

**Roger S. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Pp. xiii + 110; + 15 halftones + 11 tables. \$29.95/£20.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-14026-1.**

- [1] This is a small book, but with a big punch. Bagnall has managed to pack a tremendous amount of information into a short space. However, he is not simply summarizing consensus positions or offering a basic level textbook. Instead he is engaging a number of contested issues surrounding early Christianity and the transmission of its texts, and exploiting the surviving papyrological and codicological evidence to present informed answers. The book is arranged into four chapters with accompanying notes, bibliography and indices at the end of the book.
- [2] In the first chapter ‘the Dating of the Earliest Christian Books in Egypt’, Bagnall advances the following proposition: ‘the narrowness of much [scholarship] has permitted its practitioners to reach conclusions that I believe are profoundly at odds with fundamental social realities of the ancient world and with basic probability’ (p. 1). Focusing on pre-Constantinian Christianity in Egypt, Bagnall observes the paucity of archaeological evidence and the concomitant need to use the evidence of the papyri to probe the realities of daily life and practices. It is stated that the documentary papyri offer little help in evaluating Egyptian Christianity before 300, since they contain no details of religious affiliation or practice (p. 7). Having noted the lack of evidence for Christianity in Egypt in the second century, Bagnall turns to ‘the papyri bearing biblical texts and given relatively early dates by some of the scholars who have studied them’ (p. 10). Using the Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB) as a datum, Bagnall notes that it lists one Christian codex fragment as originating in the late first or early second century, and six others in the second century. With the first example he notes that the LDAB has simply misread the comments of the scholars who published the fragment from the Psalms codex, since they state that a second century date is more likely than a date in the third century. Furthermore, Bagnall argues against van Minnen’s suggestion that since only one-twelfth to one-twentieth of surviving papyri have been published, one could expect the proportion of unpublished Christian texts to be similar to the proportion of published texts. Bagnall argues that since Christian texts sell for far more in comparison to other papyri, and that their publication attracts far more prestige for scholars, this means unpublished collections are searched for Christian texts, whereas non-Christian texts are regularly left unpublished (p. 18). Then making controversial extrapolations about the size of the Christian population (less than 1% before the late 220s) he provides a table of expected numbers of surviving Christian books from various periods. However, techniques of extrapolating through sampling have various limitations and although Bagnall is not unaware of these, one wonders at the level of confidence that can be placed in results such as that from the second century one would expect the survival of just one Christian codex, and maybe only twelve from around the turn of the second or third centuries. The limitations of small sample sizes need to be considered. However, what Bagnall does illustrate is how little we actually know about any of these matters.
- [3] In chapter two, Bagnall engages in two case studies. The first is re-visiting, for heuristic purposes, Carsten Thiede’s claim to re-date several papyri to the first century, especially the Magdalen fragments of Matthew (P<sup>64</sup>). While this section is mainly descriptive, Bagnall does correctly draw attention to the dubious comparative dating process utilized by Thiede. Perhaps the most colourful is the following:

The reference here to Herculaneum, which is mentioned only in passing, is remarkable. Thiede offers no citation of specific texts or palaeographic features as having similarity to the Matthew

codex – this is all just a drive-by shooting, in effect, invoking the single most famous closed archaeological context with a precise date. (pp. 31-32)

In many ways, Thiede's work is a 'soft target', but Bagnall uses it to illustrate his claim that such datings are not objective inquiries, but are suffused with heavy agendas. The second case study interacts with Nikolaos Gonis' dating of three fragments of the *Shepherd of Hermas* in volume 69 of the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*. It is noted that Gonis, albeit tentatively, uses his early dating of the fragments of P.Oxy. 4706 to suggest that, contrary to the theory that sections of the *Shepherd* circulated independently, the fact that this manuscript attests the unified form of the Visions and Mandates at an early date speaks against separation theories. Again, Bagnall sees dating issues driven, at least partially, by wider theories.

- [4] Chapter three investigates the issue of 'The Economics of Book Production' (pp. 50-69). Here the cost of books is quantified through the citation of extant references to the cost of codices of various sizes. Here various factors are taken into account, such as the quality of copying, and the costs of various components in the book production process—labour, materials and so on. The implications of these costs would have been a little clearer if readers were given some indication of the relative cost of codices in comparison to either some level of weekly pay, or the cost of other commodities. However at the end of the chapter he does conclude that 'we have here at least the beginnings of a hypothesis about how a body of Greek-reading, educated, well-to-do, book-owning Christians could have come into being and how the leadership of the church might already in the first half of the third century have been interested in developing a form of Egyptian that would serve the need of their religion' (p. 69).
- [5] Bagnall's last controversial claim, in his final chapter, is that contrary to widespread scholarly claims Christians were not distinctive in their preference for the codex format. The transition from roll to codex is acknowledged to be 'one of the major technological changes of the Roman world' (p. 71). However, by the end of the chapter the ground seems to have shifted in the light of the raw data. Bagnall is correct that the origin of the codex remains unclear (p. 90), but he sees the early adoption of codex technology in Egypt as a distinctive Christian practice.

This pattern of adoption throws into higher relief the early Christian adoption of the codex for scripture. Even if, as I have argued in earlier chapters, some of the dates proposed for Christian biblical papyrus manuscripts are too early, there is no doubt at all that the church routinely and uniformly used the codex for scripture in the period from the end of the second to the beginning of the third century, when it becomes visible as an institutional presence in Egypt. That is a century before society at large seems to have reached even the point of moderately widespread use of the codex, and it highlights the distinctiveness and specificity of Christian practice (pp. 88-89).

In many ways, this is far from being a controversial or challenging finding. Instead it appears to reflect accurately the current scholarly consensus.

- [6] Ultimately Bagnall makes two important claims in this book that require consideration. First, there has been a tendency to date Christian papyri too early. And, secondly, there is little evidence for the emergence or visibility of Christianity in Egypt before the end of the second century. Both of these points deserve close reflection. It is surprising that Bagnall did not attack the early dating of  $\Psi^{52}$  more severely, especially given the fact that it was dated in relation to P.Egerton 2. The publication of P.Köln 255, which is a continuation of one of the pages of

P.Egerton 2, has resulted in a revision of the dating of P.Egerton 2. This is due to P.Köln 255 containing a punctuation mark not evidenced prior to the end of the second century. Hence, instead of the initial proposal of dating P.Egerton 2 to around 130, it is now seen as being written sometime closer to 200. However, despite the fact that the hands of  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$  and P.Egerton 2 were seen as similar, and hence  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$  was dated to 125 on this basis, there has been no attempt to move the dating of  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$  to around the end of the second century. Such an insight would have strengthened Bagnall's case of the ideologically driven nature of the dating of many New Testament papyri. The case for the spread of Christianity in Egypt beyond the confines of Alexandria as occurring in the third rather than the second century may also be a corrective to prevailing theories. However, one must acknowledge, as Bagnall does, that such theories are simply constrained by a lack of evidence. This is a provocative and informative book that deserves detailed interaction and wide consideration of the ideas it advances.

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