THE READING OF THE PERSONAL LETTER AS THE
BACKGROUND FOR THE READING OF THE SCRIPTURES IN
THE EARLY CHURCH

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Twenty-five years ago I became interested in the place of "the reader"
in the worship of the early church. Professor Ferguson wrote to me at the
time:

I have noticed in a recent Blackwell's catalogue Robert Martineau, The
Office and Work of a Reader. You should also consult standard histories of
the organization and ministry of the church. Also, check entries in the
Dictionary of Christian Antiquities and Bingham's Antiquities of the Christ-
tian Church. I hope that this will help you in your plans for your paper.¹

I ordered the Martineau book, which, though it has some helpful com-
ments about Justin Martyr's description of reading in worship in his day,
is limited for the most part to reading in the contemporary Anglican
church.²

The moment for that paper apparently passed. A year and a half later
I was at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, wondering where to
pursue further graduate work. Professor Ferguson wrote me and sug-
gested that I might consider Septuagint Studies at the University of
Toronto with J. W. Wevers.³ And so it was that I returned to Toronto. It
was in Wevers's Septuagint criticism class, where we were considering
the various sub-versions—including the Armenian—that I recalled an
aside that Professor Ferguson had once made in a lecture on the early
church. As he was describing the spread of early Christianity—through
Syria, Armenia, Georgia—Professor Ferguson made the comment that
these areas would be interesting for someone to work in because they
were relatively virgin territory. Armed with that comment, I undertook
a dissertation with Wevers involving the Armenian version, an area of

¹ Ferguson to Cox, letter, 8 February 1971.
is cited in the bibliography of the article "Reader" by Ferguson in EEC (ed. Everett
studies in which my esteemed teacher in Texas has maintained a personal interest ever since. Now after the delay of the intervening years, I welcome the opportunity to return in this festschrift to the questions I had about the role of the reader in the worship of the early church.

A. The Earliest Church and the Private Household

The earliest churches met in private households, and this remained true for the first two or three centuries. These meeting places might be the larger homes of those who were well off or an upper floor apartment, as at Troas (Acts 20:8–9). In larger cities several house churches might meet, each accommodating twenty or thirty people, and without much contact one with the other. We encounter these house churches in Paul’s letters; for example, Prisca and Aquila and the church that met in their house at Rome are greeted by Paul and the church that met at Gaius’s house at Corinth (Rom 16:3, 23); a few years earlier Paul had sent greetings to Corinth from Prisca and Aquila, who at that time had a church in their house at Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8, 19); at Colossae a church met in Philemon’s house. Paul addressed his letters to such local groups, and in his early correspondence we see him enjoining his recipients to read his letter publicly: “Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read (ἀναγνωσθήναι τὴν ἐπιστολὴν) to all of them” (1 Thess 5:27). He can direct that a letter once read be passed on to another local group nearby (and then returned perhaps): “And when this letter has been read among you [at Colossae], have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea” (Col 4:16). Some letters were clearly intended to be circular in distribution: for example, “To the churches of Galatia” (Gal 1:2); perhaps also 1 Peter, “To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia”

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4 L. Michael White, Building God’s House in the Roman World. Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians (ASOR Library of Biblical and Near Eastern Archeology; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins, 1990). He delineates four early stages: the private house (ca. 50–150); domus ecclesiae—an adapted or renovated private house (ca. 150–250); continuation and enlargement of what was true in the second stage (ca. 250–313); and basilical (314–).