



St. Francis Virtual House of Studies

Readings In
**THE HISTORY OF
EARLY CHRISTIANITY**



1. Scholarly Literature

Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. New Edition with an Epilogue. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967, 2000.

This is not just a biography. It is an excellent study of Latin Christianity in 4th-century North Africa. An already useful volume was made even better in this new edition. The author added an epilogue that is not a brief note, but a 70 page essay on new evidence and directions in scholarship since the book appeared 33 years earlier.

Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Brown challenges the idea that the cult of the saints was simply a manifestation of superstition among the unsophisticated. He nicely demonstrates the influence of the saints as iconic figures in formal thought and elegant poetry.

Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

This is an excellent study of how a Western perspective on Christianity emerged from the dynamics of political and cultural tension.

Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church. Vol. 1 of the Penguin History of the Church*. 2nd edition. New York: Penguin, 1993

The book is useful for insights, but relatively short on detail. This book is best read after having digested an informative survey so that one is in a position to evaluate the author's assertions.

Christian Origins: Vol. 1 of A People's History of Christianity, Edited by Richard A. Horsley. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.

The original essays synthesize recent research for a popular audience in a way that is respectful of both the scholarship and the reader.

W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984.

This thousand page tome covers the first six centuries of Christianity. The book is thorough and presented seemingly without an ax to grind or a perspective to sell.

Robert M. Grant, ***Early Christianity and Society: Seven Studies***. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

Grant's careful and imaginative research challenges some romantic assumptions about Early Roman Christians. Grant convincingly argues that they were more clearly in the mainstream of society than pious legend, and a good deal of scholarship, would have us believe.

Judith Herrin, ***Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire***. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

In spite of the sub-title, this book belongs in the Ancient section as well as the Medieval. The interplay between the "New Rome" of Constantinople and the development of Eastern Christianity is one of the dominant themes in this excellent book.

Phillip Jenkins, ***The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died***. New York: HarperOne, 2008.

Jenkins provides a fascinating and useful look at Christianity as it developed on the fringes of the Roman Empire (and beyond) and apart from the incipient centralizing tendencies in a monarchical papacy.

J. N. D. Kelly, ***Early Christian Creeds***. 3rd edition. New York: Continuum, 2006 (originally published 1972).

J. N. D. Kelly, ***Early Christian Doctrines***. 5th edition. New York: Continuum, 2000.

Though the late J. N. D. Kelly conceived and wrote these as separate books, taken together they continue to be the best single introduction to the formation of doctrine and the expression of faith in creedal statements. Read in tandem, they present many interesting questions about the extent to which doctrine and creed are related and the extent to which their histories diverge from time to time.

Late Ancient Christianity: Vol. 2 of A People's History of Christianity, Edited by Virginia Burrus. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.

The original essays synthesize recent research for a popular audience in a way that is respectful of both the scholarship and the reader.

Ramsay MacMullen, ***Christianizing the Roman Empire: AD 100-400***. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

MacMullen convincingly demonstrates that prior to the Constantinian establishment Christians had successful modes of persuasion leading to significant conversions before 312. In the process of his unpacking the evidence, we learn a great deal about the subtleties of Early Christian History.

R. A. Markus, ***The End of Ancient Christianity***. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

This book belongs as much to the scholarship of Medieval Christianity as it does in the bibliography of Ancient Christianity. Markus traces the transition (over a period of more than three centuries) from simple and relatively egalitarian communities to a sort of caste system that would provide the basis of Medieval structure and would persist even after the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The three castes or orders were the laity, an all male clergy, and religious orders. Much of the History of Christianity in late antiquity and early Medieval Europe can be understood as each of these orders competed for power, which each in turn held.

R. A. Markus, ***Gregory the Great and his World***. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

*The theme developed in Markus' **The End of Ancient Christianity** is brilliant illustrated through the life and times of one of the most important movers and shakers of the transition.*

Wayne A. Meeks, ***The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul***. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

The entire book is important, but it would serve us in the early 21st century well to pay particular attention to Chapter 3 "The Formation of the Ekklesia" and Chapter 4 "Governance."

James J. O'Donnell, ***The Ruin of the Roman Empire: A New History***. New York: Ecco, 2008.

Contrasting the world-views of King Theodoric, Emperor Justinian, and Pope Gregory in the late 5th through the early seventh centuries, O'Donnell analyzes the intricate interplay between political and religious dynamics in the transition from the Ancient to the Medieval world.

Elaine Pagels, ***Adam, Eve, and the Serpent: Sex and Politics in Early Christianity***. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Elaine Pagels, ***The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics***. New York: Vintage, 1996.

Pagels explorations into the early creation of Christian attitudes from a variety of sources and contexts not found in the teachings of Jesus provides illuminating and provocative reading.

Birger A. Pearson, ***The Emergence of the Christian Religion: Essays on Early Christianity***. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997.

Birger devoted a career to the study of the plurality of beliefs among Christians prior to the First Council of Nicea. In this book he summarizes a considerable amount of scholarship on that diversity in a series of accessible essays.

Jaroslav Pelikan, ***The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine: Volume 1 The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition: 100-600***.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.

The treatment is thorough, the interpretation is stellar, and the marginal notes with leads to primary sources are valuable.

Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001.

Sullivan places the emphasis on the function of both Apostles and Bishops rather than the personas of those who hold the office. Thus he gives us a useful perspective on the pragmatic role of leadership that is subordinate to the perpetuation of the called assembly of the baptized that defines the Church.

Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. 2nd edition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

Any perspective on the Christians in the ancient world is incomplete without a consideration of how they were perceived by the dominant population. Wilken does a fine job of exploring this territory.

Robert Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980 (originally published 1971).

Robert Wilken has published a dozen books and scores of articles on Early Christianity. Each of these is based on careful and extensive research in the primary sources. If anyone can tell us the story of how Christianity began, it is Wilken, but in this book he tells us that no one can. Part of the problem is the plurality of sources, some of which are contradictory. A larger problem is the way in which human beings attempt to create a past to justify a perspective on the present. Given that we have different perspectives, we construct different and often mutually exclusive pasts. Thus, a Golden Age of the apostles when the Church was truly one has more faith than evidence to support it.

A Woman's Place: House Churches In Earliest Christianity, Edited by Carolyn Osiek. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.

These essays, based on solid research, are part of a growing body of literature making it more and more difficult to argue for exclusion from ordained leadership on the basis of gender.

John D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church In the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop in the First Three Centuries*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001.

Zizioulas begins his understanding of the concept of unity in the Early Church with ponderings about various phrases from the letters of Paul—particularly “coming together as a church,” “church in the household,” and church as “the body of Christ.” These musings develop into a clear analysis of ideas and praxis in Early Christianity and foundations for a recovery of what is vital and important from that period.

2. Primary Source Material

Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History, Edited by Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2005.

The research is solid and the evidence is clear. There really isn't much more to be said.

Second Century Christianity, Edited by Robert M. Grant. 2nd edition. Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 2005.

This is a useful collection of primary sources from pagan as well as Christian sources.

The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 10 Volumes. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, originally published 1895.

Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 Volumes. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, originally published 1886.

Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series, Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 14 Volumes. Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, originally published 1890.

These facsimile editions make available the 38 volume set of Patristic translations that was generated by a late 19th-century team of scholars at Union Theological Seminary in New York and Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati. The set contains writings from Clement in the first century to Aphrahat in the mid-4th century, plus a final volume containing the complete texts of the Canons of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. One can find the entire set for a very reasonable price on Amazon or from Christian Bookseller Distributors. In addition, one can access all 38 volumes free of cost online at Christian Classics Ethereal Library:

<http://www.ccel.org/>

This is an indispensable resource for anyone interested in the History of Early Christianity.