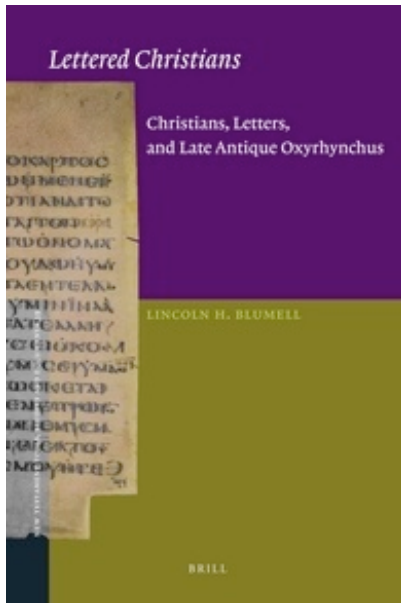


RBL 04/2013



Blumell, Lincoln H.

Lettered Christians: Christians, Letters, and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus

New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents 39

Leiden: Brill, 2012. Pp. xvi + 427. Hardcover.
\$196.00. ISBN 9789004180956.

Thomas J. Kraus
University of Regensburg
Regensburg, Germany

Since the days of the successful campaigns in Egypt by two pioneers of papyrology, Bernhard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, the name of Oxyrhynchus, “city of the sharp-nosed fish,” causes a glint in the eyes of scholars who are fond of archaeological sites and their fantastic stories. Oxyrhynchus has become a trademark for both a persistent pioneer spirit (because Grenfell and Hunt’s campaign did not start with immediate success) and invaluable findings. Among the latter are many documentary and literary papyri but also texts that belong to intermediate categories, such as para- or subliterate papyri. We have, for instance, fragments with texts from Alcaeus, Ibycus, Pindar, Sappho, and Menander; there are also theological manuscripts with texts from the Old and New Testament texts and the so-called Apocrypha. In contrast to these literary texts, some other material from Oxyrhynchus has never really been systematically investigated. Lincoln Blumell, Brigham Young University, focuses on papyrus letters written by Christians, which is a natural choice, because he has repeatedly published about these and edited some on his own. He is to be praised for taking over such a complicated and strenuous task. Blumell’s meticulous study offers new insights into the world of late antique Christianity at Oxyrhynchus between the third and seventh centuries C.E. and is a very welcome investigation into important aspects of the sociocultural life and world of ancient Christians.

In his introduction (1–26), supplemented by a richness of footnotes and bibliographical data, Blumell lays the groundwork for what is to follow: in a brief survey he offers the main pieces of information about ancient Oxyrhynchus and the digging campaigns that took place there; then he reviews previous scholarship about the Christian remains, before he comes to justify his own approach and his limitation to letters. His own data pool consists of about nine hundred letters from the third to the early seventh centuries, which marks a longer period than that covered in previous studies. In general, Blumell concentrates on two main issues: the identification of letters as Christian and the examination of specific sociohistorical questions about the Christians behind those letters. But this comes together with two major difficulties he has to face: (1) it must be demonstrated that the letters were written by Christians or come from a Christian milieu, which is a real challenge, as many letters do not contain anything typically Christian at all; (2) in contrast to official letters, the ones analyzed in the present study do not have a date and, consequently, must be dated on the basis of palaeography and/or, if possible, their contents. In addition, letters written by scribes for someone else form another complexity: Are the religious sentiments expressed in such a letter a scribe's own or those of the sender of the letter?

After the brief introductory survey, Blumell addresses the issue of identifying letters as being of Christian origin (27–88). First he reviews previous research on Christian letters, then he deals with “markers of Christian identity within letters” (the *nomen christianum* = the epithet “Christian,” crosses and monograms [e.g., the staurogram and the *chi-rho* monogram], isopsephisms and acrostics [e.g., ἀμήν, χξς or χις, ΧΜΓ], *nomina sacra*, monotheistic terminology and phraseology [invocations and obeisances, greetings and farewells, monotheistic epithets, monotheistic phrases], familial language and the use of ἀγαπητός, miscellaneous markers [e.g., titles and offices]). With this in mind, Blumell concludes that “between the third and seventh centuries there was a dramatic increase in letters written by Christians” (79), especially in relation to the total number of letters from Oxyrhynchus. Of course, Blumell is aware of the problems any statistics cause. There might be significant letters of Christian origin that have not been identified as Christian because they do not contain any marker.

The third chapter is dedicated to the sociohistorical issues “travel and epistolary networks” as preserved in Christian letters from Oxyrhynchus (89–161). It is natural that Blumell provides rudimentary details about travel and communication in Roman and Byzantine Egypt (90–103) before he can adequately return to the letters and what they tell us. In many cases Christians traveled, as others did, because their vocation required them to do so, and they were often occupied with agricultural production. There are “letters of recommendation” (ἐπιστολή συστατική) “used by the clergy and a few laity of distinction so that they might be able to obtain hospitality and admission to communion, and there

were “letters of peace (ἐπιστολή εἰρηνική) that were used exclusively by the laity to attain support” (113). Specific travels were motivated by pure and plain facts, such as travels to Alexandria because it was the center of economic activity and learning. Of course, times of oppression, economic failure, or even prosecution prompted Christians to travel to other places. Some letters prove that networks on which Christians could rely existed (see, e.g., references to a network between Oxyrhynchus and Laodicea). As a service for his readers, Blumell summarizes his findings in a concise way (155–61).

In chapter 4 (163–236) Blumell raises the question whether or not Christians were people of the book (see Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39.5–7 [367 C.E.]). Oxyrhynchus has become so important for research on early Christianity because of the literary Christian texts found there during diverse digging campaigns, canonical and apocryphal ones. In this respect, Blumell addresses *P.Oxy.* LXIII 4365, a letter from the fourth century, about the exchange of books between a woman and another person (whom Blumell easily accepts as being a woman, too, which is not sure). Extra- or noncanonical literature is lent and borrowed (probably 4 Ezra and the book of Jubilees, though Blumell carefully discusses a miniature book of Genesis as an alternative understanding for λεπτή Γένεσις). The wide array of Christian literature taken together with a wide variety of classic works demonstrates the fascinating facets of book reading and, probably, the book market in Oxyrhynchus. But it remains difficult to make clear statements about the learning of Christians in this city, because the papyri we have today are more or less only snapshots. Thus, they do not present a systematic view of reading and writing abilities. Be that as it may, it might be surprising that the letters do not offer much direct evidence of scripture, above all in contrast to letters of Christian writers. However, the purpose of most of the Christian letters from Oxyrhynchus was definitely different from somewhat literary or homiletic letters composed by church fathers. Besides, reliable assertions on the level of reading and writing among Christians in this Upper Egypt city are not possible, because letters basically represent the writing elite of a late ancient society.

Chapter 5, “What’s in a Name?” (237–79), is about the crucial question how to identify Christians by means of their names and by self-identification. Of course, we do not know how many Christians changed their names after conversion and how many kept their original ones. Moreover, the Old Testament offers names for Christians, too, so that the next problem is to distinguish between Jews and Christians. Nevertheless, Blumell succeeds in differentiating, categorizing, and systematizing *nomina Christiana* (biblical names, names of martyrs and saints, and names carrying Christian connotations) and in applying them to the *epistulae*. In conclusion, he ponders about the reliability of quantitative statistics but points at “a connection between patronage for local cults and shrines for saints and the selection of certain kinds of Christian names” (279). The only point of criticism, if this is one at all, is the thought whether this chapter should have

followed immediately after chapter 2, as I had exactly this expectation in mind at the end of the first chapter.

The final chapter (281–293) contains conclusions but carries the nice title “Reading Someone Else’s Mail,” something Blumell himself has done. The survey is short and not more than a summary of what has been demonstrated in detail in the preceding chapters. Nonetheless, maybe reading these thirteen pages first and then starting with the book itself might be a good recommendation in order to have the outcome in mind before the investigations into the letters begin. But this is not the end of the book: Blumell briefly deals with Oxyrhynchus after the fourth century (“Epilogue,” 295–300) before he offers the database on which his study is founded on: twenty-nine tables form a very impressive appendix (301–70). Here Blumell distinguishes between letters with certain, probable, and possible Christian authorship—arranged chronologically and with information about title, date, language, material, and indicators for each letter. Other tables are about, for example, Christian symbols/monograms, isopsephisms/acrostics, *nomina sacra* (there are also letters with *nomina sacra* without supralinear stroke), suspensions, specific phrases, and titles/offices. Among others, very helpful and a fine service for readers is a table with “Christian literary texts provenanced to Oxyrhynchus.” The tables alone are a treasure trove; they manifest a very useful tool for future research.

The book comprises a comprehensive bibliography (371–98) with all the relevant titles (and, of course, with many references to Bagnall und Epp) and useful indices of ancient authors, biblical references, Greek terms and phrases, modern authors, papyri and inscriptions, and subjects (399–427). At the beginning of his book Blumell lists abbreviations, explains the Leiden system for transcribing papyri, and offers eleven color plates of papyri he addresses thereafter.

Lincoln Blumell is to be both congratulated for his fascinating, meticulous, and invaluable investigation into Christian letter writing *and* thanked for successfully fulfilling the task of systematizing, categorizing, and analyzing the manifold details about that area of research. This is a landmark study and, not only because of the many tables in the appendix, a real treasure trove for future research.