will not submit manuscripts to radiocarbon dating, whether because of non-destruction policies (small bits of material would be lost) or for fear of finding that the manuscript in question was not as early or as valuable as previously surmised.

In all, Nongbri calls for far greater care in the evaluation of early Christian manuscripts and far greater restraint in the claims made about them and on the basis of them. His detailed stocktaking of manuscript discoveries, of the many problems attendant on them, and of the numerous resulting uncertainties provides ample reason for the more scrupulous approach to these materials that he recommends.

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Writing the History of Early Christianity: From Reception to Retrospection. By **Markus Vinzent**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. vi + 485 pp. $107.23 hardcover.

In this volume, Markus Vinzent (Chair for the History of Theology at King's College London), treats the reader to a radical approach to the writing—and reading—of early Christian history. The thesis of the work is that, rather than approaching the writing of the history of Christianity either chronologically or "anachronologically," a more helpful approach that fills the gaps that always present church historians with many problems is to write and read the history *retrospectively* (3). This is approaching history from the present and reading it back to the past, an approach that the author admits is "radicalised" (3). However, for a full treatment of retrospection, Vinzent urges his readers to wait for his forthcoming work entitled *Retrospektion* (4n27).

As the argument progresses, Vinzent's first chapter, entitled "Methodological Introduction," proposes that writing history retrospectively is helpful because, instead of creating a narrative, it "seeks to lay out the *status quaestionis* first, not to answer it, but to delineate the external and internal determining factors of the given status" (30). As such, his approach, instead of finding "primary sources," focuses on "constructions, editions, manuscripts," a focus he sees reminiscent of the movie *Titanic*, involving both flashbacks and flashforwards (30). In so doing, Vinzent argues that his approach serves as an invitation, based on the optimism of "New Historicism," to his readers to read with him "more broadly than we have been doing and to resist being dominated by a set of texts and evidence that are themselves the result of earlier historiographic agendas, driven by precisely the form of retrospective apologetic, hagiographic, institutionalised and institutionalising sets of writings" (47). However, what is new in Vinzent's proposal in the writing of church history is not retrospection per se. Rather, it is a retrospection that, instead of creating narratives, aims at peeling the layers of construction that have produced the texts as we have them today.

Methodologically, the thesis is supported through analysis of four "individuals, some of whom may not even have labelled themselves 'Christian'" (60): "Abercius," Hippolytus of Rome, Aristides of Athens, and Ignatius of Antioch. All of these are household names in patristics. These case studies can be multiplied using Vinzent's criteria for selection and make the same point.

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After his long chapter on method (5–76)—a chapter that he suggests can be skipped by “those who are less interested in methodology” (4)—Vinzent introduces the reader to “Abercius.” Drawing on the two tomb fragments in the Musio Pio Cristiano in the Vatican as well as the fragment *The Life of Abercius*, Vinzent argues that, rather than “sources” capable of giving us the true picture of the life of a certain second century “Abercius,” these are actually constructions that have taken place over time for various reasons. Through a detailed analysis of the various witnesses of the document as well as scholars’ careful interaction with it in the past, Vinzent concludes that the *Vita Abercii* is a document that has undergone various layers of reconstruction over the years for various theological and sociopolitical reasons (149–153).

The second case study is that of Hippolytus, the “bishop of Rome.” Through the same careful analysis of the inscription on the statue of Hippolytus in Rome, as well as attention to the works purported to have been written by the bishop, Vinzent concludes, again, that what we find on the statue is a multilayered construct of several Hippolyti of split personalities—“the exegete, theologian and computists, and an anonymous fourth/fifth century pseudonymous” (190).

This is followed by the third case, that of Aristides of Athens, in chapter 4. As Vinzent’s imaginary journey moves from Rome to Athens, he sets the stage by noting that “the person whose door we will knock here is an Athenian philosopher from the second century who called himself by the Greek name Aristides, but also carried a Latin cognomen, Marcianus” (197). Again, Vinzent utilizes the same method of careful retrospective analysis on reception, giving special attention to what is commonly known as Aristides’ *Apology*. Vinzent argues that, rather than using the *Apology* to gain insight into second-century Christianity (he argues for a *cautious* usage here), we should define and reflect on “the stages at which the *Apology* was appropriated to serve purposes such as the re-orientation of the Buddhist-Manichean-Christian conversion of the *Balavariani*” (258), because this was clearly the case. Of course, Vinzent argues that there was an original version of the *Apology* upon which all these constructed layers are based.

The final case Vinzent takes up is that of Ignatius of Antioch, described by Theodor Zahn as a “most curious example of personalities” of his time (266). This is the longest chapter in the book, occupying a whopping 198 pages! This may be because of the centrality of Ignatius in the early church as well as because of the number and nature of letters he is purported to have written. As he addresses questions pertaining to the number and nature of the letters, Vinzent analyzes the three recensions of these letters: the short, the middle, and the long recensions. He argues that, instead of bowing to the now almost universally accepted theory that the middle recension is the authentic one (a theory pressed by J. B. Lightfoot and Theodor Zahn), scholars should evaluate each recension on its own merit, accounting for its origin and reception. This is only possible if we, retrospectively, “cut through the layers of historical uses of a legacy” (408).

Vinzent concludes the work with a short preface emphasizing the value of retrospection in history-writing. It is worth reiterating this strange configuration: the preface is at the end!

One of the most significant contributions of this work is to show the importance of reading history retrospectively. Doing so helps history writers and readers avoid the pitfalls associated with other predominant approaches: the narrative approach (which tends to be handicapped in dealing with the constructional gaps sometimes evident in the witnesses) and other newer approaches, which produce uncontrolled

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reconstruction of history. While there have been some earlier attempts at reading history retrospectively, Vinzent's work is perhaps the first major breakthrough in reading history this way. In so doing, he has given especially historians of the early church an approach that has the potential to upend hundreds of years' worth of patristic scholarship—perhaps even a millennium! Despite its sometimes-pedantic style—evidenced by unnecessarily long sentences—the work is a worthy read. I highly recommend it, especially to historiographers of the early church.

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Christian Reading: Language, Ethics, and the Order of Things. By **Blossom Stefaniw**. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. x + 249 pp. $95.00 hardcover.

Christian Reading: Language, Ethics, and the Order of Things is an ambitious title for a book about the Tura Papyri—an understudied collection of nearly two thousand papyrus pages found in Tura in 1941, dispersed into antiquities markets, mostly re-collected in the 1950s, and edited over the course of twenty years, starting in the 1960s. Twenty additional pages turned up in 1982, and there may well be more still adrift. The papyri dates to the sixth century and includes works by Origen and—most important for this study—lessons on the Psalms and Ecclesiastes by Didymus the Blind. Can these lessons tell us everything about Christian reading? Of course not. Frances Young's *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge, 1997) on biblical exegesis remains foundational for explaining Alexandrian and Antiochene reading practices and how they produced Christian culture. Blossom Stefaniw, however, has a different goal, a goal worthy of its title. If Young focused on hermeneutic strategies, Stefaniw examines how reading produced knowledge. What were Christians actually learning when they read? The content of a book, and even the hermeneutics deployed, get at only a fraction of the bodily and intellectual habits acquired through engaging scripture. In order to understand the story of David and Goliath, readers need to know the narrative, but they also need to know, for example, grammar, physics, geography, logic, and how they were related to the characters. Therefore, the larger question becomes: How were biblical texts part of the production of general knowledge?

Stefaniw's first chapter spins a historical-fiction narrative about the Tura document. It opens with a boy who "was just learning to read and write when the blindness came." That boy, Didymus, lived in a world of "darkness," inside of which "there was endless space, which words had shaped into rooms" (6). Didymus's words would eventually be copied and moved from Alexandria to Tura by the Roman aristocrat-turned-ascetic Arsenius. Copies of the lessons would eventually be hidden in a cave—surviving empires, burnt buildings, and wars—where they were found by a team of locals and British forces, written up by Octave Guéraud, organized into bound critical editions, and eventually studied by a Tolkien-loving girl named Blossom who made it as a

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