

Lincoln H. Blumell. *Lettered Christians: Christians, Letters, and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus*. New Testament Tools, Studies, and Documents 39. Leiden: Brill, 2012. Pp. 427 and 11 plates. ISBN 0077-8842. Hardcover €150.00/\$196.00.

- [1] The volume, which publishes a 2009 Toronto dissertation, is a comprehensive study of Christianity in the Oxyrhynchite nome through the prism of letters written by Christians and preserved on papyrus. It also forms a rich introduction to the entire subject of Christian papyri and early Christianity in Egypt in general. It reflects its origin as a dissertation in its lengthy documentation of most points in detailed discussions accompanied by long and sometimes exhaustive footnotes. If some of these seem more detailed than required for the argument, they are nonetheless a welcome source of reference for those seeking to trace the history of a discussion or seeking a well-referenced overview of an issue.
- [2] The Introduction presents information on Oxyrhynchus itself, the history of papyrological discoveries there, and the evidence for Christianity at the site, before locating the book in the need for more work on letters on papyrus and letters written by Christians in particular. B. signals his intention to study *all* Christian letters from the site, rather than just those from the third–fifth centuries (as has been usual), before laying out the questions and issues the book will address. This includes a set of caveats, including the limited linguistic coverage of the letters (most of the letters are Greek), and the difficult question of what a “letter” actually is (B. opts for a fairly maximal definition). Rightly in this reviewer’s opinion, B. discards time-honored categorizations such as “Geschäftsbrief vs. Privatbrief” (“public letters vs. private letters”) and “Christian letters” as either being too difficult to maintain, anachronistic, or misleading. He includes summaries of the elusive realities of palaeographical dating and discusses the influence a scribe might have had over the wording of a letter. (B. sensibly presumes that indications of religion within the letter will reflect those of the sender unless anything indicates otherwise.) He closes the Introduction with a broad inclusive definition of “Christian.”
- [3] Chapter 2 (“Writing Christian”) is a substantial analysis of how to locate letters “within a religious category.” The chapter surveys previous scholarship on identifying Christians in documentary papyri beginning with Ghedini (1923). The ground-breaking work of Wesley in the first volume of *Les plus anciens monuments du Christianisme écrits sur papyrus* could perhaps have been better acknowledged: B.’s note on p. 32 cites only the second part, published in 1924; the first part, published already in 1908, while only including three letters, forms an important precursor to the later works which B. discusses. The second section of the chapter steps through “Markers of Christian Identity” one by one, making detailed and thorough observations on each of the words, phraseology, expressions, titles, names, symbols, and scribal techniques that have been suggested as markers of Christian identity. In the process, B. compiles a comprehensive survey of these issues and the bibliography on them, which must be read by anyone engaging in the task of finding Christian writings in the documentary papyri. On the basis of these criteria, from the ca. 800 (overwhelmingly Greek) letters on papyrus from Oxyrhynchus, B. is able to classify 191 that reflect a Christian milieu “with a relatively high degree of certainty” and another 40 “where Christian authorship was possible and sometimes even probable.”

- [4] A table on p. 79 charts the expected trend, with letters evidencing some contact with Christianity rising from 3 percent in the third century to 100 percent in the seventh. The largest jump is between the fourth century, in which 18 percent of letters bear one or more markers of Christian identity, and the fifth century, where 76 percent do (note too 75 percent of letters dated fourth/fifth century). Are there more Christians, or are the epistolographic tropes and scribal techniques by which we detect them more familiar and widely used? If the former is undoubtedly true, the latter should not be discounted as a factor. The reverse phenomenon, that “distinct markers of Christian identity did not emerge in the letters until this time,” reflecting in part a slower than expected development of Christian self-identity, is rightly stressed by B. as the reason why there are no letters from Christians before the third century, despite there having been Christian communities in Egypt (certainly in Alexandria and probably elsewhere, too, if smaller). Overall, this is a very clear, well-argued, judicious, and careful discussion, which sets up the analysis in the rest of the book.
- [5] In chapter 3, “Mapping Christians: Travel and Epistolary networks in Christian Letters from the Oxyrhynchite Nome,” B. turns his attention to the complex networks of hospitality, education, and patronage formed by Christian travel and letter-writing. “Travel and communication” forms the central theme, which B. contextualizes with an extended discussion of the nature, modes, and geographical realities of travel in late-antique Egypt (90–97) and the important matter of how letters were actually delivered. If some of this, such as the fact that grain was the most common item transported as freight or the list of goods Egypt exported (92) does not seem particularly germane to the discussion at hand, the section nonetheless forms a very useful overview of the issues. B. then addresses “detectable travel motives in the letters.” Here the observation that “a direct relationship existed between the motives for travel and one’s vocation” leads to a detailed discussion of industry, agriculture, land registration and taxation, shipping, and other legal and business pursuits that required travel. There are, of course, also religious reasons for travel: B. focuses first on the so-called “letters of recommendation” (more properly “letters of peace,” as B. rightly notes, 113), arguing that, notwithstanding the fact that many of those recommended are specified to be catechumens (at times with their level of instruction also stated), the travel recorded in them need not have been for educational or catechetical reasons and could have been of a secular nature. With regard to P.Oxy. XXXVI 2785, this argument seems somewhat forced, as Anos the catechumen is explicitly stated to be being sent “for instruction” (εἰς οἰκοδομήν), even if “our sister Taion” who accompanies her needs none. Yet the point is nonetheless well made that such letters were surely often used to provide itinerant Christians with an introduction to the clergy at the location to which they were—for whatever reason—traveling.
- [6] “Patterns of Travel and Epistolary Networks” are then examined at length (120–54), with the important observation that the vast majority of these attested in the letters are within the Oxyrhynchite nome: that is, we deal for the most part with local networks. In the discussion on pp. 122–24, a reference to the work of Giovanni Ruffini (cited elsewhere in the book) might have been expected. A much smaller number of letters illustrate connections with centers outside the nome: the observations on PSI IV 311 and Bishop Theodotus of Laodicea at 139–154 are new and important, and B. synthesizes a variety of material on

episcopal competition within the fourth-century Oxyrhynchus to close a very useful discussion. This chapter backs up what has been found in other contexts: that the theological and religious motivations attributed to Christian behavior in literary sources are usually not evidenced in papyrus letters (here in relation to travel), which reflect rather people's normal occupations and daily life. B. plausibly suggests that a difference in the genre of the sources may partially account for this and closes the chapter by suggesting that the epistolary data backs up the argument that the conversion process was enabled not by dedicated missionaries but by the natural spread of ideas through the local and regional social and economic networks which the papyri illustrate.

[7] Chapter 4, "Christians of the Book?" works inwards from Athanasius's well-known definition of the canon (and what lay outside it) in 367 CE to a close reading of letters that illuminate Christian book reading in Oxyrhynchus. This is contextualized in a thick discussion of the production, circulation, and consumption of books at Oxyrhynchus in general, which leads to reflections on literacy and education among Oxyrhynchite Christians. This discussion proceeds via an excellent overview of the educational system at Oxyrhynchus to an examination of the relatively meager evidence for Christian education and educated Christians at Oxyrhynchus, again bolstered by consideration of evidence from a wider temporal and geographical range. The conclusion of this section, that Christians placed a high value on "scriptural literacy," leads to sustained consideration of the use of Scripture in private letters, where B. provides a detailed analysis of citation, quotation, echo, and reminiscence of scripture in the Oxyrhynchite letters. This includes the possible identification of Theon, the sender of three letters from the late fourth–early fifth century (as B. dates them, *contra ed. pr.*) as the like-named Oxyrhynchite monk from *Historia Monachorum* 6. The final section on "Echo and Reminiscence" is naturally the longest, and B. provides a thorough catalogue and rigorous examination of those letters which might be thought to reflect Scripture. The results—that, of ca. 200 letters, four cite Scripture, one quotes it, and a "handful" echo it—are, as B. freely admits, "not as elucidating as might have been expected." B. cautions against this being interpreted as evidence for scriptural illiteracy, suggesting (rightly in my opinion) that the utilitarian genre of most of the letters militates against much opportunity for the sort of sustained and regular biblical citation encountered in letters of famous bishops preserved in the manuscript tradition.

[8] In Chapter 5, "What's in a name?" B. turns his attention to onomastics, bringing the dataset of Oxyrhynchite Christian letters to the long-debated issue of the degree to which names can indicate religious adherence in the Roman and late antique world. After carefully laying the standard caveats, B. produces his own thickly referenced typology of the names used by Christians at Oxyrhynchus (the section on "Names of Martyrs and Saints" is particularly useful), then analyzes the classes of names as they occur. Here, he gives attention not only to those in his earlier-established classes of names, but female names and "nomina pagana" (which become progressively less common during late antiquity). B.'s finding that "over the course of the late third through seventh centuries Oxyrhynchus and its environs was experiencing a dramatic onomastic shift as a direct result of the increasing influence of Christianity" (262, see also 272–79) may not surprise, especially given that B.'s dataset comprises letters he has already determined were certainly or probably sent by Christians, but the careful and complete laying out of this evidence—complemented by the thorough table of

names occurring in the letters in table 26—is an important contribution to the debate.

- [9] Chapter 6, “Reading Someone Else’s Mail,” acts as a conclusion, where B. draws together the strands of evidence to consider the ways in which the papyrus letters provide evidence for religion even if they do not treat of (or for the most part even mention) the ecclesiastical and theological concerns that dominate the letters of famous monks and bishops preserved in the manuscript tradition. The lack of strong evidence for the theological diversity and syncretism which characterize the literary record for late antique Christianity can be counterpointed by the great value these letters have in showing changing formulaic, linguistic, and onomastic patterns, and the nature of Christian travel and educational networks. An Epilogue considers “The Demise of Christian Oxyrhynchus,” narrating what can be known of the city in the time after the papyri cease in the seventh century; B. suggests that later papyri may have been destroyed or lost, either naturally, or in the ninth-century conquest of the city recorded in al Mu’izz’s *The Conquest of Bahnasa*.
- [10] An Appendix of seventy pages is comprised of twenty-nine tables, listing much of the data on which the book rests. Primary among these is the list of letters where Christian authorship is certain or near certain, probable, or possible (tables 1–3). Tables 4–9 list various scribal and/or formulaic markers of Christian identity. All these are excellent scholarly tools. The remaining twenty tables of are varying utility. Some, like ecclesiastical titles (11), “miscellaneous Christian references” (13), churches (21), monasteries (22), toponyms (25), and names (26) occurring in the letters are very useful. Others, like the lists of occurrences of ἀγαπητός / -ή in letters (table 13) or those of Christian literary texts found (or said to have been) at Oxyrhynchus (tables 14–16, 18) may be extracted from online databases such as papyri.info or trismegistos.org, but their appearance here saves the reader the work. It is somewhat less clear why tables 28 and 29, which list the letters included in the collections of Christian letters by Ghedini and Naldini, are necessary; the same might be said about the list of letters in the archive of Paphnouthios and Dorotheos (table 10). Overall, however, if one may wonder whether the Appendices are not somewhat bloated by material collected in the course of writing a dissertation which might have been pruned at publication stage, together they provide a valuable source of data for those wishing to take the issues B. examines further. Comprehensive indices complete the work.
- [11] The book is highly readable and well argued. A set of eleven color plates of Oxyrhynchite letters at the start complement and illustrate the text. The frequent provision of the Greek text and translation of letters helps the reader assess B.’s arguments and form a useful resource in themselves, as some have not previously been translated into English. The written expressions are of a high standard: I noted only a very few errors (e.g. 51 n. 114, “a *nomina sacra*”). The referencing is thorough and wide-ranging, and omissions are few and minor (e.g., the papyrus that B. assumes is unpublished at p. 177 n. 67 is edited by K. Ohly, *Stichometrische Untersuchungen* [Leipzig, 1928], 88–89; see SB 20.14599). Errors in papyrological metadata are highly infrequent: I can note only that P.Oxy. 1 43 V does not date to 295 CE, but to some time later, as B. notes in footnote 172 on 202 but not in the text itself, which simply (and probably incorrectly) states that “already by the year 295 Oxyrhynchus had two churches.”

- [12] Overall, B. has written a very important book, which heralds the arrival of a major new scholar in the field of the history of Christianity in Egypt. It complements AnneMarie Luijendijk's (likewise excellent) *Greetings in the Lord* (Harvard University Press, 2008), meaning that the reader interested in the papyrological evidence for early Christianity at Oxyrhynchus now has two major recent treatments of this material, which together put the subject on a new footing and are now the starting point for discussions of Christianity in the documentary papyri. Congratulations on the volume reviewed here should be accompanied by the hope that B. continues to offer further insights on this material in the future.

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