This is the SBL edition of a work earlier published in 2004 by Hendrickson Publishers. The *Early Christian Reader* is a text- and sourcebook for students of early Christian origins who seek to gain historical understanding of the literature of early Christianity in its formative period (first and early second century). Different from the average study Bible or annotated Bible, the *Reader* does not limit itself to the canonical writings nor to the canonical ordering; it intends to describe early Christian literature in its historical development rather than the New Testament per se. Different from the average New Testament introduction, it incorporates the primary texts themselves, so that the reader has immediate access to them. The work has grown from the teaching experience of the editors in teaching introductory courses on Christian origins in different universities. The *Reader* intends to help to learn students from a variety of backgrounds to read early Christian literature from a strictly historical perspective. Bart Ehrman’s *The New Testament. A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (2000; 5th ed., 2012) comes close to it, but that work fails to give students access to the primary texts themselves.

The *Early Christian Reader* is clustered around groups of more or less affiliated writings and organized in a (very) roughly historical order. After a general introduction on earliest Christianity in its historical context (3–19), the *Reader* starts with the oldest preserved
Christian writings, the letters of Paul: 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans (23–147). After a general survey of topics that relate to Pauline literature in general (e.g., the quest for unity and diversity, the nature of ancient letter-writing, the question whether Paul’s thinking may have changed over time, the social context of his preaching, and the search for a “center” of his thinking), the typical introductory matters of each letter are surveyed: setting and purpose, overview and major themes, date and place of composition, value and relation to other early Christian texts, and so on. All sections conclude with select literature references (“For Further Reading”).

The text of the early Christian documents is set in two columns and printed in English (according to NRSV, as far as the New Testament writings are concerned). The texts are provided with occasional notes roughly equivalent with the NRSV apparatus (indicated by letters in superscript) providing information about textual differences (“Other ancient authorities read…”), alternatives translations (“Or…” or comments on the Greek, especially where the NRSV seems to differ from the Greek (“Gk…”)). The text and notes are accompanied by more elaborate annotations on individual verses at the bottom of the page (in small print), first and foremost intended to provide readers with historical and cultural backgrounds and to clarify the meaning of words and concepts. Given the historical approach of the Reader, it comes as no surprise to find few theological comments here.

The section on the letters of Paul is followed by an introduction (following the same format) to the letters attributed to Paul, the pseudepigraphical writings: Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, Titus, 1–2 Timothy (151–208), and letters associated with Peter: 1 Peter, Jude, 2 Peter (211–39). These sections include lucid discussions about authorship, pseudonimity (and its “moral problem,” 153), literary features, and other background matters.

The next section discusses early Christian narrative material, categorized under the headings of “Biography, Anecdote, and History” (243–530) and “Writings Attributed to John” (533–622). The former relates to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, Luke and Acts, and the Gospel of Thomas; the latter (the writings attributed to John) include the Gospel of John, the three Johannine letters (in the traditional order), and the book of Revelation. The translation of Thomas is taken from the Q-Thomas Reader (1990) compiled by John S. Kloppenborg and others. A helpful survey of the Synoptic problem helps the reader to get acquainted with the historical and literary questions surrounding the gospel material.

The final section treats the remaining early Christian writings: James, Didache, Barnabas, Hebrews, 1 Clement, and the seven letters of Ignatius (625–757). The early Christian texts
outside the New Testament are taken from Michael W. Holmes’s revised edition of The Apostolic Fathers (1992); the translation of Barnabas is from Jay C. Treat and R. A. Kraft (2004). Treat wrote the introduction and notes to Barnabas. In this section, the date of James is left undecided (631); Didache may very well “contain material reflecting the primitive period” (646); Barnabas is dated between 70 and 135 (655); Hebrews is dated after 70 and no later than the 80s (675–76); and 1 Clement is situated in the 90s (694).


That a strictly historical approach to the early Christian writings does not necessarily lead to a firm foundation of “assured results” does not surprise, and the editors are acutely aware of it. Historians have to construe the historical setting and, in doing so, are destined to make choices, choices that do not always represent the scholarly consensus of the time. For instance, the Reader’s section on the letters of Paul includes the seven undisputed letters of Paul in the order 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans. Mason and Robinson date 1 Thessalonians in the early 40s (37), 1 Corinthians “no later than the 40s” (45), Galatians (because of its proximity to Romans) “late in Paul’s career” (108), and Romans between 54 and 57 (126). Philippians and Philemon are to be placed somewhere in the middle period of Paul’s career, and the dating of 2 Corinthians is left undecided. Especially the early datings of some writings in the (early) 40s are at least a matter of dispute in current scholarship, and it immediately makes us aware of the tentative nature of the entire enterprise: change one or two of the dates (e.g., Galatians), and the reconstruction of early Christianity needs to be revised accordingly. Of course, this does not mean that a historical approach is a dead-end street (on the contrary!), but the optimism over what it can ultimately achieve must be tempered a bit.

In general, Mason and Robinson take well-balanced, middle-of-the-road positions in matters of dating and authorship. They offer the pros and cons of the various positions (although in a general, summarizing way, appropriate to the introductory nature of the book, not as exhaustive as Donald Guthrie did it in the past). Regardless of the positions taken, all introductory essays incite to further reflection and do not force the reader to accept the proposed solutions.
It would have been helpful, though, to have the dates defended in the Reader added to the table of “Dating the Early Christian Texts” in the appendix (773). It would have revealed the position of the Reader more clearly (esp. their surprisingly early datings in some cases). As far as I can see, the organizing principle of the table is unclear: the list of writings does not concur with Mason and Robinson’s own preferred chronology, nor with any of the other selected authors (W. G. Kümmel, H. Koester, J. A. T. Robinson, J. B. Tyson, D. Guthrie, R. E. Brown), nor with the clusters of writings in the Reader itself. And what about the interrelationship (or not) and the spreading (or not) of the various writings? Surely the list of writings does not constitute a straightforward linear development.

Unfortunately, the Early Christian Reader still carries all the features of the 1990s. On page 10, for instance, the reader is informed that nowadays we possess 5,400 manuscripts, whereas in 2015 we have, in fact, about 300 more. The bibliographical information has not been updated since the first edition (and the choice of titles seems somewhat arbitrary). To compensate, a reference to Mark Goodacre’s NT Gateway website has been added in the preface (http://www.ntgateway.com/tools-and-resources/bibliography). Finally, in the notes on page 322 there is a passing reference to Morton Smith’s “discovery” of a Secret Gospel of Mark, etsi Stephen Carlson non daretur.

Despite these reservations, I think students can and will (continue to) profit from the Early Christian Reader. Intended for a broad (not necessarily religious) audience, it will be helpful for a faith-based readership to experience and appreciate the historical embeddedness of the sources and, hopefully, the advantages of the academic study of the Bible: many of these students pay lip service to the need to study the New Testament in its historical context and even acknowledge the need to work with tools of historical criticism, but when pressed only few of them would be prepared to read the texts from perspectives beyond their faith tradition and break away from narrow theological and dogmatic readings. The Early Christian Reader may be a sympathetic eye opener to many of them and pave the way for sound academic biblical studies.

Perhaps serious students of early Christian beginnings are better served by Bart Ehrman’s historical introduction to the early Christian writings (including helpful instruction materials, an accompanying website, and full-color pictures), even though it has not the advantage of providing the reader immediate access to the texts themselves, but the Early Christian Reader is a valuable alternative.