Palmyra (ancient Tadmor) is undoubtedly one of the most glamorous of Graeco-Roman cities in the Near East and probably the most visited of all historical sites in the modern Republic of Syria. It has long been recognised as a major centre of Semitic religious cults which flourished particularly when the city was politically within the orbis Romanus. Its semi-independent political status and its retention of Aramaic as a major day-to-day language of commerce and administration certainly helped to guarantee the continuation of its Semitic cultural traditions and religious life. The fact that the city is host to over a dozen major temples and shrines, of which the massive Temple of Bel is one of the best reconstructed religious buildings in Syria, and the fact that scholars have found and located over 2,000 inscriptions (many bilingual, some even trilingual) as well as thousands of reliefs of religious significance have all made the religious life of the city an obvious focus of scholarly activity. Intrepid English gentlemen scholars like Robert Wood (1717–1771) and James Dawkins (1722–1757) had first brought the importance of the site to the notice of scholars worldwide (including that of Edward Gibbon) through their bestselling work (The Ruins of Palmyra, otherwise Tadmor, in the Desert, London, 1753). However, the serious study of the history of Palmyra has long been dominated by scholars based on the European continent, especially those from France—a nation which had control of Syria in the decades between the two World Wars when excavation by European nations could be conducted on a grand scale. With the coming of the Cold War and with Syria being allied to the Soviet Bloc, Polish scholars, especially those working under the leadership of Michal Kazimierz Michałowski and now Michal Gawlikowski have made major contributions alongside leading Syrian scholars such as Adnan Bounni and Khaled al-As‘ad. The study of the religions of Palmyra as distinct from its general history of archaeology, however, has attracted scholars from other European countries such as Harald Ingholt (Denmark and the USA), Javier Teixidor (Spain) and Han Drijvers (the Netherlands). The monograph of Teixidor (The Pantheon of Palmyra, Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain t. 79, [Leiden, 1979]) and the photographic album with scholarly introduction by Drijvers (The Religion of Palmyra, Iconography of Religions, [Leiden, 1976]) have been the twin pillars of the study of the religious for Anglophone scholars. In more recent years a younger generation of scholars
specialising in the cultural and religious history of the Roman Near East have emerged from the Netherlands who are well versed in both classical and Semitic languages. The monograph of K. Dijkstra (Life and Loyalty: A Study in the Socio-Religious Interaction in Roman Syria, [Leiden, 1995]) though focusing mainly on a narrow range of inscriptions is a major contribution to our knowledge of the religious life of Palmyra, Hatra, Petra and Dura Europos. The substantial work of L. Dirven (The Palmyrenes of Dura Europos, A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 138, [Leiden, 1999]) gives an in-depth study of the cultural and religious links between Palmyra and Dura Europos in the Roman Empire. Though the book under review is developed out of a doctoral thesis completed in Oxford under the guidance of Professor Fergus Millar, the author Ted Kaizer had previously studied under Dirven for his Master’s degree in the Netherlands and his work shows the same thorough grounding and complete familiarity with the source material which characterise the works of the three more senior Netherlandic scholars. For the specialists on the religious history of Palmyra two substantial works in French by distinguished Semitic scholars Le Comte Robert du Mesnil du Boisson (Les tessères et les monnaies de Palmyre, 2 vols., [Paris, 1962]) and Michal Galwikowski (‘Les dieux de Palmyre’ in H. Temporini and W. Haase (eds.), Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II, Pt. 18/4, [Berlin, 1990] pp. 2605–2658) also deserve consultation but for the purpose of this review the works to which the contribution of Kaizer will be closely compared will be those of Teixidor, Drijvers and Dirven because they are the works most likely to be consulted by readers of Kaizer. 

As with the work of Teixidor, the study of religious inscriptions of Palmyra forms the core of Kaizer’s work. He gives the full text and translation (mainly his own) of some seventy Greek and Palmyrene Aramaic inscriptions – into English, many of them for the first time. He has provided every major epigraphical text cited with a critical commentary. This is very helpful to fellow researchers and not just a show of pedantry as the number of epigraphical and linguistic problems surrounding these texts are considerable and his commentary is an essential accompaniment to his reconstruction and translation. Wherever possible he has given references of the inscriptions to Palmyrene Aramaic Texts (PAT) compiled by D. Hillers and E. Cussini (Baltimore, 1996) to avoid the tedium of listing duplicate publications. However this seemingly standard work of Hillers and Cussini contains a disconcerting number of typographical (esp. in the Greek parallel texts) and dating errors (cf. D. Taylor, ‘An annotated index of dated Palmyrene Aramaic texts’ Journal of Semitic Studies 46/2, 2001, pp. 203–219) and sole reference to it makes difficulties for comparison with earlier works which give references to standard collections like Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum, Pars secunda. Tomus III: Inscriptiones palmyrenae, eds. Jean-Baptiste Chabot et al. (Paris, 1926) and the Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre 12 fascicles to date (Beirut and Damascus, 1930–75). Reliance on the work of Hillers and Cussini may explain an otherwise inexplicable typographical error on p. 60 (PAT 0197, 1.9) where ϕ[ηϕισ]μασι has been printed (like PAT, p. 49) for ψ[ηϕισ]μασι (correctly spelt in Teixidor and in earlier publications). Nevertheless, Kaizer’s handling of the epigraphical material is masterly and many of his improved readings are definitely worthy of consultation by seasoned Semitic epigraphists.

The book which is developed from an Oxford thesis takes nothing for granted and this is particularly clear in the introductory chapters. Kaizer convincingly argues against the popular
evolutionary theory of the city growing out of a federation of four major and many more minor nomadic Arab tribes. He rightly points out that all the epigraphical evidence to “the four tribes” comes from a very brief period of Palmyrene history and the term is more likely to be a reflection of Roman administrative convenience than of the tribal division of the city (pp. 60–66 with texts and translations of all the relevant inscriptions).

This argumentative vein is followed in the second main part of the work, which examines the evidence and the state of research on the major cultic sites in Palmyra beginning inevitably with the great Temple of Bel – the most dominant religious building of the extant archaeological remains of the ancient city. The monumental two volume work of Henri Seyrig, Robert Amy and Eduard Will (Le temple de Bel à Palmyre. Texte et planches, Paris, Planches 1968, Texte 1975) though it appeared two decades after the end of the Second World War still reflects primarily the work done on the cella of the temple while Syria was under the French Mandate. Kaizer (pp. 67–68) and Dirven (p. 71) are the first two scholars writing in English to have benefited from the important discovery made by the late Pietrzykowski of the Polish excavation team on the curious pattern of drains under the cella. This denies the often held theory that the enclosed cella is a special development of the cult as the south adytum (dedicated to Astarte) appears to have been added simply to make the building more grand. As with Teixidor, Kaizer gives the text and translation of the important inscription (PAT 1347) which records the erection of a statue to Lishmash who dedicated the temple to Bel, Yarhibol and Aglibol on the sixth day of Nisan, the year 343 (6 April, AD 32). Unlike Teixidor, however, Kaizer is much more wary of seeing these three Semitic deities as a perpetual triad or pagan Trinity and like Dirven (pp. 45–47) Kaizer is keen to point out that many other gods had shrines dedicated to them within the naos of the Temple of Bel (pp. 76–79). As for earlier attempts to link the worship of Bel at Palmyra with that of Marduk-Bel at Babylon through the Akitu festival which takes place in the month of Nisan, Kaizer is justifiably cautious (pp. 203–211) and also offers alternative interpretations to the relief depicting what appears to other scholars as the victory of Marduk-Bel over Tiamat and the absence of kingship in Palmyra means that the Babylonian cult would not have the same socio-political basis. The change of the deity’s name from “Bol” (well attested in names like Yarhibol and Aglabil) to “Bel” is clearly significant but whether this implies that the cult of Bol-Bel at Palmyra shares common features with the worship of Bel elsewhere, as “pan-semiticists” like Teixidor would have us believe, is certainly an important new line of investigation.

The size and scale of the temple of Bel and its religious architecture is barely touched on by Kaizer but scholars could turn to the works of Drijvers and Seyrig and the excellent summary by Peter Richardson – a professional architect as well as a Professor of Christian Origins–(City and Sanctuary, Religion and Architecture in the Roman Near East, [London, 2002], pp. 36–39). However, the predominantly epigraphical treatment given to the Temple of Baalshamin – the second best known religious site in the city—strikes the present reviewer as very limiting. The site of the temple of Baalshamin has been the subject of extensive excavation by a Swiss team and its multi-volume report is still not complete. Of the six projected volumes in the series La sanctuaire de Baalshamin à Palmyre, Vols. 1–3, 5 and 6 (1969–1975) have so far appeared. Unlike the Temple of Bel which had the Grand Colonnade as its processional way, the manner in which the street pattern of the city failed to give emphasis to this second
most important temple is interesting and the construction of the cella or naos (circa AD 130) necessitated the destruction of a dining room. The unusual arrangement of the two courtyards with surrounding colonnades, complicated even more by a central courtyard in front of the naos, is a reflection of the complex historical development of the temple. The baroque central exedra which reminds one of Roman architectural designs attested in Pompeii and Corinthian column capitals simplified in a distinctly Romano-Egyptian manner points to a high degree of social and religious inculturation. Kaizer's approach to this complex religious site, however, continues to be epigraphical, updating only our knowledge of the Roman adyton by reference to the work of Gawlikowski and Pietrzykowski. In describing the temple court, Kaizer's attention is quickly focused on the dedicatory inscription of Yarhai of the tribe of Ma'ziyan who paid for the portico, its columns, its architrave (or entablature) and its roofing (p. 81). How this donation is related architecturally to our reconstruction of the temple is not explained. True, the inscriptions that Kaizer reproduces in the chapter are helpful for the dating of particular architectural features of this complex site and for explaining the social origins of the donors and of the mythical relationship of Baalshamin to other deities (esp. to Durahlun) but they are not the best sources to illustrate the nature of the cult nor do they help us to understand the evolution of this complex site. The Cannanite deity Baalshamin (Lord of Heaven) is one of the most commonly worshipped Semitic deities in the Roman Near East and comparative study with other important sites of the cult such as that at Sia in the Jebel al-Arab, from whence the famous statue of the god now in the Louvre originated, is clearly needed.

Major excavation of the site of the temples of the Babylonian god Nebu and of the Arab goddess Allat had been carried out in the mid-1970s and the results were published mainly after the publication of the works of Teixidor and Drijvers. The sections of Kaizer's book devoted to these two deities have certainly benefited from the new data. Almost all scholars mention the unfortunate amputation of the temenos of the temple of Nebu by the construction of the Grand Colonnade. The donors of the temple would certainly not have been too pleased by such an act of official vandalism but Kaizer rightly points out that the site of the temple of Nebu had become a centre of a number of cults and the new religious topography in fact helped link it more directly to the great Bel Temple. There is also iconographical evidence of links between Bel and Nebu including the much cited scene on one of the lintels from the cella of the temple of Bel depicting what appears to be Tiamat by Marduk-Bel which might have featured Nebu in a prominent role. Kaizer made excellent use of either unpublished inscriptions or those which are still little known to non-specialists (esp. the then unpublished important inscription on p. 92 but see now A. Bounni, Le sanctuaire de Nabû à Palmyre, IFAP, Bibliothèque archéologique et historique, T. 131, Vol. 1, Texte, [Beirut, 2004] p. 56, see also pp. 57–58) in his discussion on the donor family links between the temple of Nebu and of the temple of Bel. Kaizer also made good use of a then unpublished inscription (B 17/64) which shows other Babylonian deities such as Herta, Nanai and Reshef of AD 99 in which the names of the first two were rendered as Hera and Artemis in the Greek version (p. 96). This text which is now published (Bounni, op.cit., pp. 61–62) is worth noting as the honorand enjoyed the privilege of isopolitiea accorded to select citizens in that he was a citizen of both Palmyra and Antioch and his bilingual honorific inscription attests to his bi-cultural political aspirations. As for the temple of Allat, two very
important inscriptions were published by the late Professor Drijvers (‘Greek and Aramaic in Palmyrene Inscriptions’ in M. J. Geller, J. C. Greenfield and M. P. Weitzman (eds.) Studia Aramaica, Journal of Semitic Studies Suppl. 4 (Oxford, 1995): pp. 34–38 and ‘Inscriptions from Allât’s sanctuary’, Aram Periodical 7 (1995) 111, both texts not in PAT) are presented in full and discussed by Kaizer but not in the section devoted to Allat (pp. 99–108) whose Athena-like statue which adorns the museum at Tadmor (p. 106) was discovered after the publication of the works by Teixidor and Drijvers. The first of the pair which is in Aramaic only (cf. Kaizer, pp. 248–249) shows that the dedicant’s devotion to Allat was not exclusive as he also made donations to other temples. The second (cf. Kaizer, pp. 62–63) is a bilingual inscription (Greek and Palmyrene) of exceptional interest in that it celebrates the achievements of a caravan leader who rescued the caravans which came down from Vologesias from a named bandit. The Greek version is composed in a much more sophisticated literary style than is normally encountered in Palmyrene inscriptions and is worthy of attention by scholars of Roman history. The Greek version which was very likely to have been the original also appears to have influenced the style and vocabulary of the Aramaic.

A novel and exemplary aspect of the book is Kaizer’s bold and imaginative attempt to reconstruct the “Rhythm of Religious Life” of the city (pp. 165–211). The reader is warned on p. 165 that “About the ‘beliefs’ of the Palmyrenes we know nothing. There are no liturgical texts, no prayers, and no written myths handed down”. Kaizer then proceeds to show that there is however enough evidence, especially from inscriptions (mainly dedicatory or funerary), to give a broad outline of “what happened in the temples” such as sacrificial acts and cultic activities. Though the evidence explored in this part of the book remains predominantly epigraphic, excellent use is made of literary sources for instance Lucian and Porphyry. Though more comparative material could have been drawn from Petra and Hatra, Kaizer’s treatment is as thorough as the sources could yield the relevant information. Kaizer collects together conveniently all the published epigraphical texts on cultic regulations. Included is the only known English translation of an important Palmyrene inscription regulating the symposia for Bel and Bolastor (PAT 0991). However, Kaizer’s comment on the text is all too short (pp. 168–169) for such a long and interesting albeit fragmentary text. Equally significant are the three inscriptions from the foundations of the Hellenistic Temple of Bel as these were among the oldest epigraphical evidence to have been unearthed and careful study of them could yield further insight into the Hellenistic settlement at Tadmor, the importance of which many modern historians tend to belittle. He also draws interesting inferences on sacrificial acts from an unpublished sarcophagus (pp. 179–180 and Plate IV) but equally important information from better known reliefs and from religious architecture are otherwise made secondary to the analysis of epigraphical material. For this the student will need to turn to the earlier works of Teixidor and Drijvers. Kaizer also warns the reader against ready reliance on interpretatio Babylonica, especially on the Akitu Festival which most scholars regard as a Babylonian festival linking the Bel of Palmyra with Bel-Marduk in Babylonia (pp. 203–209). While it is important to stress the cultual independence of Palmyra in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the city continued to have good trading and cultural relations with the city of Babylon (see e.g. PAT 1352, lines 3–4: tlgry ‘kluwh dy bmdynt |bbl ‘all the merchants who were in the city of Babylon’) and a host of other Babylonian deities like Nanai and Herta were honoured in Palmyra. This major section of the book certainly
fils a substantial gap in the works of earlier scholars and is essential for students who do not have the requisite language skills to consult the relevant section of the monograph-article by Gawlikowski (op.cit., pp. 2647–2653).

Though the focus of the book is on Semitic and pagan cults in Palmyra under the High Empire, the presence of a Jewish community throughout this period deserves more than just a long footnote (p. 108, note 226) as the author himself realises that there were important parallels, especially in the institution of hereditary priesthood (p. 240), between Judaism and Palmyrene Semitic cults. Moreover, the amount of epigraphical material on the Jewish presence in this period is quite extensive and these have now been conveniently collected together in D. Noy and H. Bloedhorn (eds), Inscriptiose Judaicae Orientis III, Syria and Cyprus (Tübingen, 2004) pp. 69–80 and pp. 227–232. While it is arguable whether Zenobia gave support to Manichaeanism or to Paul of Samosata, it is worthwhile mentioning that Palmyra became heavily Christianised in the Early Byzantine period and was host to a number of major churches which included among them the converted cellae of the temples of Bel and of Belshamin, as well as one recently discovered by archaeologists in the residential areas of the city. Cf. M. Gawlikowski, ‘Eine neuentdeckte frühchristliche Kirche in Palmyra’ in M. Ruprechtsberger (ed.), Syrien – Von den Aposteln zu den Kalifen (Linz, 1993) pp. 150–157.

Kaizer’s monograph is a major front-line contribution to the study of the sources on the religions of Palmyra. His industry, his mastery of those sources, especially of the important epigraphical material, his precise and cautious scholarship and his sound judgement all contribute to make this well-focused book a milestone in the study of the religious life of this fascinating city.

A few points for discussion and (possibly) for correction. Page 60, inscription (PAT 0197) line 1: for βωλιαδος read Βωλιαδος. Page 134: the use of the Greek term δεξιωσις as a modern terminus technicus for the offering of the right hand by two Semitic gods seems inappropriate and most non-experts will not understand the significance of word without translation. Page 152, line 14 (PAT 0259): for rb ‘syr’ read rb ‘syr’; this is particularly important for the possible derivation of the word suggested by Kaizer which follows. Page 163, inscription (PAT 0269) line 8: for ευνοι ιας read ευνοι ιας. While it is not abnormal to give the text of Latin inscriptions entirely in the Upper Case (e.g. p. 187); it is entirely odd to present literary texts in Latin in the same manner (p. 154, note 450) and needs some editorial justification. Otherwise Greek inscriptions which were normally inscribed entirely in the Upper Case will have to be presented likewise. Page 164: Kaizer suggests adding Θαιμει τοι (cf. Palmyrene 1. 2: br tymy). Since the first line of this now severely damaged inscription (PAT 0269) being on a moulding, is somewhat longer than the remaining lines there is certainly room for such an addition and perhaps even for Φαισαηλου τοι (cf. Palmyrene 1. 1: br psy ‘[l]). On the physical aspects of this inscription see the editio princeps in W. K. Prentice, Greek and Latin inscriptions, Part III of the Publications of an American Archaeological Expedition to Syria 1899–1900 (New York, 1908) p. 278. Page 254, inscription (PAT 0273) line 4: Kaizer follows the suggestion of Garbini in restoring ω ‘m[m] mh[m]n’ ‘consecrated lambs’. While ingenious, this is not supported by the Greek version and will require abandonment of the traditional reading and restoration of ω ‘q[m] at the end of line 3 adopted by other editors.