

CHAPTER I

*Egypt and the Social World of the New Testament***An Everyday History of the New Testament**

Research into New Testament literature has increasingly, albeit slowly, opened up to include in its exegesis historical studies of the society and economy of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.¹ New insights into Roman social structure, the role of the family, ancient associations, and Roman law, as well as economic aspects, have all enhanced research into the sociohistorical dimensions of events depicted in the Gospels and the history of early Christian communities, and have helped to illuminate the origins of early Christianity in its ancient social context. However, the sociohistorical studies that have been employed are based primarily on historical accounts, biographies of emperors, honorary inscriptions, and Roman jurisdiction which inform us first and foremost about the elites of the Roman world. As such, they tell us very little about the common people who predominate the Gospels and early Christian writings. Individuals of the lower social classes are occasionally mentioned in passing by Roman historians and lawgivers – representatives of the Roman elite – but their thoughts and words are not transmitted.

Common people held no high offices and composed no histories, epics, or poems – in fact, most were not able to write at all. Their everyday lives and deeds were generally of no importance to the writing of history. Roman law had little personal relevance to those who did not own or bequeath anything and could not afford to start legal proceedings. A commoner did not have the means to dedicate a portico to the civic forum; nor did the city have any reason to honor them publicly with a monument. Their offspring could rarely afford to mark their tombs with a stone inscription. It was only in later centuries that accounts of the acts of martyrs and hagiographies started to focus on members of the lower classes,

2 Egypt and the Social World of the New Testament

whom classical historians had never hitherto considered the main historical actors.

Consequently, New Testament scholars, church historians, and modern readers of the Gospels often fail to properly set into context the events described in the Gospels due to the fact that so little is known about the everyday lives and concerns of the lower social classes in the provinces of the Roman Empire. Moreover, medieval and modern misinterpretations of and anachronistic analogies to the New Testament texts have led to the formation of persistent and erroneous beliefs about ancient daily life. This state of affairs, I believe, must be addressed.

Papyri and the Social World of the New Testament aims to focus on the lower classes of Roman provincial society. It privileges micro-approaches in order to contribute to a better understanding of the structural, social, and cultural conditions that the protagonists of the New Testament, as well as its early readers, experienced in their everyday lives.

The upper class is defined in this study as the imperial and provincial elite, including great landowners, Roman senators, city councilors of the major cities of the empire, and high-ranking officials in the imperial administration and the military. It represented 1 to 2 percent of the free population. To the middle classes belonged individuals of modest, comfortable wealth – that is, middle-sized landowners, city councilors of provincial towns, well-to-do merchants, and contractors – who comprised another 6 to 12 percent of the free population. Finally, the lower social strata, who were living at subsistence level – the peasants, small peddlers and craftsmen, shepherds, and day laborers – constituted between 86 and 93 percent of the entire free population.² Despite their numbers, their reality has been vastly obscured by ancient sources and consequently muted in modern historical accounts. As a result, learning more about the living conditions and everyday existence of these common people represents one of the most urgently felt *desiderata* within the field of ancient studies.

From the 1960s onwards the humanities and social sciences have witnessed a “quotidian turn” or shift toward a scholarly concern with nonelites and common, everyday life.³ However, daily life in the Gospels and early Christian communities from the first to third centuries CE has, until now, been vastly neglected. There is a surprising lack of interdisciplinary working between New Testament scholars based in departments of religion and Roman social and economic historians, as well as between epigraphers and papyrologists, who belong to departments of classics or history. Not only are New Testament scholars generally unaware of the latest research on the periods and social strata with which they are

concerned in their texts; ancient historians also commonly refrain from using early Christian literature as sources for studying the everyday lives of the common people in the Roman provinces.

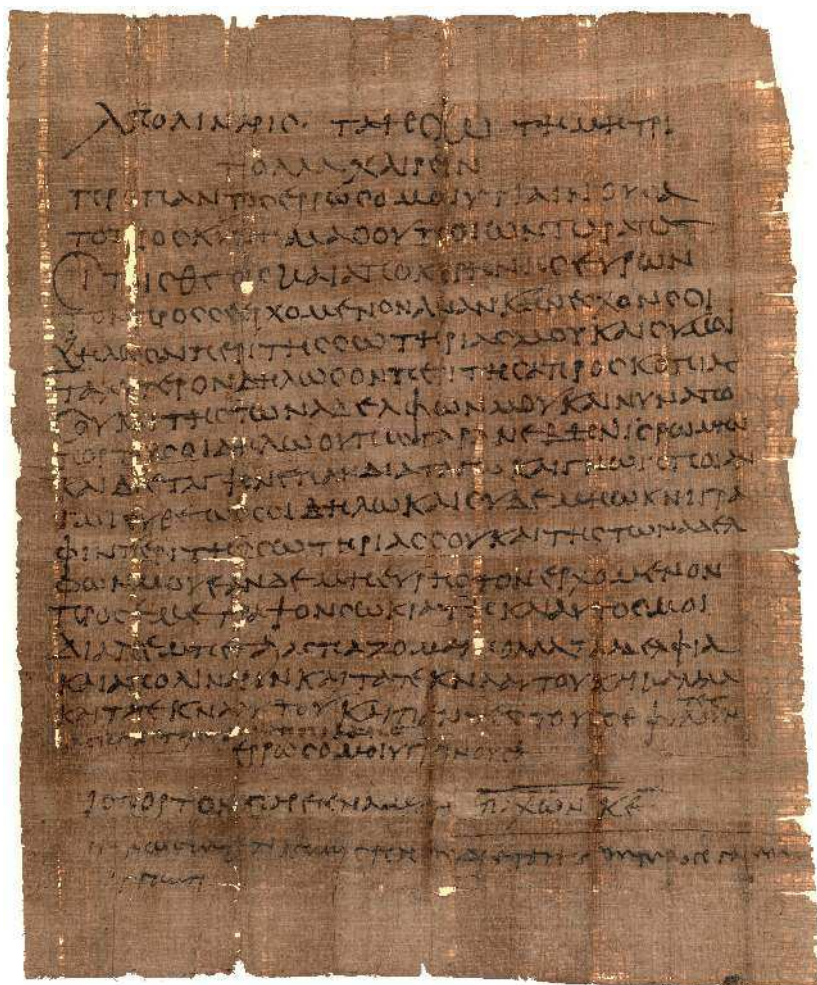
Admittedly, conducting in-depth studies of the common people in Roman Galilee or Judaea, where most of the New Testament accounts are anchored, is nearly impossible due to a lack of sources. It is in the nearby Roman province of Egypt – and there alone – that we find sources in large quantities that provide information on the everyday lives of the Roman provincial middle and lower classes. Hundreds of thousands of papyri, preserved by favorable environmental conditions, report on details of life in Roman times, including individuals' daily fears and worries, which are unavailable with this degree of quality and in this quantity in any other sources.

Papyrus – the ancient form of paper – was the everyday writing medium in the ancient world, available to almost every social class and put to a variety of uses. Among the papyri we find dated official and private letters, tax receipts, census returns, petitions, wills, marriage contracts, and land leases alongside a wealth of other documents. Whether they have been found in their best-known scroll form or were lost, discarded, or used as packaging in the mummification process, the information they record has been preserved over the centuries by Egypt's dry desert sands (see Figure 1.1).

In those circumstances where no papyrus was at hand or was considered too costly, *ostraca* were used for a wide variety of purposes. Ostraca are broken-off pieces of pottery that cost nothing and were always available (see Figure 1.2). The immediate and personal character of papyri and ostraca grants us insights into the lives and ordinary existences of the majority of the population, thereby constituting a particularly fascinating type of ancient source. The documents permit the ordinary people of the ancient world to speak to us just as they spoke to one another. The voices of those who never appear in ancient literature – artisans, peasants, shepherds, and fishermen, their wives and children – are suddenly heard.

The difference between the transmission of papyrological and literary sources is remarkable. Recorded and copied through late antiquity and the Middle Ages, the great literary works reflect the priorities and interests of previous mediating agencies. They were judged by ancient scribes and medieval monks as worthy of repeated transcription so as to preserve them from oblivion and for posterity. Their contents continued to fascinate people down the centuries. In contrast, the preservation and discovery of papyri were mainly accidental. They lay for two thousand years in ancient rubbish heaps. No medieval monk would have spent time copying the everyday documents of common people; often these texts had been discarded by their own

4 Egypt and the Social World of the New Testament



1.1 Apollinarius, a young Egyptian recruit in the Roman Army writes home to his mother, Taesion: papyrus letter sent from Rome to the Egyptian village of Karanis (Fayum) (*P.Mich.* 8.490 from the second century CE).

authors. But for us, they reveal much about the everyday routines of ordinary people, about their economic situation, family and married life, dietary habits, health issues, illness and death, and generational as well as gender relations and roles. And so, anyone seeking insight into the lives of ordinary families from the middle and lower classes of the ancient world must turn to the unique sources offered by Egypt.⁴



1.2 Receipt for 4 drachmas written on a potsherd, dated to the Egyptian month of Thoth (*P.Duk.inv.* 233).

The evaluation of the papyri from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt for New Testament scholarship has in recent years principally been carried out by Peter Arzt-Grabner, John Kloppenborg, and Mauro Pesce. Their scholarship has extended our understanding of key New Testament linguistic terms and supplemented existing biblical commentaries.⁵ Yet the potential of the papyri for a better understanding of everyday life and the circumstances described in the New Testament has only been realized and exploited in a rudimentary way. This book thus draws on documentary papyri shedding light on everyday life in order to provide the social context for key issues covered by the New Testament accounts.

The Special Status of Egypt

Aegyptum imperio populi Romani adieci – “Egypt I added to the Empire of the Roman people.” Thus runs Emperor Augustus’ concise record of the incorporation of Egypt into the Roman Empire in 30 BCE.⁶ Roman provinces were

6 Egypt and the Social World of the New Testament

traditionally ruled by a governor drawn from the senatorial aristocracy, but in view of the political and economic significance of Egypt as a province, Augustus instead selected an equestrian, most likely so as to avoid placing such a potential key to power in the hands of a man of excessive ambition. Tacitus tells us:

Ever since the time of the Divine Augustus, Roman knights have ruled Egypt as kings, and the forces by which it has to be kept in subjection. It has been thought expedient thus to keep under home control a province so difficult of access, so productive of corn, ever distracted, excitable, and restless through the superstition and licentiousness of its inhabitants, knowing nothing of laws, and unused to civil rule.⁷

Although based in Alexandria, the *Praefectus Aegypti* traveled extensively through the region, dispensing justice and supervising the local administration. With the exception of his social status, the legal position of the *Praefectus Aegypti* was no different from that of the other magistrates of senatorial rank, whether the *legati Augusti* in the imperial provinces or the promagistrates in the public provinces.⁸

Egypt has always been considered exceptional by both ancient and modern authors. In fact, its exceptionalism within the empire was an idea proposed by Tacitus in the *Annals*:

That prince, among other secrets of imperial policy, had forbidden senators and Roman knights of the higher rank to enter Egypt except by permission, and he had specially reserved the country, from a fear that anyone who held a province containing the key of the land and of the sea, with ever so small a force against the mightiest army, might distress Italy by famine.⁹

The idea of Egypt's special status among Roman provinces was taken up by Theodor Mommsen. Mommsen's now dated notion of Egypt as the emperor's private possession – something approaching a crown colony to which he appointed the *Praefectus Aegypti* as a viceroy – was developed further by Wilcken, who warned of generalizations for other Roman provinces made on the basis of the rich source material from Roman Egypt.¹⁰ In summary, Tacitus and his modern followers explained the special status of Egypt basically by reference to the nature of its establishment as the private property of Augustus Caesar. This political dimension later became enmeshed with economic considerations: Egypt provided the lion's share of Rome's grain and constituted one of the richest provinces of the empire. For this reason its special status became an economic one.¹¹

The most striking difference between Egypt and the rest of the empire lies, however, in the source base it left us. In fact, the contemporary prevailing idea of Egypt's unique status within the empire stems above

The Special Status of Egypt

7

all from the papyrus finds starting in the late nineteenth century. The tremendous papyrus discoveries in Middle and Upper Egypt and the relatively new field of papyrology revolutionized research in ancient history, which until then had largely relied on literary sources, and enabled scholars to challenge the existing *communis opinio*.¹²

One consequence of Egypt's rich papyrological documentation is that historians ask different questions, investigate different social classes, and explore different aspects of life when studying Egypt than when studying other parts of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world. Some scholars remain sceptical as to the representative nature of this source base for the empire as a whole, even if papyrologists and historians specializing in Roman Egypt have come to broadly reject the idea of Egyptian exceptionalism, at least for the Roman and late Roman periods. They instead attempt to demonstrate the existence of economic, administrative, and social commonalities between Egypt and other areas of the empire – particularly Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine. Furthermore, they argue that the results drawn from an analysis of the papyri for understanding Roman Egypt's demography, economy, society, and administration are transferable to other provinces of the Roman Empire.¹³

Today, the majority of historians focusing on the economy, administration, and society of Roman Egypt generally reject the idea that Egypt had any form of special status within the Roman Empire and assume that the elements previously considered peculiar to it could actually have been found in many other Roman provinces if we had comparable evidence. Martin Goodman has written:

It is important to be aware of the probability that many of the apparently unique elements of life in Roman Egypt in fact may have been shared by other provincials in the Empire, and that Egyptian society differed primarily in that it left behind a detailed record in the sand.¹⁴

Papyri and ostraca found outside Egypt, as well as wooden writing tablets such as the Vindolanda tablets from northern Britain, the tablets from Vindonissa in Switzerland, or the Bloomberg tablets from London, show many similarities in terminology with the Egyptian papyri, testifying to a common mindset and shared understanding across the Roman provinces. Roman Egypt thus distinguishes itself from other provinces above all by its incomparable level of documentation of everyday life. Simply put: Egypt was not exceptional within the Roman Empire; it is only exceptionally well documented thanks to its climate, which allowed the everyday writing medium of the ancient Mediterranean, papyrus, to survive in the desert sands.

8 Egypt and the Social World of the New Testament

The Christianization of Egypt

Soon after its establishment by Alexander in 331 BCE, Alexandria was harboring the largest Jewish community outside Palestine. A thriving center of trade and commerce, this Mediterranean city was near the Jewish motherland and was a popular destination for Jewish migration. Accorded considerable legal autonomy by the ruling Ptolemaic dynasty, the Jews constituted the majority in two of the five city districts of Alexandria at the beginning of the Christian era, and maintained close economic and cultural ties with Jerusalem. While Jerusalem had about 100,000 inhabitants by the beginning of the common era, Diodorus Siculus estimated the Jewish population of Alexandria at around 300,000.¹⁵

There can be little doubt that a Christian community developed early in Alexandria, although we know relatively little about it. A tradition first recorded in the early fourth century CE by Eusebius of Caesarea holds that Mark the Evangelist launched a missionary journey to Alexandria. According to Eusebius, Mark was said to have come to Egypt during the reign of the Emperor Claudius (41–54 CE): “And they report that this Mark was the first to be sent to Egypt, in order to announce the gospel which he had written. He was the first to found churches in Alexandria.”¹⁶ The recently published *Historia Episcopatus Alexandriae*, a medieval Ethiopian version of a Greek composition from the fourth century, on which more will be said later, builds upon this tradition but gives a different date for Mark’s entry into Alexandria: the seventh year of Nero (60 CE).¹⁷ Since neither Acts nor Clement of Alexandria nor Origen know anything about Mark visiting Egypt, we might have to do here with an entirely fabricated story of the early fourth century when the Alexandrian church was competing with Rome, Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Antioch for supremacy of status and authority and therefore claimed an apostolic foundation for itself as well.¹⁸

A Judeo-Christian from Alexandria named Apollos appears as early as around 50 CE in the Book of Acts:

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.¹⁹

Apollos was indubitably an educated man – probably an Alexandrian Jew – but it is not clear whether he picked up Christianity in his hometown or

The Christianization of Egypt

9

elsewhere on his travels to Asia Minor. Acts also reports that Egyptians were present at Pentecost in Jerusalem in 33 CE. Jewish pilgrims from all over the empire had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, fifty days after Passover: “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome; Cretans and Arabs.”²⁰ About 3,000 of those present were reportedly baptized on that day of Pentecost and might have proselytized after their return to their homelands.²¹

Apart from these legends, however, we have no reliable sources for Christianity in Egypt or for the Alexandrian church or its leadership. Writing in 1902, Adolf von Harnack summarized the situation thus: “The greatest gaps in our knowledge of the history of the early church are constituted by our almost complete ignorance of the history of Alexandrian Christianity and Egypt . . . to 180.”²² The first discoveries of early Christian papyri preserved in the sands of the Egyptian desert thus caused a sensation among late nineteenth-century classicists and the public alike. The new findings kindled hopes of learning more about the first centuries of Christianity and the first Christian communities in Egypt. New societies were launched in Europe and North America to search for further caches of papyri and an entirely new discipline – papyrology – was established to collate and interpret them.

At the turn of the twentieth century British researchers Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt discovered and shipped to Oxford some 400,000 papyrus fragments from the ancient refuse site at Oxyrhynchus, a Greco-Roman settlement in Middle Egypt.²³ They found among the fragments works by ancient authors, some long thought lost and others completely unknown, as well as thousands of records of everyday transactions such as purchase agreements, marriage contracts, private letters, and wills. These novel insights into the ancient world are largely inaccessible anywhere else and unprecedented in scope and quantity. Intensive study of the finds carried out over the course of the ensuing twentieth century means that we now know more about the economic, religious, and social life of Egypt than we do about any other place in the Greco-Roman world.

Scholars interested in the study of the earliest Christian period in Egypt, however, were quickly disappointed by their first examination of the Christian papyri. Copies of the New Testament were found – among the Christian writings was even an entire series of hitherto unknown texts entitled, for example, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Judas, and even the Gospel of Mary, written in the style of the

10 Egypt and the Social World of the New Testament

known Gospels and reporting the teachings and works of Jesus Christ.²⁴ However, none of these literary Christian papyri date from a time before the second quarter of the second century at the earliest, but probably rather even fifty to a hundred years later.²⁵ Furthermore, apart from two exceptions we lack any reference to Christians in the documentary papyri until the second half of the third century.²⁶ While the earliest epigraphic references to Christians in other regions of the empire such as Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy originate from the middle of the second century,²⁷ there are no more than a few dozen papyri from the second half of the third century which may have been written by Christians – and the identification of some of these as Christians remains dubious.²⁸

Recent research suggests that Alexandrian Christianity developed in the first century in the shadow of the older synagogue. Embedded, however, as it was in the city's Hellenized Jewish diaspora, Alexandrian Christianity most likely suffered severely from its suppression under Trajan during the Jewish revolt of 115–117 CE.²⁹ Several hundred thousand Alexandrian Jews fled or were killed or enslaved during the Roman countermeasures.³⁰ It was only at the end of the second century that Jews and Jewish settlements were once again recorded in Egypt.³¹ The composition of the Greek Gospel of the Egyptians, which is dated to 120–150 CE, shows, however, that Christianity must have expanded earlier outside the established Jewish quarters. The Gospel of the Egyptians seems to have been popular in the second and third centuries among the indigenous Egyptian population.³² Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215 CE) was familiar with the text and quotes from it in his *Stromata*.³³ A sign that Christianity also appealed to the classical intellectual milieu of Alexandria are two Christian intellectuals of Alexandrian origin, the philosophers Basilides and Valentinus, who taught their respective interpretations of Christian doctrine in the second quarter of the second century. Basilides, a member of the Peripatetic school of Alexandria according to Hippolytus,³⁴ is said to have composed the first commentary on the Gospels and to have publicly taught his Christian beliefs in Alexandria during the reign of Hadrian (117–138 CE).³⁵ Origen claimed that Basilides had even composed his own gospel.³⁶ Later condemned as a heretic, most of his work is lost apart from a few fragments. That Valentinus originally came from Egypt is less certain. According only to a late fourth-century tradition, he was born in Phrebonis in the Nile Delta and received his education in Hellenistic philosophy in Alexandria, where he might have heard Basilides.³⁷ He is