Michel Roberge’s volume in Brill’s Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies series, *The Paraphrase of Shem (NH VII, 1): Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, is a translation of Roberge’s French edition of the Paraphrase of Shem published in 2000. The English version of the book includes the most essential elements one needs from a critical edition of a Nag Hammadi text: an English translation, commentary, an introduction that discusses the text’s genre and the relationship of its contents to other ancient works and systems of thought, and bibliography and indexes that facilitate the relating of the Paraphrase of Shem to other texts and the pinpointing of passages where intersections and relationships have already been observed. The English edition apparently removes some elements that were present in the French original, such as the Coptic text and the Coptic and Greek indexes, while adding additional notes.

The Paraphrase of Shem is a highly distinctive and original work, one that has often seemed impenetrably difficult. As a result, it has rarely received the attention it merits. As far as its genre is concerned, the Paraphrase of Shem is an apocalypse (albeit with a paraphrase incorporated into it). It reflects and presents a unique system of thought that foreshadows Manichaeism in certain important respects. Other influences and conversation partners can also be identified confidently, such as Valentinianism and the
Chaldean Oracles. But it is important, Roberge emphasizes, not only to compare individual details that may be shared in common—such as terminology, metaphors, or doctrines—but to compare and contrast entire systems of thought and the way details that may be common to two systems are configured within each (87). Roberge’s book offers precisely this with respect to the Paraphrase of Shem and other ancient works, sometimes presenting the key similarities and differences in chart form (88 and in the appendix on 159). Helpful outlines make it easier for readers to trace the flow of thought in the work. The Paraphrase of Shem offers a relatively coherent account of origins involving three eternal powers: Darkness, Light, and Spirit as an intermediate entity between them. While Hippolytus mentioned several groups and individuals with a system of thought of this sort, Roberge regards the Sethians as those whose viewpoint, as described by Hippolytus and others, most closely resembles the system found in the Paraphrase of Shem (33), although in its precise details and configuration the Paraphrase of Shem remains distinct from them in certain key respects.

Based on the contracts that were used in creating the binding for the codex of which the Paraphrase of Shem was a part, the copy found at Nag Hammadi can be dated to the middle of the fourth century (2). Among the distinctive emphases of the work is its strongly antibaptismal polemic. Roberge speculates that the target of such polemic may have been Elchasites at the time of its composition (95, 136). Given the importance of baptism in Mandaism, it is unfortunate that the Mandaeans are not included in the book’s indexes.

Roberge regards the Paraphrase of Shem as reflecting a form of Christian gnosis. Although there is no explicit mention of Jesus, Roberge is not the first to understand the reference to Soldas, a demon who baptizes, as having Jesus in view. While some scholars have argued for an identification of Soldas with John the Baptist, Roberge is among those who understand him to be the bodily Jesus, distinct from the spiritual savior figure Derdekeas, who is also the revealer who addresses Shem over the course of the work. The interpretative crux with respect to this matter is the passage 39.24b–40.3. Roberge renders the passage as follows, with the words in parentheses added to clarify the meaning (122):

That is why I appeared, being without deficiency: because the clouds are not equal (and) in order that the wickedness of Nature might be brought to completion. For (Nature) wished at that time to seize me. She will (in fact) affix Soldas (to the cross) who is the dark flame, who will stand on the height, (nailed) to the wood of error, that it might seize me. She took care of her faith, being vain.

It will be clear that there is significant ambiguity about whether Jesus and his crucifixion are genuinely in view here. Among the major interpretative considerations relevant to
drawing a conclusion are the parallel ideas found in the Paraphrase of Seth and the understanding of the Greek term pēsein, which Roberge renders as “affix.” Since the Coptic text is not provided, those seeking to evaluate the translation and interpretation offered by Roberge are forced to turn elsewhere for some of the resources needed in order to do so.

Whatever one makes of this single ambiguous passage, the work as a whole cannot be said to have any explicit Christian elements, although there certainly are ideas and phrases that resemble those found in Christian sources. One example is 36.2–15, which depicts the Savior as the revealer who endures the wrath of the world and triumphs, adding, “Not one of them knew me” (120). The reader familiar with early Christian literature will inevitably wonder about connections to Johannine thought and tradition.

Roberge inserts section headings into the translation that clarify instances when certain characters and events from biblical narratives are in view, which it might otherwise be possible to miss, the figure of Abraham in the work’s treatment of the people of Sodom being a case in point. As one might expect, typical gnostic reversals of details in Genesis are to be found, so that Abraham is characterized as a demon, whereas the Sodomites are those who “will rest with a pure conscience”—even though Sodom will “be burnt unjustly by perverse Nature” (117). For precisely these reasons, it is said to be important that Shem reveal his teachings to them.

The text as a whole focuses much of its attention on the interaction of the primordial powers. These interactions, which produce the various spiritual and material entities believed to inhabit the cosmos, are described in imagery that, even at its most euphemistic, is overtly sexual. The soteriological focus of the work becomes clear when Derdekeas explains the origin of humanity in general and of Shem and his race in particular, describing the opposition of Nature to the plan of salvation and providing crucial knowledge about the powers that stand opposed to the race of Shem.

On the whole, the English translation does an impressive job of walking the fine line between rendering the text faithfully with all its difficulties and ambiguities and clarifying the meaning wherever possible so as to facilitate comprehension. The commentary is surprisingly sparse (less than ten full pages), but this is compensated for to some extent by the substantial discussion of key passages offered in the introduction. Extended discussion of some of the more important matters of translation and interpretation would have made the volume all the more valuable, as would the inclusion of the Coptic text. Yet even if it is possible to identify shortcomings or wish that other things had been included in the volume, these points do not ultimately change the fact that this is an extremely important book, one that promises to bring about renewed and increased interest in a text
that has often seemed at best confusing and at worst incomprehensible and suffered from scholarly neglect as a result. As a result of Roberge’s book being published in this English edition, English-speaking scholars who work on a range of subjects, including not only Nag Hammadi texts and Gnosticism but also early Christianity in general, Mandaeism, and Manichaeism, will benefit from improved access to this fascinating ancient work.