God's Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts. By **Brent Nongbri**. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. xi + 403 pp. $35.00 cloth, $24.00 paper.

This is a deeply researched, well-written, and highly informative book—a must-read for anyone with an interest in early Christian manuscripts. It will serve as a cold shower for text-critics, papyrologists, paleographers, and codicologists and should be of interest even to historians of early Christian literature. Nongbri provides a critical review and evaluation of the discoveries of early Christian papyri in Egypt from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century. He does so with admirable skill, displaying a close acquaintance with the manuscripts themselves, a remarkable range of bibliographical research, and carefully formed judgments.

The study begins with a discussion of the construction and inscription of the codex as the characteristic form of the early Christian book (chapter 1), a consideration of the difficulty of dating ancient manuscripts by paleography (chapter 2), and an overview of archaeological manuscript finds in Egypt and their various sites (chapter 3). Having laid this groundwork, Nongbri proceeds to discuss specific manuscript finds. In the central chapters, he reviews in careful detail three principal corpora of early Christian manuscripts: the Chester Beatty papyri (chapter 4), the Bodmer papyri (chapter 5), and the Christian papyri from Oxyrhynchus (chapter 6). For each he discusses available information about the discovery, the problem of provenance, the contents of the find, and the papyri themselves. A concluding chapter (chapter 7) comprises a systematic dismantling of recent claims that several papyri (numbers 4, 64, and 67) are the remains of a second-century codex of the four Gospels.

With this study, Nongbri demonstrates how disconcertingly slight and tenuous our knowledge about early Christian manuscripts is. The limitations on our evaluation of them begin with their discovery, which was usually haphazard and poorly documented. Absent the care, control, and correlative data that belong to modern scientific archaeological methods, the provenance and context of the manuscripts are usually very uncertain. The specific sites of the discoveries—whether graves, caves, buildings, trash heaps, or monastic dwellings—are often unknown and sometimes are altogether fabricated. These problems are compounded by the Egyptian antiquities market, in which dealers rarely receive or maintain a find intact and are anxious to separate or combine and to represent materials in ways that will command the highest prices. Dispersals of finds to various holders make it difficult to determine what items originally belonged together. Once available for scholarly evaluation, manuscripts are often subject to mischaracterizations and predispositions toward early dating.

Nongbri provides a sobering assessment of paleographical dating. If paleography is sometimes described as an art rather than a science, it is correspondingly inexact. Hence, if paleography "when practiced in a disciplined manner involving close comparison with securely dated examples of handwriting, can establish a range of possible dates for an undated literary manuscript, it can never be conclusive. Paleographic comparison is by its very nature a subjective undertaking, and oftentimes, especially when early Christian manuscripts are concerned, paleographic dating can devolve into little more than an exercise in wishful thinking" (72). Radiocarbon dating provides harder data but only in ranges of years and probabilities. Also, most institutional holders

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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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