Originating in a set of lectures delivered at the École Patrique des Hautes Études (Paris), the four chapters of this slim volume offer a vigorous discussion of some key matters about the forms and uses of books characteristic of early Egyptian Christians. Bagnall’s main concern in these studies is what he regards as a misguided tendency by some scholars to push the limits on the possible early dating of the fragments of early Christian books. This tendency toward early dating of Christian manuscripts he attributes to an understandable desire to find direct evidence about the distribution and nature of Egyptian Christianity in the second century C.E. Specifically, Bagnall questions the evidence for a spread of Christianity widely beyond Alexandria in the small towns and villages of the Egyptian chora in the second century and the use of papyri (both biblical/literary texts and documentary texts) dated (in his view dubiously) early to support the view that Christianity was widely developed in Egypt at that point. In the course of making his case, Bagnall also offers stimulating discussion of several specific topics that will be of interest to anyone concerned with early Christianity.

This book joins several others of recent vintage that all emphasize the importance of early Christian papyri for wider historical questions about early Christianity, and Bagnall engages most of these publications as well as the primary evidence. He is particularly
critical of Mario Naldini, accusing him of being “excessively given to describing epistolary banalities as fervent expressions of Christian piety” (8), and he dissents from Ewa Wisszycka’s view that Christianity was widely distributed in second-century Egypt. He notes more positively AnneMarie Luijendijk’s “Greetings in the Lord”: Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri (Harvard University Press, 2009) and has both appreciative and occasionally critical comments about my own book, The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins (Eerdmans, 2006).

In support of his contention that the widely accepted number of second-century Christian papyri is too high, Bagnall points to the slightly later dates of early papyri assigned by the great papyrologist/palaeographer Eric Turner, rightly observing that Turner’s expertise was unsurpassed. (It must be noted, however, that in general Turner’s dates differ by only a few decades, e.g., dating several items to the early/mid-third century instead of the late second century.) Bagnall also offers an argument from probability. Essentially, he contends that we should expect that the percentage of Christian papyri among extant second-century papyri should correlate with the likely percentage of Christians in the population of Egypt in that time. In the absence of hard data on either the population of second-century Egypt or the number of Egyptian Christians then, Bagnall adopts Rodney Stark’s “guesstimates” of the number of Christians in the early centuries. This leads Bagnall to propose that Christians comprised as much as 1 percent of the Egyptian population only by “the late 220s” (19). So, he reasons, Christian manuscripts from the second century should comprise no more than 1 percent of the total extant, or about one or two manuscripts. Consequently, he concludes, the widely accepted view that we have as many as eight second-century Christian manuscripts must be wrong.

I share Bagnall’s high regard for Turner and am also reluctant to base much on any dating of manuscript that conflicts with Turner’s judgments. But I am less swayed by Bagnall’s attempt to mount his argument from probability. It all seems to me too much guesswork to form the basis of anything compelling.

Contending also that there is “little evidence of private lay ownership of biblical books at any early date” (21) and that there is “no reason to suppose that Christians were disproportionately more likely than other people to own books” (23), Bagnall urges that “the natural sense of palaeographical comparisons can be followed without an unreasonable zeal for finding origins” (24). Later in the book, as another reason why there should be very few copies of Christian writings in the earliest centuries, Bagnall notes that “Christian books had no role in the traditional Greek educational system” (50).

I find his claims a bit puzzling, however. For example, as to evidence of private copies of Christian texts, it is commonly thought that the copies of Christian writings (including
some biblical writings) on reused rolls (“opisthographs,” e.g., the third-century copy of the Gospel of John known as P22) likely represent inexpensive copies made for personal usage. Also, given Bagnall’s recognition of “Christianity’s inheritance from Judaism of a writing-centered culture” (2), and given that certain texts were treated as scripture and came to have a special place in early Christian worship and devotional life, do we not have reason to think that Christians may in fact have been somewhat more inclined than the general population to value, own, and use their writings? Granted, Christian texts were not copied for use in schools; nevertheless, Christians may well have had their own reasons for being involved in, and committed to, copying texts. So they may have produced copies of their texts disproportionate to the number of Christians in the general population. In any case, it is curious that Bagnall makes no reference to Kim Haines-Eitzen, Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature (Oxford University Press, 2000), who argued that there was frequent private copying of Christian texts in the early centuries.

Chapter 2, “Two Case Studies,” is perhaps the most instructive and also the most vigorously written. Bagnall gives a critical analysis of Carsten Thiede’s dubiously early dating of the Magdalen fragment of the Gospel of Matthew, which Bagnall terms “a somewhat horrifying object lesson” (26). He rightly judges Thiede’s use of comparative paleographical data sloppy and tendentious. Bagnall rather colorfully characterizes Thiede’s use of the Herculaneum papyri as “all just a drive-by shooting” (31). He describes Thiede’s argument in his 1995 article in Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik as “a kind of burlesque of a normal scholarly presentation” and Thiede’s 1995 book as “a parody of a work of academic popularization” (48). As a contrasting example of careful scholarship, Bagnall discusses appreciatively the analysis of fragments of Shepherd of Hermas by Nikolaos Gonis published in volume 69 of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri.

Chapter 3, “The Economics of Book Production,” is a very demanding discussion of how much it may have cost to produce copies of texts in the second and third centuries. Personally, I found the flurry of various figures and various monetary measures a bit difficult to follow at some points. In any case, again, Bagnall takes no serious account of the private copying of texts and seems to base his analysis solely on costs involved in professional copying. He is likely correct, however, that there were more Christians in the third century, and more of them with sufficient means to afford paying for copies of texts, than in the second century and that this is probably reflected in the comparatively greater number of copies of Christian texts datable to the third century.

In the final chapter, Bagnall engages questions about the well-known Christian preference for the codex. His particular concern is what contribution Christianity may have made to the wider preference for the codex evident in the fourth century and increasingly
thereafter. Bagnall seeks to correct what he regards as misleading claims that Christians preferred the codex "to a degree not true of non-Christians in the first four centuries of our era" and that there was "a distinctive association between Christianity and the codex" (71). He presents tables showing that the majority of codices in these centuries are non-Christian. To be sure, these and other data rather clearly show that the codex was used in some limited measure prior to and apart from Christian usage, but this is not really the key matter.

As Bagnall cites my 2006 *Artifacts* book as the most recent example of what he then calls "partly misleading" statements of matters (71), however, I hope that I am allowed to correct the misleading impression given by Bagnall here. Neither on the pages cited by Bagnall (5–6) nor anywhere else in my book do I suggest that the eventual triumph of the codex was due to Christianity (although others have made the suggestion). Instead, I simply indicate two indisputable facts: (1) that Christians of the second and third centuries preferred the codex over the roll to a remarkable degree over the general book-culture of the time, and (2) that this preference was especially strong in making their copies of those texts that they treated as scripture. There can be nothing misleading about these two statements, as the data are entirely clear. Moreover, Bagnall himself reaches and underscores these two points in this chapter.

As to origins of the codex, Bagnall expresses an interest in Kurt Treu’s hypothesis that Christians inherited use of the codex from Jewish scribal tradition. Although deceased, Treu’s stature in papyrology remains high and for good reason, as his contributions were many. But Treu’s particular proposals that both the codex and the scribal practice known as the *nomina sacra* derived from Jewish practices suffer the serious inconvenience of having no solid evidence to support them. Specifically, no undoubtedly pre-Christian Jewish manuscript of a literary text exhibits either *nomina sacra* or the codex form.

In any case, whatever the prior usage of the codex among non-Christians, there is no precedent (or ready/agreed explanation) for the demonstrable and striking Christian *preference* for the codex in the second and third centuries. At the very least, Christians seem to have been ahead of the curve in what became later the preferred book form. To be sure, as Bagnall emphasizes, in the early centuries the majority of extant codices are non-Christian, but the more crucial data are these: (1) codices form a tiny percentage of the total number of non-Christian manuscripts of the second and third centuries, whereas the overwhelming majority of Christian manuscripts of this time are codices; and (2) Christian codices form a massively disproportionate percentage of the total number of codices in these early centuries: for example, per the table given by Bagnall (73), 29 percent of second-century codices are Christian, whereas Christian manuscripts make up circa 2 percent of extant second-century manuscripts overall. (For a fuller treatment of
the matter, and presentation of data, see my *Artifacts*, 43–93.) So, in the end, Bagnall does not really offer any new light on Christian preference for the codex and seems more concerned to challenge the view that Christian preference may have contributed to the wider adoption of the codex evident in the fourth century and later. He may have a point on this latter question, and it will be interesting to see how the debate progresses hereafter.

In sum, this slender volume essentially comprises a case for dating the spread of Christianity in Egypt in the third century (rather than the second) and for preferring slightly later dating of most if not all of the Christian manuscripts often taken as from the second century. It is a readable and sometimes lively discussion and should certainly receive the attention of anyone interested early Christian manuscripts.