarmene, which was borrowed from the Middle Platonists (53-54). The fourth and fifth chapters both address writings from the Nag Hammadi Library and their use of the term heimarmene. The fourth chapter revisits the Apocryphon of John and On the Origin of the World and looks at the similarities of the treatment of heimarmene in these and Middle Platonic teachings. The fifth chapter addresses one of the Hermetic texts, the Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth, and argues that like the Gnostic Christians, Hermeticists also struggled to understand the relationship between heimarmene and pronoia and how they themselves were affected by fate. Chapters six and seven address how various Christian and non-Christian sources in second century explore solutions to the “enslavement of fate” and how they propose different ways of achieving this. The Gospel of Judas is featured in the eighth chapter, though heimarmene is not specifically mentioned in this text, the stars are addressed at length and in a context that appears to imply a connection to Jewish cosmology in the Second Temple Period (166-167).

This book offers the reader a good overview of texts that address heimarmene, though it does so in a very brisk manner; at 206 pages, the book does not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of the concept of fate in antiquity. The texts were chosen based on the author’s preference, choosing instead to analyse texts she “feels comfortable treating as a historian of the Roman Empire and a specialist in ancient Gnosticism” (7). The texts are ordered thematically rather than chronologically, and though initially this was confusing, it helps to underscore her new approach to the argument: that fate was viewed similarly throughout second century texts and that the “Gnostic” texts did not represent a view opposing proto-orthodox views on fate. The concept of Gnosticism as a category is not addressed; rather scare-quotes are used throughout to denote the complicated issues surrounding this controversial term. Overall this book is a great resource for those interested in fate and how the ancients understood it.

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