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Roger S. Bagnall: Early Christian Books in Egypt

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CHAPTER I
The Dating of the Earliest
Christian Books in Egypt

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The subject of this book, early Christian books in Egypt, cannot make any claim to novelty. The bibliography is enormous, and much of it is learned and even intelligent. If I dare to offer some observations on several aspects of this vast domain, it is certainly not because I think I know more about Christian literary manuscripts, or about book production in antiquity, or indeed about the dating of handwriting, than my predecessors. That is certainly not the case. Nor will many of my observations be very original. Rather, what has led me to trespass onto this intellectual territory is my unease with what I see as the excessively self-enclosed character and absence of self-awareness of much of that scholarship.

The narrowness of much of it 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; and the lack of a self-critical posture has been particularly damaging in that it has tended to allow problematic assumptions, interests, agendas, and desires to escape being made explicit. Much of what I have to say will therefore be directed at bringing these foundations of the discussion into the light and looking for their consequences. More broadly, my interest in the subject comes from two intersecting directions of work: first, social history and the role of writing in

ancient society; and second, the character of written texts as archaeological artifacts (Bagnall 1995).

The subject of early Christian books, of course, offers many interpretations, many avenues of approach, and many sets of issues, of which I shall deal with only a few. That there is such a diversity of issues and approaches is in large part the result of Christianity's inheritance from Judaism of a writing-centered culture. I do not mean by this to suggest that other characteristics of the religion, like ritual, healings, and so on, were absent or unimportant, only that they were perhaps less distinctive and original. The gospels and the letters of the New Testament respond to certain characteristics of the early church and embed its diversity and contentiousness. Surviving writings that did not make their way into the eventual biblical canon go back to almost as early a period as the gospels and epistles.¹ A religious movement geographically dispersed around the Roman world, but evidently, from an early date, intent on achieving some kind of unity and uniformity, depended on correspondence and on written versions of its message to achieve any kind of coherence.² Such unity and coherence need not have been important, but in Christianity clearly they were felt to be important from the very beginning, or at least from as close to it as we can get. This double drive for uniformity and organizational structure is indeed one of Christianity's most distinctive characteristics.

It is particularly with the implications of surviving books and book fragments for Christianity before Constantine that I shall be concerned, and especially with its first two centuries. That is where the liveliest controversies are to be found. The reason for that is not obscure. It is, quite simply, that we are far less well informed about pre-Constantinian Christianity than we are about the fourth century or later periods. This relative lack of information has been a central problem for scholarship, in large part because Christian discourse and the study of Christianity have for more than a century been obsessed with questions about the nature of early Christianity, of Christian "origins."³ For modern scholars who were unfriendly to the Christianity that emerged as catholic orthodoxy from the struggles of late antiquity it has been important to demonstrate that this late antique religion had betrayed the essence of the original message of the religion

it claimed to represent; and the contrary has been equally important to demonstrate for those intent on defending Nicene Christianity against all such assertions. The authority attributed by the church to Jesus and the canonical scriptures has been virtually the one element on which people who agree on little else can agree. Or, as we might put it, those who think that Nicene Christianity was a deviation from a more sympathetic primitive Christianity have adopted for the sake of persuasiveness a rhetorical strategy that privileges the supposed origins. Determining just what Jesus preached and how far the New Testament canon rests on an accurate rendering of that preaching has thus been one of the most durable of scholarly industries.

There is, of course, a large body of surviving extracanonical Christian writings from the period before Constantine, both those preserved and revered in orthodoxy and those rejected by it (Ehrman 2003). Many of the latter, although not all of them, were not transmitted in the medieval manuscript tradition and are known only from texts discovered since the late nineteenth century. The publication of the Gospel of Judas in April 2006 has brought one more element to this dossier.⁴ But because all these writings, whether preserved or rejected by the church authorities, are with hardly an exception writings devoted to supporting one side or another of some ancient controversy, and thus obviously not objective witnesses to the early character of Christianity, there is a tradition, now of some antiquity itself, of looking to archaeological and documentary sources—using these terms in a broad sense—to try to capture a less tendentious and more “authentic” early Christianity.⁵ That notion is itself problematic, but that is not my subject here.

In that endeavor, Egyptian Christianity has played a central role, mainly because the survival of papyri there seemed already by the early twentieth century to offer hopes of recovering an earlier documentary past than was available elsewhere, but also because the episcopal throne of Alexandria was one of the most prestigious of late antiquity and seemed to demand a past commensurate with its distinction and influence under Athanasius and his successors. And even for the period after Constantine, when archaeological evidence remains relatively scarce until the fifth century, the evidence from the papyri has continued to be called on to help us figure out what

was going on behind the noisy clash of doctrines in the theological literature, above all what were the realities of daily practice and habits (Wipszycka 1996, 2007a, and forthcoming).

The pressure to produce usable information from the papyri has been even more intense than it might otherwise have been precisely because Christianity before Constantine in Egypt itself is so poorly known from the literary tradition. There is in effect a vast blank, the “mere echo and a puff of smoke” as Walter Bauer famously called it.⁶ Most of this tiny amount of traditional information comes from Eusebius’s *Church History*, and it does not give one the impression that Eusebius knew a lot. In book 2, chapter 16, he says, “They say that this Mark was the first to be sent to preach in Egypt the gospel which he had also put into writing, and was the first to establish churches in Alexandria itself.” That is all Eusebius knows of the supposed foundation of the see of St. Mark, and he does not seem to give it a high degree of confidence; it is clear that his sources were far from being as copious as he was accustomed to in some other settings.

There follows, in chapters 17–18 of the *Church History*, a long excursus concerning Philo’s *On the Contemplative Life*, which Eusebius identifies as describing an early Christian community near Alexandria, ancestral to or at least foreshadowing the monastic milieus of his own time. This passage has given rise to extensive modern discussion that I cannot go into here. Then comes a more characteristic notice, in chapter 24: “In the eighth year of the reign of Nero Annianus was the first after Mark the evangelist to receive the *leitourgia* of the *paroikia* in Alexandria.” Stephen Davis, in his recent book *The Early Coptic Papacy* (2004: 14–15), has summarized the scattered notices that follow in Eusebius about the succession to Mark and Annianus. None of them, for the period down to the late second century, betrays any actual information about any of the early bishops of Alexandria, other than their names and dates.

Alexandria did, of course, eventually develop a distinctively centralized episcopate leading a highly Christianized society with a vast network of local bishops. But Eusebius, as we have seen, had no real information about this developmental process before the episcopate of Demetrios (189–231), nor do we. There have been various reactions to this blank, including Attila Jakab’s argument that there were no

bishops of Alexandria before Demetrios, only a collection of presbyters.⁷ This has become almost a counterorthodoxy, if we may judge by its adoption as a basic premise for understanding the position of Origen, in the new book of Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams (2006). But the logical consequences that might be derived from such a view, or from pre-Demetrian skepticism in general, for the development of the book in Egypt have hardly touched discussions of early Christian manuscripts actually known.⁸

It has been widely asserted, instead, or at least assumed, that the developments in the reign of Demetrios show that (and are understandable only on the assumption that) Christianity was widely disseminated in the Egyptian *chora* before this time, and that he in effect built on a substantial infrastructure, at least in the metropoleis of the nomes. This view has in large part been based on the existence of papyrus letters and manuscripts dated to the second century and coming from various provenances. This is true even in the work of so critical a historian as Ewa Wipszycka, who has rejected the Christian identity of some of what have been claimed to be the earliest private letters showing signs of Christianity.⁹ This view, however, seems to me seriously open to question because of the insecure dating of the papyri. Perhaps equally problematic, it shows just how vital the existence and early dating of the papyri are to the entire conception of the development of Christianity in Egypt and how much is at stake in such datings. Without these early datings of papyri, we have no contemporary witnesses to pre-Demetrian Christianity to provide a background for his era.¹⁰ It is worth the trouble at least to consider the consequences that would follow from taking a different view.

It may be helpful to summarize briefly some of the distinctive characteristics visible in the church of Egypt in late antiquity, as Wipszycka has outlined them. The episcopal network of Egypt developed relatively late in comparison with other regions; there were no metropolitan bishops in charge of subdivisions of the Egyptian province (which included Cyrenaica); the patriarch therefore had a direct relationship to all his bishops. Similarly within dioceses, priests had a direct relationship to their bishops. These characteristics were highly consequential for the history of the Egyptian church. What today in the language of management we might call an extremely flat structure,

with a lack of intermediate layers of hierarchy, is very striking. Such structures have, as Wipszycka notes, various trade-offs of advantages and disadvantages. The chief executive, the bishop of Alexandria, had a relatively weak ability to watch over so many people carefully and adequately, thus allowing room for quite a bit of local freedom of maneuver. On the other hand, potential rivals to episcopal power were kept far from any position in which they could build up a substantial power base.

It would be surprising if a flat, monarchic structure of this kind had been universally popular. In fact there are many signs that the authoritarian ambitions of the see of Alexandria were not supported by everyone. Origen's need to leave Alexandria, late in Demetrios's reign, was probably a matter of a struggle over episcopal control of the teaching function, which was most likely not very institutionalized until that point (Jakab 2001: 169–73 and 216–27). The Meletian schism in the fourth century was mainly a question of the primacy of Alexandria over other bishops. Although Arius's clash with successive bishops is depicted by Athanasius throughout his works as a matter of false versus correct doctrine, something he could not claim about the Meletians, it seems that the Arian controversy was perennially insoluble precisely because it was *not* a matter of doctrinal agreement but of the struggle of the bishop to control a presbyter in his diocese and of widespread resistance to that type of control over preaching.

In the face of such a picture, it is hard not to adopt the extreme skeptic's position and wonder if the entire history of the see of Alexandria during its first century and a half, with its long but thin foundation story, was not part of an attempt, at the earliest in the time of Demetrios but perhaps not until a century or so later,¹¹ to create a legitimation by apostolicity for an otherwise contested monarchic power in the hands of the bishop.¹² Wipszycka, although not going so far as to see in Demetrios the first bishop of Alexandria, has proposed that we should see in Demetrios the originator of the network of bishops in the countryside, with only *presbyteroi* in place before him. She believes that he deliberately set out to episcopalize the *chora*, in the face of opposition from the *presbyteroi*. This may be correct, but it is worth observing that even so he consecrated, as far as we know, only three of them, which does not support the view that the

much larger network we find at the end of the third century was really his creation.

But whether the larger network of bishops was the product of Demetrios or of his successor Heraklas, who was in office from 231 to 247 and consecrated twenty bishops to Demetrios's three, and in less than half the time that Demetrios had, it remains clear that at a minimum down to at least the end of the second century, and perhaps to the second quarter of the third, bishops did not exist outside Alexandria as they did in other Roman provinces. Why would this have been the case? Explanations seem of necessity to run in the direction of either a lack of desire on the part of the bishops in Alexandria to create such a body of local bishops or else their inability to do so. As I have indicated, Wipszycka thinks that the latter was the case, and this inability stemmed from opposition among the provincial clergy. But in part that view stems from the conviction that Christianity was indeed widespread in the countryside. Again, it is worth asking if this assumption might be wrong. What would be the consequences of imagining that in fact there were not very many Christians in the *nomes*?¹³ That does not, of course, mean that we must go as far as Jakab, who has argued that there was essentially no evangelization of the *chora* before Heraklas,¹⁴ just that we would not imagine that the numbers of Christians were very substantial.

Here we are brought back inescapably to the papyri, with a stronger sense of just how much stands or falls on our assessment of the value of the papyri, both documentary and literary, for second-century Egyptian Christianity. Documentary papyrology is in fact not of much help for the period before 300. The Roman government did not record religious affiliation in its census operations and indeed would have had no concept of "religion" in the modern sense at this period even if it thought it something worth asking people to declare. It is not until the declarations of sacrifice under Decius (249–251) that we can legitimately begin to look to the bureaucracy for any idea that it might record compliance or noncompliance with the state religion. Official records do not even designate individuals by Christian clerical titles in this period, nor do individuals describe themselves as presbyters or deacons in legal documents of this era. That is not in all likelihood a matter of self-concealment, which was not necessary

during most of the third century, but of a sheer lack of the notion that the clergy formed an occupational or civil category deserving mention of this sort. The Christian clergy was not thought of in the same category as, for example, the Egyptian priesthoods, access to which brought fiscal privileges and was therefore carefully controlled by the state. There are just a couple of instances, from the second half of the third century, when people are identified as “Christians,” and these rarities occur in a fashion that makes it speculative how to interpret them.¹⁵ AnneMarie Luijendijk’s recent Harvard dissertation has suggested that “Christian” may in fact in some cases be a way of identifying someone as a member of the clergy, a professional Christian, so to speak (Luijendijk forthcoming). This is an attractive notion, but it does not widen the evidence very much. At all events, neither official records nor private contracts offer any hope of recovering second-century Christianity in Egypt.¹⁶ That fact has long been understood, at least in a kind of general fashion, even if not really internalized.

In consequence, successive compilers of Christian letters have done their best to find private letters that could be dated before the Tetrarchy (293–305). The general difficulty of dating many letter-hands, particularly the less skilled, has made this a perilous enterprise. Much ingenuity has indeed been devoted to trying to identify such letters written in the second century, but with essentially no result.¹⁷ Mario Naldini, although excessively given to describing epistolary banalities as fervent expressions of Christian faith,¹⁸ recognized the problem. Following in the footsteps of Colin Roberts,¹⁹ he admitted the scarcity of such letters but argued that one could nonetheless say with confidence that Christianity was widespread in the cities and towns of Egypt in the second century, because the biblical and related papyri had come from a wide range of provenances (Naldini 1968/1998: 34, 58). The earliest letter that can be said certainly to be written by a Christian, because of the use of a distinctively Christian abbreviated religious term, *ἐν κ(ρ)ίῳ*, *P.Bas.* 16 (Naldini no. 4), is dated to the early third century, thus to the period of Demetrios’s episcopate or at the latest that of his successor. There are a number of other such letters, securely Christian, datable to the latter part of the third century, and some reasonable assignments to the earlier part of the third century. But letters datable to the second century with confi-

dence are never securely Christian, and letters with definite marks of Christianity are not firmly datable to the second century.

With official documents, private documents, and even private letters failing to yield the desired information, the critical importance of the literary papyri for a Christian presence in the Egyptian countryside in the second century is thus all the more obvious, as Naldini and Roberts already recognized. These are, in effect, the last hope of finding a pre-Demetrian Christianity outside Alexandria, whatever one may think about the usability of the later literary tradition for reconstructing the situation in Alexandria itself. A great deal of church history is dependent on them. If there was a significant body of biblical or other theological texts in circulation in places like Oxyrhynchus, Arsinoe, and Hermopolis in the second century, we will have to accept that the lack of other evidence is just a product of the ways in which people did not feel any reason to record their Christian identity in everyday written form. But if there is no such body of Christian manuscripts, we may be entitled to suspect, with Jakab, that the widespread presence of Christianity in the countryside before Demetrios is an illusion. If so, the long-standing baffled disappointment of papyrologists and those who follow papyrological work in the face of the relative silence of the documentary papyri would only be intensified. The level of this disappointment, however, is a result not only of the silence of the papyri taken on their own but also of the fact that I remarked on earlier, namely, that we also have so little other evidence for Christianity in the period before the episcopate of Demetrios and that hopes for the contribution of the papyri were correspondingly high. The period of Demetrios is of course rich in literary remains of the Alexandrian church, with the voluminous output of both Clement and Origen to give a sense of the lively and contentious intellectual atmosphere of this church in this period. But before Clement the picture is close to blank, just as with the papyrus documents and letters. And Grafton and Williams (2006) have argued forcefully that this literary work is to be seen in terms of normal ancient literary and philosophical work, based on independent means of the writer or of a patron, as in the case of Origen, and did not rely on ecclesiastical infrastructure; they date the creation of serious intellectual work in that kind of institutional framework only to the episcopacy of Eusebius in Caesarea.

There is one other point to be made about the consequences of failure to find evidence of second-century Christianity. The conclusion that Christianity was pretty much limited to Alexandria (with its large Jewish community, devastated under Trajan) and other places from which we have no papyri has not been the only possible explanation offered for the general lack of evidence. There has also been Walter Bauer's thesis that Egypt's Christianity was heterodox and therefore effectively concealed from view by a posterity that rejected that kind of Christianity.²⁰ In fact, however, heterodoxy does not really fare any better than orthodoxy—(these are, I know, problematic and retrospective terms, but that does not need to concern us in the present context)—in this assessment, because there is little sign of the Gnostics (who are usually the group mainly in view—this is of course another problematic term) in the second-century papyri either. If the absence of papyrus witnesses other than the uncertainly dated biblical papyri is a sign that orthodox Christianity was missing, it is just as good a witness for the absence of Gnosticism.²¹

When we look to the possibility that the manuscripts will rescue us from this deep pit of ignorance, we must confront at the start the basic difficulty of dating manuscripts written in the ancient world, because of the absence, in most cases, of external evidence for the date and because of the approximateness and subjectivity of dates based on the styles of handwriting used in these manuscripts. Book-hands aspire to regularity, and their style changes only slowly over the decades. They are far harder to date accurately than are the hands of documentary papyri, and minor variations or individual letter-forms are rarely reliable guides. In the case of the biblical papyri commonly assigned to the second century, with which I shall be concerned here, everything rests on such fallible palaeographical dating. I am using the term "biblical" here in a broad sense, to include noncanonical works as well as the Old Testament and New Testament canons, but that does not actually change the situation significantly in this case.

Let us turn, then, to look at the papyri bearing biblical texts and given relatively early dates by some of the scholars who have studied them, leaving aside for the moment the controversy of a decade ago over some supposed first-century gospel fragments and also the earliest fragments of the *Shepherd* of Hermas, both of which require an

extended discussion of their own (chapter 2). These papyri with early dates bear the burden not only of helping to indicate whether there were Christians in the Egyptian hinterland (and what sorts of Christians they were) but also of telling us whether the Christians were leaders in the use of the codex (chapter 4)—heavy burdens indeed for what are mostly small scraps.

I shall take as a starting point the dates given for texts in the Leuven Database of Ancient Books,²² which does not represent any particular school of thought on this point. That eclecticism is not free of problems, but it will at least avoid any particular structural bias at the beginning. We find there one Christian codex fragment assigned a date to the late first or early second century, and six more dated to the second century. Apparent pride of place goes to a fragment of Psalms published four decades ago by J.W.B. Barns and G. D. Kilpatrick.²³ They do not in fact date this papyrus to the turn of the century, as the Leuven Database seems to suggest, but rather state that it “is more likely to be the second century A.D. than the third,” a view that is restated a page later in their article as, “the papyrus may belong anywhere from the end of the first century to the end of the second.” In other words, they assign it to the second century. They compare its handwriting to that of two other early biblical papyri, *P.Ant.* I 7 and *P.Ryl.* III 457, of which the first is another fragment of Psalms, the latter a New Testament fragment to which we shall come shortly. Like *P.Ant.* I 7,²⁴ the text published by Barns and Kilpatrick presents no distinctively Christian characteristics except, arguably, the use of the codex format. In both cases, then, there is some risk of circular argument in identifying the texts as Christian rather than Jewish. (On this question, see below, p. 24.) The editor of the Antinoopolis papyrus dated it to the middle of the second century.

In both of these cases of Psalms fragments, the most thorough study of the history of the early codices, by Sir Eric Turner (1977), offers a later date, namely, second to third century. That, as it happens, is also the date assigned in the Bodleian’s register for the Psalms fragment, quite likely deriving from the opinion of Arthur Hunt, whose widow donated it to the Bodleian. Grenfell and Hunt are regularly described in much of the more recent scholarly literature about the codex as having assigned excessively late dates to many of their finds,

as a result of an a priori judgment that codex fragments should not be found before the fourth century.²⁵ That may have been true in the early stages of their work, but it is not necessarily a fair assumption about their later work, when the finds from Oxyrhynchus had made it clear that codices occurred in the third century. Indeed, the Hunt who would have dated the Psalms fragment to the end of the second or the beginning of the third century obviously did not think that codices started in the fourth century!²⁶ As we shall see, Turner, who knew vastly more early codices than Grenfell and Hunt or indeed practically anyone else before or afterward, fairly consistently also opted for later dates than those that the editors of papyri and other commentators had offered.

The third of the fragments assigned an early date, *P.Bad.* IV 56 (figure 1.1), also contains a work from the Jewish scriptures, this time of Exodus. It was found at Qarara, ancient Hipponon in the Herakleopolite nome, and dated to the second century by its editor, Friedrich Bilabel, without offering any parallels or analysis. It contains *nomina sacra* written in the Christian fashion and is thus more definitely a Christian production than either of the Psalms fragments. Turner assigned it to the late second century.²⁷

Turning now to the canonical gospels, there are again three fragments attributed to the second century. The first of these is a small bit of the Gospel of John in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, of unknown provenance.²⁸ It is the only fragment dated by Turner to the second century without qualification. More recently, however, one scholar has argued that it should be reassigned to the early third century, on the basis of a comparison with *P.Chester Beatty X*.²⁹ That may be too definitive, but an exhaustive article by Brent Nongbi (2005) has brought forward a range of palaeographical parallels that undermine confidence in an early date, even if they do not fully establish one in the late second or early third century.

The second New Testament fragment, *P.Oxy.* L 3523, also of John (figure 1.2), was assigned to the second century by T. C. Skeat, its first editor. He offered as palaeographic parallels *P.Egerton 2*, which is more generally dated to the turn of the second to third centuries, and *P.Oxy.* IV 656, which he and Bell assigned to the second century but which Turner (*Old Testament 9*) again dated II/III.

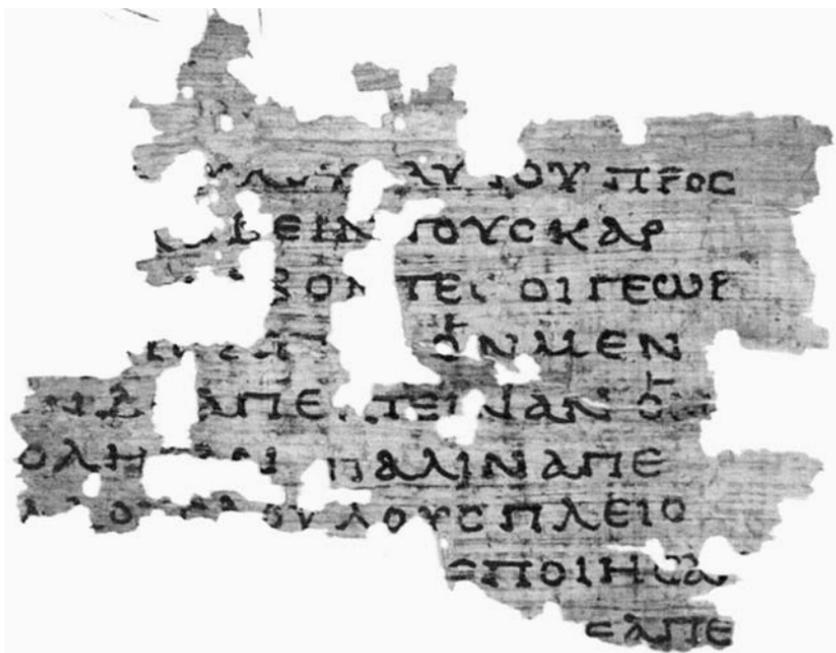


FIGURE 1.3. *P.Oxy.* LXIV 4404. Photo courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.

to. There are comparisons within the group, and there are comparisons to several papyri generally dated to the end of the second or beginning of the third century. Disagreement arises only about where the entire cluster should be dated. One may see one camp, typically consisting, across the generations, of Bell, Roberts, and Skeat, which prefers an early date for the group, and another, represented in more recent times by Turner and Thomas, but originally by Grenfell and Hunt, arguing that the entire cluster should be put later. There is on average perhaps a half century or a bit more between the positions of these two camps. Herbert Hunger has also argued for the earlier date, seemingly happier to push them back to the very start of the second century or the end of the first than to have them dated later (Hunger 1960: esp. 20). Only the fragmentary apocryphal gospel stands outside this discussion, detached from the relatively enclosed circle of palaeographic parallels adduced.



FIGURE 1.4. *P.Oxy. LX 4009*. Photo courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.

The number of papyri dated to the general zone of the late second to early third century, or, even more vaguely, of the second to third century, is much larger. The Leuven Database includes—apart from the items already mentioned—some twenty papyri in that range. If six out of the “second-century seven” already discussed were added to that, we would have twenty-six papyri dated to this period, compared with only one before the late second century. Obviously these two views can have enormously different consequences for our conclusions about the diffusion of Christianity in the second century.

It is interesting, I think, to look at the breakdown of these relatively early texts by the works represented (table 1.1). At this point, it is useful, even necessary, to look more deeply into the assumptions underlying all these scholarly agonizings about the numbers of Christian papyri in the second and third centuries. We might well

TABLE 1.1
 Christian Papyri Dated to the Second and/or Early Third Centuries

| | Dated II or II/III | Dated early III | Total |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-------|
| Old Testament | 3 | 8 | 11 |
| New Testament | 3 | 6 | 9 |
| New Testament Apocrypha | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Hermas | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Dubiously Christian | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Total | 8 | 21 | 29 |

ask how many we should expect to find—in comparison with *what standard* are we thinking that there are few or many?

Obviously our surviving papyri come from a small minority of the ancient communities of Egypt, and even among these only a tiny fraction of all that were written have survived; an even smaller percentage have been edited. Peter van Minnen has estimated that published papyri amount to somewhere between one-twelfth and one-twentieth of his guess at a total of known numbers of papyri in all collections, an estimate that is in the range of 1 million to 1.5 million, and there is little information publicly available on what the unpublished material consists of (Van Minnen 2009). In any event, probably the most we might hope to have in the published papyri would be for the number of Christian literary papyri, set against the total of literary texts, to be proportionate to the Christians' share of the population at a given moment.

There are, to be sure, reasons both why this estimate might be too optimistic and why it might be too pessimistic. Christian books not only did not in this period have the advantage of being part of the educational system—the reason why we have so much Homer in the papyri, for example—but also should have suffered from the systematic destruction of Christian books ordered during some of the later persecutions. There are other elements also affecting the Christian share of published literary texts. First, editors have been more eager

to edit Christian fragments than any other, precisely because of the intense interest generated by such texts and the issues at stake in dating them.³⁰ Second, some of the fragments might be dated too early for the same reason. The second of these points is of course at the focus of our inquiry. As to the first, I do not know how to quantify it. Every papyrologist will instinctively consider it likely to be true. New Testament fragments sell for far more than comparable papyri of other types, and they generate more visits to papyrus collections and their Web sites than any other type of papyrus. No one who identified an early fragment of a Christian text in a papyrus collection would be likely to leave it unpublished.

For the sake of the following argument, I shall assume that the various crosscurrents I have described cancel one another. That is, I shall assume that the lower probability of original creation and of ancient survival of Christian texts is negated, but not outweighed, by the much higher modern probability of publication of those pieces that do survive. It is most unlikely that this assumption is exactly right, of course. If anything it will be mistaken in the direction of overstating the likely proportion of Christian texts, above all because the influence of classical *paideia* undoubtedly increased the volume of Homer papyri, perhaps overbalancing the likelihood that most collections have been scoured for Christian texts. In the final chapter, I shall also explore the possible implications for this question of the economics of book production.

We would then want to ask what proportion of the population was Christian and likely to possess Christian books. We do not, of course, have accurate figures about the percentage of the population that was Christian in the second and third centuries, nor will we ever have them. The census did not, as I already remarked, record such information, and in fact no one ever knew what the figures were. But models of what these numbers might have been have been offered by Keith Hopkins and Rodney Stark (Hopkins 1998; Stark 1996: esp. 3–27); as for our purposes these do not differ significantly and they use similar methodologies, I shall use here Stark's calculation that the rate of growth of the Christian population ought to have been somewhere in the neighborhood of 3.4 percent per year (or 40 percent per decade). He bases this estimate on the twin assumptions that

Christians numbered only a thousand in the whole empire in 40 CE and that they were an overwhelming majority by the late fourth century. Both of these points are controversial, but neither is likely to be wrong by enough to alter the results where they matter for our present purposes. It should be stressed, indeed, that different assumptions, particularly about the dominance of Christianity in the late fourth century, would be much more likely to strengthen the point I am going to make than to weaken it.

A more serious objection might be that the growth rate is not likely to have been constant; but if this objection is correct, as I think it surely is, then Stark's assumption of a constant growth rate will flatter the number of Christians in the earlier period. The reason is simple: the most likely shape for the curve of the rate of Christianization, that is, the rate of growth of the Christian population as a percentage of the entire population, if it was not a straight line, is the S-shaped curve of the logistic function, which has been widely observed in phenomena of diffusion ranging from religious conversion to technology change. That means that the growth rate in the earlier centuries and at the end of the period was probably slower and the rate in the middle—from the mid-third to the mid-fourth century, probably—was steeper.

I now present a table embodying Stark's simpler assumptions about growth, which will, as I have indicated, have if anything a tendency to exaggerate the number of Christians in the second century (table 1.2). It is based on the assumption that Egypt amounted to about a tenth of the population of the empire, for which I am using the conventional figure of 55 million. The argument about percentages will not, however, be affected if one prefers a different total, and those scholars who believe that the number was higher would also put the population of Egypt higher as well.

According to these estimates, Christians did not amount to as much as 1 percent of the population until the late 220s—near the end of Demetrios's episcopate, in other words. I stress again that even though none of these figures is likely to be correct, their approximate level would not be affected very much by almost any plausible changes that one might make in the assumptions.

So when Demetrios came to the episcopal throne in Alexandria, there were probably fewer than twenty thousand Christians in all

TABLE 1.2
Estimated Size of Christian Population in Egypt

| Date | Number of Christians | Percent of population |
|------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 100 | 753 | 0.014 |
| 125 | 1,746 | 0.032 |
| 150 | 4,047 | 0.074 |
| 175 | 9,382 | 0.170 |
| 200 | 21,747 | 0.395 |
| 225 | 50,409 | 0.917 |
| 250 | 116,849 | 2.120 |

of Egypt. I suggest now that we look at the total numbers of literary papyri—fragments of books of all types—for three chronological slices, the first to second century, the second century, and the second to third century,³¹ set against the expected or probable number of Christian texts that would be proportionate to their share of the population (table 1.3). I have obtained the expected number of Christian books (column 3 in the table) by multiplying the average of the beginning, middle, and ending percentages of Christians in the population (column 2) times the total number of known “books” (column 1), using the broad Leuven definition of books, about which I shall say a little more later on.³²

TABLE 1.3
Expected Number of Surviving Christian Books

| Period | Book fragments | Christian percentage of population | Probable Christian books |
|--------|----------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| I/II | 403 | 0.014 | 0.056 |
| II | 1,474 | 0.092 | 1.360 |
| II/III | 813 | 1.482 | 12.000 |

There is, to judge by the figures in this table, only one chance in eighteen that *any* Christian book of the late first or early second century would survive. That is, the odds are seventeen to one that we would have zero such books. We should have just one or two Christian fragments from the second century as a whole. On any reckoning, the number of published fragments of Christian character usually assigned to these early periods considerably exceeds the expected number. At all events, there are no grounds for thinking that we have a small number of Christian papyri compared with the likely proportion of Christians in the population, let alone Gnostics. The reverse is true. It is time to let go of the idea that Christian literature is somehow underrepresented in the papyri before the later third century. If the early dates attributed to Christian texts are accepted, they are actually grossly overrepresented. If the later dates are taken to be correct, the second century has about the right number—one, most likely—and the turn of the century is significantly oversupplied with Christian books. At all events, the basic congruity between what exists and what the model predicts is interesting and encouraging.

It is impossible to leave this point, however, without trying to assess a little further the initial likelihood of the existence of Christian books. Why would someone make a copy of one of the gospels or epistles, or of a collection of them? And how does the motivation and likelihood of such book production compare with that of classical literature? I have already mentioned one important factor, the role of the standard classical education of the elite of Graeco-Roman Egypt (Cribiore 2001). Many of the ancient “books” included in the Leuven Database are not books at all but only excerpts from them that served the purpose of pedagogy. The literature that individuals possessed at home as adults also reflected the authors they had read in school. By contrast, we have little evidence for the private lay ownership of biblical texts at any early date, and even later, ownership of Christian books by individuals may not have been extensive. Even in Constantinople and with an affluent body of worshippers, John Chrysostom did not expect many to have, let alone to read, the scriptures at home (MacMullen 1989).

An obvious point of critical interest is the clergy, who were both the persons likely to acquire scriptures for their churches and the individuals most likely to need biblical texts for their own use.

Remarkably little is known about most of the Egyptian clergy as individuals. Wipszycka ascribes their main source of recruitment to the “middle classes” but without defining that term (something that is of course extremely difficult), and she goes on to speak of their need for a good education (Wipszycka 2007a). A good education, however, suggests family wealth with which to pay for the education, even if not necessarily membership in the very top stratum of society. Despite examples like Synesius of Cyrene, there is not much to suggest that the highest-ranking aristocrats were recruited for the clergy, even as bishops, although this may have changed over time. Quite possibly some bishops came, like Augustine, from the curial class. As with so much else in the clergy, much would have varied according to the wealth and importance of the see.

The recruitment of *presbyteroi* and deacons is also very poorly known, but it is now better understood than it was in the past because of the recent studies of Egypt by Georg Schmelz and of Asia Minor by Sabine Hübner (Schmelz 2002; Hübner 2005). For small-town south Asia Minor, Hübner shows that presbyters and deacons came heavily from a stratum that can be defined as middle-class in a local sense, that is, against the background of the communities. They were in many cases the kin of merchants and craftsmen of substance. No doubt there were also many small to medium landowners, as the appearances of clergy in Egyptian land registers suggest. Overall, there is every reason to expect a correlation between an individual’s initial social status and his clerical position. A matching of that sort would fit well with the differential needs of education at the various levels, urban and rural.

The increased monastic recruitment of bishops and even other clergy in later periods may not have changed this situation much. Monasticism was, as is by now well established, not a uniform movement in social terms but also reflected a wide range of origins and statuses. In any case, because the clergy in Egypt had no formal training and the church had no institutions for providing such a professional education, there was no way to avoid a reasonably close match between their status of origin, and thus their education, and their rank in the clergy; monasticism may have helped a bit to level gaps in formation.

Perhaps the best conclusion we can draw from all these considerations is that the *presbyteroi* of the Egyptian church in the third and fourth centuries are likely to have come from an approximately representative sample of the classes who received a grammarian-level education in the metropoleis of the nomes in this period. How many of them there might have been is hard to say. To extend speculation just a bit further, let us imagine that of our twenty thousand hypothetical Christians in Egypt at the beginning of the episcopate of Demetrios, a quarter were in Alexandria. That might be a low estimate for the degree of concentration in the capital. But even such a low figure for Alexandria would leave just fifteen thousand in the nomes, or something like three hundred per nome. It is hard to see why the average nome would have needed a clergyman of higher status than presbyter, and the absence of bishops at this time seems in this light not terribly significant. If we suppose, as I think likely, that the majority of these Christians were in the metropoleis, we need not suppose the existence of village *presbyteroi*. It is hard to imagine that more than a hundred Christian clergy of a rank requiring a grammarian's education existed in all of Egypt, and the number may have been substantially lower. Their proportionate share of educated adults is in any case unlikely to have exceeded their share of the population as a whole, somewhere shy of 0.4 percent.³³ Altogether, however, this should lead us to the conclusion that there is no reason to suppose that Christians were disproportionately more likely than other people to own books.

My conclusion is not a negative one in the sense that I would argue that there were not Christians in second-century Egypt. Instead, it seems to me that their numbers and structure were such that we should recognize frankly that it would be only a lucky coincidence if we were to find a Christian text, be it letter or manuscript, from the period before Demetrios—before the Severan period, to put it in Roman political terms. To accept this view means, of course, admitting a kind of defeat. We cannot expect the papyri to save us from our ignorance of the nature and development of the Egyptian church in the pre-Severan period. That is undoubtedly not going to be welcome news for many people. But it is in my eyes the only realistic assessment of the probabilities, and it has the virtue that it frees us from the struggle to push the dates of manuscripts back into the

second century, or even into the first. Instead, the natural sense of palaeographical comparisons can be followed without an unreasonable zeal for finding origins. This strikes me as a welcome liberation, which papyrologists should embrace, because it is only with the preoccupation with origins set aside that the interest and original contribution of the few genuinely early texts can be assessed properly.

Earlier in this chapter (p. 11) I remarked on the potential for circular reasoning in distinguishing Christian from Jewish books when dealing with texts of the Jewish scriptures, the Christian Old Testament. In one sense, any identifications of early codex fragments as Jewish rather than Christian would only strengthen the larger argument made here that there is far less evidence for Christian books before the late second century than usually claimed. The difficulties posed by the use of abbreviated sacred vocabulary (the “*nomina sacra*”) and the codex form in distinguishing Christian from Jewish books have generated a long discussion, for which Kurt Treu’s analysis (1973/1991: excursus) is fundamental. The most recent thorough discussion (Choat 2006: 119–25) concludes that, with the exception of Manichaean texts, “no instance of a *nomen sacrum* in an unquestionably non-Christian documentary text on papyrus is known to me.” It is obviously impossible to prove that such an instance could not occur, but that impossibility provides no support for any positive argument in favor of non-Christian use. I shall therefore take it as a given that the *nomina sacra* in texts written before the diffusion of Manichaeism are signs of Christianity.

The situation with the codex differs in that there are more cases in which it is impossible to make a clear distinction between Christian and Jewish origin. In some of these (Genesis and Psalms dominate the material) there are characteristics that have seemed to Treu (1973/1991) and others to make Jewish provenance more likely, although they could also be signs of the continuing presence of strongly Jewish traits in early Christianity. The argument is complicated by the near-total absence of documentary evidence for a Jewish population in Egypt between the revolt that ended at the start of Hadrian’s reign (117) and the late third century. In any event, as will become apparent in chapter 4, if a few of the codices sometimes identified as Christian were in fact of Jewish origin, the argument presented there about the diffusion of the codex would only be strengthened.