Comparative study of ancient cultures—especially ancient religious conceptions—has evolved in recent decades, and this volume meets an important desideratum in light of scholarly advances. The book presupposes that the Mediterranean Sea served in antiquity as a conduit through which religious and cultural ideas were easily transported. A new scholarly consensus emerged in the 1960s, appreciating for the first time the degree to which ancient peoples were exposed to diversity of cultural influences transmitted throughout the Mediterranean world, including religious beliefs and practices. This volume therefore proposes to collect for the first time pertinent information on all religions of the ancient Mediterranean world (hence the lack of religions from the Far East) from the third millennium B.C.E. to the fifth century C.E., and intentionally structures the presentation in order to foster a comparative methodology. The editor has positioned the volume as a “guide,” as the subtitle makes clear, rather than as a dictionary or encyclopedia. This has two practical results: the selection of topics and the arrangement of materials. I will comment on the selection of topics below, but the arrangement of the materials is perhaps the real strength of the volume.

The book has a tripartite structure. The first part, “Encountering Ancient Religions,” has eleven general essays on topics relevant for all the cultures under consideration in the volume. The essays are as follows. “What Is Ancient Mediterranean Religion?” (Fritz Graf); “Monotheism and Polytheism” (Jan Assmann); “Ritual” (Jan Bremmer); “Myth” (Fritz Graf); “Cosmology: Time and History” (John J. Collins); “Pollution, Sin,
Atonement, Salvation” (Harold W. Attridge); “Law and Ethics” (Eckart Otto); “Mysteries” (Sarah Iles Johnston); “Religions in Contact” (John Scheid); “Writing and Religion” (Mary Beard); and “Magic” (Sarah Iles Johnston). The task in these essays is to consider features of the disparate religions of the ancient world that are common to all. The essays here, as elsewhere in the volume, are written with no endnotes or footnotes, although each entry contains a brief list of bibliography for further reading.

The second part, “Histories,” consists of essays tracing the histories of religions in each of the cultures and traditions under consideration here: “Egypt” (Jan Assmann and David Frankfurter); “Mesopotamia” (Paul-Alain Beaulieu); “Syria and Canaan” (David P. Wright); “Israel” (John J. Collins); “Anatolia: Hittites” (David P. Wright); “Iran” (William Malandra and Michael Stausberg); “Minoan and Mycenaean Civilizations” (Nanno Marinatos); “Greece” (Jon Mikalson); “Etruria” (Olivier de Cazanove); “Rome” (John North); and “Early Christianity” (Harold Attridge). These essays constitute the historical framework for the whole, and serve as a point of reference for the reader.

Part 3, “Key Topics,” is the most distinctive feature of the book, and one that will make this reference tool valuable for many years to come, especially when used together with the first two parts for comparative purposes. This section, the longest of the three, is comprised of twenty chapters devoted to topics such as divination, religious personnel, deities and demons, or sin and pollution. Each chapter then discusses how the topic under consideration is manifested in the ten cultures or traditions of the ancient Mediterranean world: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria and Canaan, Israel, Anatolia, Iran, Greece, Etruria, Rome, and Christianity (some are omitted occasionally where the evidence is lacking). The result is a volume that may, in fact, be used as an encyclopedia or dictionary despite the editor’s intent, meaning it may be consulted for treatment of individual topics for the respective cultures. But the juxtaposition of these essays in this way also gives it a distinctive value as a “guide” so that comparative reading is encouraged.

The diverse topography of the ancient Mediterranean world segmented the cultures in ways we have long understood. Evolving religious conceptions over an extended chronological period have also made it necessary in recent years to speak of religion in the plural for each area, thus the religions of Mesopotamia, the religions of Syria-Palestine, and so on. Despite this segmentation and the diversity of the region, scholars in the last half of the twentieth century came to appreciate the degree to which the Mediterranean Sea connected rather than separated the cultures of the region, a point made forcefully in the opening chapter by Fritz Graf. As such, the main characteristic of the religions under consideration here was their constant contact with each other, resulting in both assimilation and dissimilation (14). It is precisely this cross-fertilization of religious conceptions that makes such a volume as this necessary, and, at the same
time, the authors rightly caution that a shared, common phenomenon does not necessarily require an explanation of transfer or assimilation. Specific means of transference may be discernible at times, but at other times a common religious matrix may be the most satisfying conclusion.

The volume contains a wealth of information (the “Key Topics” portion alone is over four hundred pages of double-column texts), and this brief review cannot be exhaustive. In order to sample this portion of the volume, this reviewer chose to read the portion of each “Key Topic” chapter devoted to Mesopotamia. After an introduction to general issues related to Mesopotamian religion in the “Histories” portion by Paul-Alain Beaulieu, one finds, for example, essays on sacrifices by Marcel Sigrist, sin and pollution by Karel van der Toorn, and many others. This is a veritable smorgasbord of important issues on Mesopotamian religion by leading scholars in the discipline. And similar essays are included for the other nine cultures or traditions represented in the volume. This exercise yielded a benefit of the book’s arrangement probably not intended by the editor, that of using cross-sections of the “Key Topics” portion for assigned readings. In other words, by taking all the essays on Mesopotamia together (or Egypt, Israel, Greece, Rome, etc.), one gains a holistic presentation of the religious conceptions of that particular culture. Such use of the volume may defeat the editor’s purpose of producing a comparative “guide” to the religions of the ancient world. But in the case of ancient Mesopotamia, this cross-sectioning opens enormous potential due to a lack of systematic treatment of Mesopotamian religion elsewhere. This reviewer suspects teachers of religion and history will likewise find selected cross-sectioning to be useful in the classroom, to which the editor will probably not object.

In an impressive, sweeping epilogue (657–67), Bruce Lincoln distinguishes between “the ancient world” and the “post-ancient” by first identifying “the ancient” as that situation dominated by the omnipresence of religion; that is, religion was not simply one system of culture coexisting among others, as in the postancient, but was pervasive throughout the whole. Not satisfied with this generalization, Lincoln goes further by surveying four critical variables at the transition from ancient religion to postancient. First, inspired sacred verse gave way to a discourse claiming transcendent status. Second, internalized and privatized practices such as prayer and contemplation supplanted sacrifice and divine statues. Third, communities defined by religious adherence displaced those of antiquity defined by geography, kinship, and culture alone. And finally, religious institutions gained autonomy from civic, national, or imperial institutions, to which they had formerly been subordinate. Lincoln concludes that the transition “yields Christianity,” or more precisely Christianity(ies), Judaism(s), and Islam(s), a conclusion that he admits is an oversimplification. Nevertheless, his epilogue is a stimulating overview of the way beliefs, practices, texts, and leadership in ancient religion have all been transformed in a
multitude of ways and how their new configurations continue to have enormous influence in our postancient world.