The handbook contains 46 articles by scholars prominent in their fields and is divided into eight parts. “Part I: Prolegomena” is the most important part for understanding the contemporary context and theoretical basis of the handbook. The opening article (1) ‘From Patristics to Early Christian Studies’ by Elizabeth A. Clark sets the tone of the tome. The handbook unabashedly subscribes to an ideology, which has three characteristics. First, the title of the volume is of utmost significance. This is a handbook of “early Christian studies,” not patristics, not church history. Clark announces that the study of the Fathers of the Church is now divorced from theology. She even speculates that the adjective “Christian” may somehow be shed in favor of “late ancient studies” or “late antiquity” so as not to accord a privileged place to Christianity. Second, while “patristics” is European, “early Christian studies” developed in the North American academic community. There are two important factors here: academic and North American. The community is academic rather than ecclesiastical. To some the university somehow rings less sectarian and more impartial than the church. Nevertheless, an academic community is just as capable of pursuing a biased agenda as an ecclesiastical community. In the United States separation from religion opens the possibility of government funding and secular development. Third, the content of the discipline has changed from philosophical thought to bodily functions. There is a greater emphasis on material culture, sexuality, gender, social life, and the body, that paradoxically had grown out of the extensive study of asceticism. Since most information from the period between 100 and 600 CE is literary, the second article by Mark Vessey (2) ‘Literature, Patristics, Early Christian Writing,’ where he lays down the literary framework and its historical development, is also significant for appreciating the volume. Vessey states that the term “literary,” first becoming widespread in the nineteenth century, has been retrojected on to the writings of early Christianity. He traces the vocabulary to Cicero and...
Quintillian. Since Christians had their own ‘letters’ or literature, Augustine in his *De doctrina christiana* formulated guidelines for reading the Christian scriptures. A Christian culture and a church history ensued. Finally, with Romanticism patristics developed primarily as literary history. The introduction of the term “late antiquity” allowed patristic literature to be regarded as an expansion of classical philology. Since post-structuralism was a French phenomenon coming at the end of European literary development, it had little effect on early Christian studies as pursued in North America. Without explicitly proposing an agenda Vessey sees the next step to be a movement from literature to a history of culture. Karen L. King in her article (3) ‘Which Early Christianity?’ addresses the problem of diversity in ancient Christianity. The rhetorical discourse of orthodoxy and heresy has remained a powerful force for centuries. With the advent of historical criticism an entirely new approach developed. Ferdinand Christian Baur applied the Hegelian dialectic to describe changes evident in the New Testament writings themselves. Nevertheless, King indicates the need for a new paradigm. James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester used the term “trajectories” to explain the dynamics of historical movement. King rejects the dual taxonomy and finds terms like “proto-orthodoxy” and “lost Christianities” equally inadequate. She introduces the term “identities,” which is the title of Part III of the handbook. “Essentializing categories tend to reify the complex, overlapping, multifarious clusters of material that constitute the continually shifting, interactive forms of early Christian meaning-making and social belonging into homogeneous, stable, well-bounded theological or sociological formations” (p. 71). “Identities” is the personalist word that solves the problem. She offers Jewish Christianity and Gnosticism as examples of diverse identities.