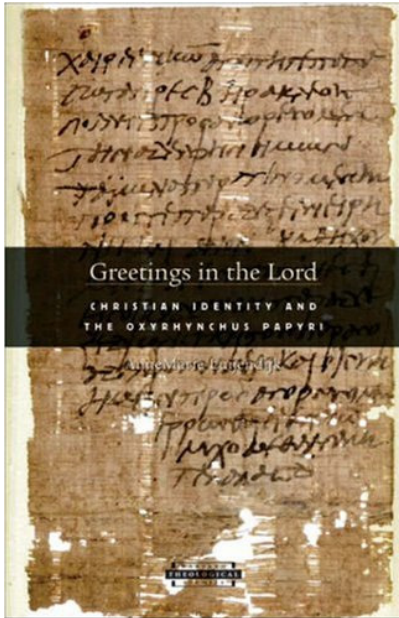


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Luijendijk, AnneMarie

Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri

Harvard Theological Studies 60

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The name Oxyrhynchus has been known to biblical scholars for over a hundred years, when the first published findings from its uncovered dumps with their myriad of discarded papyri and other materials revealed *inter alia* biblical and apocryphal fragments and, not infrequently, personal, private writings by its inhabitants. The impressively relentless publishing of significant samples of the archives in Oxford and elsewhere has ensured that the fruits of the early digs are regularly to the fore. In his popular and engagingly learned *City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish*, Peter Parsons recently opened up to a wide audience the life of this provincial Egyptian town in its great variety.

Now AnneMarie Luijendijk of Princeton has published the results of her own detective work into the Christian community in Oxyrhynchus. Parsons had devoted only one short chapter to Christianity and the Christians. She, like Parsons, writes in an attractively clear style, but, unlike his book, hers is less likely to appeal to a nonprofessional readership.

Her investigative scholarship sets out the raw materials, namely, the Greek fragments with appropriately critical notes on their decipherment and interpretation. An impressive array of footnotes, many in German, French, Italian, and Dutch, also make this a

scholarly rather than a “popular” book, although casual readers may also benefit from her introductions, summaries, translations of texts, and general observations.

Luijendijk concentrates on certain aspects of a Christian’s life in Oxyrhynchus as revealed from papyri that have been dated from the earliest documentary papyri we possess (ca. mid-third century) to about 324, when Constantine became sole ruler of the empire. Her sample thus has a defined boundary.

She is justifiably cautious in assigning texts to Christians or about Christians based purely on the names of the writers and/or recipients of letters. She concentrates on unambiguous clues. Unique Christian tell-tales include the distinctive use of the *nomina sacra*, those contractions, usually of divine names, that became so much of a reflex-action among Christian writers that some used them even when the context was not divine (thus the word “spirits” was abbreviated when the spirits were bad spirits!). Other clues (or “external markers of identity,” to use her term) include the occasional use of the numeral 99 at the end of a writing, since that was a word/number play for “amen,” and opening words such as “Greetings in the Lord” (where “Lord” obviously meant the Lord Jesus). Pages 62–64 give a helpful inventory of such examples from private letters.

Using clues such as these, Luijendijk invites us to see Christians dealing with legal problems such as property confiscation and with the varying ways in which they coped with (or resisted) the tentacles of Roman bureaucracy during the great persecution. She also concentrates on a close exegesis of five or six papyri, all apparently from Oxyrhynchus, that refer to a (Papa) Sotas. She argues that these writings refer to one and the same character, who seems to have been a bishop involved in teaching, book production, and Christian administration. She devotes much space (about a third of her book) to this aspect of Christian life in Oxyrhynchus at this period and argues her case closely and convincingly.

The large number of New Testament papyri that come from Oxyrhynchus (some 40 percent of our total) as well as fragments of noncanonical writings such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, and the Acts of Peter are testimony to a sizable Christian presence in the city. Most of the manuscripts are tiny fragments that qualitatively do not add much to a critical apparatus in a modern critical text, but their existence must mean that we also have an impressive literary archive of *Christians’* activities among other discarded scraps. Luijendijk has put some flesh onto those Christians from one early period who had once read, copied, and used the biblical texts.

Her English style is commendable. The only slips I detected are; page 21 line 4, read Jude (for the biblical letter) not Judas; page 8 line 2, the Italian society should read *la ricerca*

dei papiri. References to women scribes (78) could properly have cross-referenced Kim Haines-Eitzen's *Guardians of Letters*.