The high standard of scholarship which we have come to expect from the University of Virginia’s Harry Y. Gamble through his careful work on the textual tradition of Romans 14-16 and on the Canon of the New Testament is equaled or excelled in this fascinating book. Gamble’s chapters on literacy and literary culture, the early Christian book, publication and circulation of early Christian literature, early Christian libraries and the use of early Christian books are at once thoroughly technical and readable by the non-specialist. Much valuable information is assembled that will help those in the fields of New Testament and the early church, library science, ancient history, and especially social history.

Yale Press books are beautifully printed and produced, and like many of the codices Gamble describes, they are a pleasure to own and use. Despite the drawbacks (chiefly no bibliography or separate indices for scripture, scholars or manuscripts) Gamble makes a notable contribution to the study of early Christianity in its context.

A. von Harnack had assumed that in the early church there was something close to mass literacy. But more recent studies, especially William Harris, Ancient Literacy (1989) have caused Gamble to conclude that, “The ability to read, criticize and interpret (literature) belonged to a small number of Christians in the first several centuries, ordinarily not more than 10 percent in any given setting.” (p. 15) Even this estimate needs qualification. To what extent can the early Christian writings be classed as literary? F. Overbeck contended that until the mid-second century Christians produced only urliteratur (pre-literature), writings that were “occasional and internal.” Deissmann’s categorization of early Christian writing as Kleinliteratur (popular literature) as distinct from Hochliteratur (cultured literature or belles lettres) and the importance Form Criticism placed on oral tradition tended to minimize the literary character of Christian writings before circa 150. Gamble has questioned the characterization of early Christianity as non-literary and its texts as Kleinliteratur without claiming that the early church participated in the highly literary culture of the ancient world (p. 20).

Since Gamble is attentive to the issue of levels of literature in the ancient world, and of Christian literacy, it is surprising not to find more in this book about the Christian revision of texts. He does mention the difficulty that highly literate people found with the relatively non-literary scriptures and other Christian writings. He notes that “Christian readers and writers, cultivated men themselves, were well aware of these obstacles to would-be readers of scripture and regularly sought to overcome them” (p. 234).

Here would have been the place for a paragraph on atticism and its influence in Christian circles. It is dear that in the second and early third centuries a concern with better style, in line with classical usage caused scribes to improve upon the style of biblical texts. More could have been made of the researches of G.D. Kilpatrick, J.K. Elliott and others on atticism and the text of the New Testament.

Gamble has set forth a most interesting theory about collections of early Christian writings. The striking fact that the codex rapidly became the form in which Christian literature was copied and circulated has generated considerable discussion. C. Roberts and T. Skeat had suggested that it was the collection of the Gospels that first led to the Christian preference for the
book over the roll. Gamble argues instead that the first impetus for the use of the codex in the church was an early edition of the letters of Paul. His arguments are sound and practically convincing. The particularity of the letters and the need to overcome it; the decreasing length of letters found in Marcion and the Seven Churches edition of the Second Century; evidence from the seven churches collection in Revelation and the letters of Ignatius: all these arguments render plausible the suggestion of “an early edition of Pauline letters presented as a collection of letters to seven churches” (p. 61). It is a theory that is likely to commend itself to an age that fancies fewer genuine Pauline letters and more “original” Gospels. But the view of Roberts and Skeat should not be so easily dismissed. Gamble’s assertion that “no known Gospel can be said to have attained by the early Second Century a fixed and general esteem over either oral tradition or other Gospel documents,” (p. 58) will need qualification. The four canonical Gospels were probably already standing out from the others in stature and authority, (if indeed there were others at so early a stage).

Such issues will continue to be debated, and Gamble has made a lively and enjoyable contribution to the debate. The breadth of subjects and richness of details he presents (including details about ancient libraries, copy materials, women scribes, etc.) should commend this book to both the specialist and the general reader.