

P.OXY. XLII 3057 : LETTER OF AMMONIUS
THE [MIS]IDENTIFICATION OF AN OXYRHYNCHUS PAPYRUS
[AS THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN LETTER]

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The « Letter of Ammonius » (P.Oxy. XLII 3057) is a documentary papyrus in the form of a private letter written by Ammonius to his « brother and master » Apollonius. It originates from Oxyrhynchus and was first published in 1974 by Peter Parsons. Parsons compared the hand of this text to Schubart *Pal. Abb.* 79 (dated AD 94), dating it to the first / second century AD. Since its publication, P.Oxy. XLII 3057 has been identified as possibly the earliest Christian documentary letter due to its references to Christian themes of concord and mutual friendship and sharing of goods. The mention of a « crossed letter » by Ammonius, the horizontal stroke over the χ in line 2 of the letter as a potential *nomen sacrum*, and the reading of ἐπισκόπ(ω) on the back of the papyrus have presented the argument for a Christian authorship despite the absence of any explicit identification of Ammonius as Christian within the text.

Many thanks to Professor Margaret Mitchell, under whose guidance I first presented the hypothesis that P.Oxy. XLII 3057 should not be considered definitively Christian or non-Christian until concrete evidence arises. Following my initial presentation at the University of Chicago, Professor Mitchell presented P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959, published in 2009 by Myrto Malouta, in the context of possibly understanding P.Oxy. XLII 3057 as a non-Christian text. P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959, the « Letter of Ammonius to his parents », has a large X across it, displaying a close relationship with the reference in P.Oxy. XLII 3057 to the « crossed letter » which Ammonius had received. Perhaps his crossed letter was not one that had borne the Christian symbol of a cross, but rather a private draft of Ammonius' that he wished to retrieve. Further, within P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959, there are several references to multiple gods, presenting a clear pagan identification of the author.

In this paper, I will examine the present state of research on P.Oxy. XLII 3057 in the light of P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959 ; although the two documents cannot be proven to be directly linked to one another, the latter offers a potential non-Christian identification for Ammonius that should be considered as carefully as his Christian identification.

Description of P.Oxy. XLII 3057

In P.Oxy. XLII 3057, Ammonius takes great care in expressing his gratitude to Apollonius for the receipt of a « crossed letter », as well as of a case containing cloaks and reeds : he does not wish to put pressure on his fellow men on account of having to meet his needs. He tells Apollonius and his « brothers » that they should not carry on with their generosity towards him because he cannot pay them back. In response to Apollonius' efforts to provide a key for a « single room », he advises them not to quarrel for his or anyone's sake, but instead prays for « concord and mutual affection to maintain itself » among them. Nonetheless, he proceeds to ask Apollonius whether he has received a satisfactory amount of wool from a man named Salvius. While he frequently reminds his addressees that he does not want to create discord among them on account of his needs, he exhorts them to maintain a higher moral well-being, which would allow them to continue sharing goods with him without any negative outcome. Ammonius ends his letter with a long apology, saying that he has written « silly things » (γελοῖα) in his previous letter, thus indicating prior written communication between the two men that has not been recovered. Ammonius concludes by mentioning that Leonas endures or bears up, and he finally offers his best wishes to his « most honored friend ».

Text-critical issues

Parsons, in his *editio princeps* of P.Oxy. XLII 3057, states that the letter was written on a sheet measuring 13,5 x 23,4 cm that was cut from a roll, seeing that a thick *kollesis* is evident on the right side of the document. This is an opisthographic text : the main text of the letter is on the front, while an address was written on the back.

There is a lacuna in line 9, where some letters seem to be missing, though perhaps less than the three indicated on Parsons' transcription. The text in this passage is likely related to the issue of Ammonius' inability to repay his brothers. There are also three spelling mistakes¹.

Genre

P.Oxy. XLII 3057 was written as a private letter to Apollonius, providing an explanation for the language and references Parsons describes in relation to the « equally cryptic » P.Mert. III 115. Colin Hemer states that both documents may not have been as cryptic as they were « allusive to what the recipient already knew » (Hemer [1976] 88). Considering that Ammonius mentions prior written correspondence with his addressee, there may not have been need for further explanation of the « crossed letter », « single-room » or « pressing troubles ». Unfortunately, the same information that was clear between the writer and recipient remains relatively cryptic to outsiders.

Author / recipient authenticity

The single hand of P.Oxy. XLII 3057 is quite firm due to a consistent script throughout the text. The clear greeting in line 1 indicates that the sender of the letter is Ammonius, yet the reference to « Leonas » (29) has brought up some uncertainty among scholars about the singularity or duality of authors. The frequent switch between the first person singular and plural throughout the letter also brings confusion as to the number of authors (10–11, 14–20). Stephen Llewelyn asserts that this switch « must be explained by the fact that the writer at times feels himself, no doubt, to be writing for Leonas » (*New Documents* VI 170). The literary practice of switching from the singular to plural is also to be found within other epistolary literature (texts later canonized in the New Testament, like 1*Tim.* 6, 21, 2*Tim.* 4, 22, *Tit.* 3, 15, *Phlm.* 5, 22 and 25), with the author wishing both to speak personally to a recipient and to represent a larger community or group.

While the primary author of this letter is considered to be Ammonius, there is a possibility that either he is illiterate and Leonas is writing on his behalf, or the reverse. The former seems more likely to be true if we are to make sense of the address from Ammonius to Apollonius on the back of the papyrus. Still, Ammonius could simply be writing in the company of Leonas ; the multiple cloaks and reeds received would be understood to be for the benefit of more than one person. If, however, the author of the letter is a scribe, then the mark above χ in the letter's greeting may be a mere error of the scribe, who also made several misspellings throughout the text. If Ammonius truly cannot afford to repay Apollonius and his brothers for their kind deeds, then it is possible that he cannot afford to pay a highly educated scribe to write this letter.

On the other hand, if Ammonius has penned this letter himself and Leonas is simply a friend and bystander, then the likely use of a *nomen sacrum* together with the greeting $\chi\alpha\rho\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$ could be evidence that Ammonius is a Christian. The primary way to gather more information about this would be to investigate more closely the forthcoming publication of Oxyrhynchus papyri which would include men named Ammonius. Even though Ammonius is a commonplace name in the first and second centuries AD, a link between another

¹ 11 : νομίζωμεν > νομίζομεν ; 27 : ὄνομα > ὄνομα ; 30 : τει of τεμνίσματα is smudged and could be an incidence of misspelling as well and the editor has corrected this accordingly.

Ammonius and Leonas with a greater emphasis on the education of Ammonius could offer a stronger case for a Christian letter than simply confirming this *nomen sacrum*.

Ammonius is described as « ... nervous and under pressure » (Hemer [1976] 85), having a personal and subservient relationship with Apollonius, whom he calls ἀδελφέ and δέσποτα (Stanton [1984] 52), as well as with his fellow ἀδελφούς who are with Apollonius. Ammonius may also not necessarily have much money or property, since he has received a case full of cloaks and reeds from Apollonius. He is unable to repay his brothers for their continual courtesies, but offers prayers ὁμόνοιαν γὰρ καὶ φιλαλλη<λ>ίαν (15–16). This prayer, which displays striking similarities to Christian literary sources (as well as to pagan philosophic and mathematical sources ; see Stanton [1984] 58), opens the possibility that Ammonius offers such prayers because of his Christian identity.

Identification of Christian papyri

Integral to the identification of texts as Christian comes the understanding that, without an explicit declaration from the author of himself / herself as a Christian, it is extremely difficult to identify a text as Christian. However, a variety of information can certainly help in the deciphering process. Borrowing from Luijendijk (2008), let us consider the following markers of Christian identity :

- a) The name « Christian » : this name « originated in the first century as an outsider's term for the believers (...) [it] was not fully domesticated amongst them for three or four centuries » (Luijendijk [2008] 38).
- b) God in the singular : Mario Naldini related the singular use of θεός to the Christian identity because of the Christian theological view of monotheism (Naldini [1968] 7–10 ; Luijendijk [2008] 31).
- c) Christian nomenclature : names can provide information about gender, family, social status / cultural influence, ethnicity, religion or cultic identity.
- d) Biblical allusions, related Christian vocabulary : if Biblical language is used which can be compared to other sources that have been identified as Christian, a link to the Christian identification might be made. However, « the fact that certain monotheistic expressions and other types of religious language appear in both Christian and non-Christian private letters and other documents complicates the task of identification considerably » (Martinez [2009] 601).
- e) *Nomina sacra* : these are approximately 15 words of which the sacral character is emphasized by abbreviation ; a horizontal line is marked over the abbreviation in order to point out that this word should not be pronounced as written (Roberts [1979] 26). From Oxyrhynchus, in the pre-Constantinian period we have *nomina sacra* of κύριος, θεός, πατήρ and Ἐμμανουήλ μάρτυς. *Nomina sacra* for Ἰησοῦς and Χριστός, though prominent in literary sources from the third century, do not occur at all in papyri from this earlier period. They provide not only an indication of the religious nature of the text, but also the level of Christian education of the author (Luijendijk [2008] 67–69). The possible use of a *nomen sacrum* in P.Oxy. XLII 3057, 2, with the χ at the beginning of χαίρειν bearing a horizontal stroke above it, is a matter of debate. The writer, however, may have intended to abbreviate this term initially, only to complete it immediately after (see P.Oxy. XLII, p. 145). Also, the most standard *nomen sacrum* for Χριστός is χ̄ς, with a horizontal stroke over the χ.
- f) Mention of church or clerical titles : although it would be tempting to read the title of Apollonius on the back of P.Oxy. XLII 3057 as ἐπισκόπ(ω) « bishop », the appearance of the papyrus clearly favors a reading of an *epsilon* instead of an *omicron*, which would suggest the title ἐπισκέπ(τη) « examiner / surveyor » (Stanton [1984] 50).

Interpretative issues

In line 3, the κεχιασμένην ἐπιστολήν « crossed letter » (see also P.Oxy. X 1282) has caused some confusion. Hemer, Parsons and Llewelyn agree that a correlation between this term

and the Christian *καυρός* would be forced. Rather, it more closely takes on the meaning of cancelling – crossing out – a document or crossing the seal of a letter. The latter would imply that the letter was in its original sealed form when it was received (Hemer [1976] 89 ; Parsons in P.Oxy. XLII, p. 145). As the letter indicates, Ammonius was subjected to harassment and warned his brothers against giving occasion for external attack, which may be why he wishes to assure his friend that their correspondence has remained secure (*New Documents* VI 173).

A second issue lies in line 16 with *φιλαλλη<λ>ίαν*. This appearance of *philallelia* is earlier than any citation in the lexica (Stanton [1984] 54). Though this term does not appear in the New Testament, it becomes characteristic of Christian writers much later (Hemer [1976] 86). Parsons notes a strikingly similar parallel from Neilos of Ankyra (*Letter* 1, 146), an ascetic in the fifth century AD. However, this is not to say that it was a Christian neologism. Stanton points out that Nikomachos of Gerasa (AD 100), who vastly influenced mathematics, uses the term *philallelia* to discuss the mutual friendship of numbers (Stanton [1984] 58–59).

Early Christian writing parallels

The most reasonable, yet indefinite, cause for identifying P.Oxy. XLII 3057 as Christian can be found in the following allusions to Early Christian Literature :

- Lines 2, 7 and 12 contrasted with 29 « brother » vs. « master » – *Phlm.* 1, 16 « He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. »
- 15 « concord » – *1Clem.* 20, 10 « The very smallest of living beings meet together in peace and concord. » (see also *1Clem.* 30 and 51).
- 19 « live at peace » (*εἰρηνεύειν*) – *Rom.* 12, 18 « If possible, on your part, live at peace with all. » (see also *Mark* 9, 50 ; *2Cor.* 13, 11 ; *1Thess.* 5, 13).
- 19–20 « do not give occasions against you to others » (*ἀφορμαί*) – *1Tim.* 5, 14 « Give no occasion to the adversary to revile (us). »

P.Oxy. XLII 3057 and P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959

The name Ammonius was common enough during the early second century that the two men from both P.Oxy. XLII 3057 and P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959 could be from distinct families. Yet the similar references made by Ammonius in P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959 about his brothers, and the comparable paleographic date given to the texts, give reasonable cause for correlating the two texts. P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959 is a cancelled document or « crossed letter » to Ammonius' parents, Demetria and Dios, with several corrections where lines have been crossed out and revised in a different hand. If it is the letter mentioned by the Ammonius of P.Oxy. XLII 3057, the « crossed letter » may have simply been this letter, instead of a letter with the symbol of a cross upon it. Further, we are given strong indication that the Ammonius from P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959 is not a Christian when he asserts an identity of polytheism throughout his letter, *i.e.* « thanks to the gods... » (6–7). Therefore, if we find the same Ammonius from P.Oxy. XLII 3057 in this new publication, it is more likely, though still not definitive, that P.Oxy. LXXIII 3057 is not the earliest Christian documentary letter.

If these two letters were written by the same Ammonius, then we must re-consider the horizontal stroke above the *χ* in P.Oxy. XLII 3057, which was presented as a possible *nomen sacrum*. If there were a true *nomen sacrum* within the text, it would have been used by the sender in order to secretly pass along his Christian identity to Apollonius. In a similar manner, the Ammonius of P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959 may have been under a similar oppression even among his own family members, and may have felt the need to mask his beliefs under an expression of polytheism. Families were commonly divided due to the emergence of Christianity and its effect on young believers whose parents were unwilling to convert.

Unfortunately, only a letter openly indicating Ammonius' true beliefs could authorize our acceptance of this. Nevertheless, this consideration alone gives insight into the dilemma with identifying the Christian nature of documentary papyri in the early Christian period – one that persists due to a majority of Christians who remained hidden due to their fear of persecution.

Conclusion

Parsons stated in his most recent assessment of the text that « the date of P.Oxy. XLII 3057 rests entirely on the hand-writing. Either this paleographical date is too early (...) or this letter is the earliest Christian document surviving in Egypt » (Parsons [1980] 289). Due to the scarcity of early Christian documentary texts, we have few parallels to P.Oxy. XLII 3057 which would allow us to identify it as definitively Christian. While P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959 allows for one hypothesis toward the non-Christian identity of P.Oxy. XLII 3057, it cannot be fully considered as a pagan text. Still, many scholars agree that there is sufficient cause for considering this text as non-Christian because of the forced allusions and erroneous Christian translations of non-Christian terms. Some argue that there is even a stark counter-New Testament ethic in the contractual friendship within the letter, which was a problem considered greatly by Paul and the Corinthian church (*New Documents VI* 173). Without indisputable evidence, we cannot know for sure whether this text is the earliest Christian letter or a non-Christian letter from the late first century unless our historical methods are adjusted to create new standards of identification.

Nevertheless, the discovery of these two private letters from Ammonius has an impact on our understanding of the everyday experiences in Antiquity (*i.e.* concord and mutual friendship, sharing of goods, etc.). While we cannot be certain about the religious identity of the Ammonius in both P.Oxy. XLII 3057 and P.Oxy. LXXIII 4959, the analysis of each text is beneficial toward identifying documentary texts according to religious beliefs that can add to our sociological understanding of the earliest Christian people.

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[Editor's note : to this bibliography should now be added a recent publication of which the author of this article could not be aware at the time when she delivered her paper, but which constitutes a significant contribution to the discussion on the topic : Ramelli, I.L.E. (2010), « A New Reading of One of the Earliest Christian Letters Outside the New Testament and the Dangers of Early Christian Communities in Egypt », *Nova Tellus* 28, 125–159 <<http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/src/inicio/ArtPdfRed.jsp?iCve=59115484005>>].