

Early Christian Manuscripts

Examples of Applied Method and Approach

Edited by

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CHAPTER FOUR

IS P.OXY. XLII 3057 THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN LETTER?

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Since the publication of *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057 in 1974, a personal letter dated paleographically to the late first or early second century, it has attracted a rather inordinate amount of attention. The interest this letter has garnered can be attributed to some passing remarks made by the editor of this text, Peter Parsons, who tentatively, and in some ways dismissively, raised the possibility that it could have been authored by a Christian since it contained certain peculiarities that ostensibly suggested Christian authorship.¹ Given the early date of the letter it is understandable why Parsons' editorial musings attracted such attention; if this letter could be shown to have been written by a Christian it would represent the earliest extant Christian text predating, or at the very least contemporaneous with P^{52} (= *P.Ryl.* III 457), the famous fragment from St. John's Gospel (18:31–33, 37–38) that dates to the first half of the second century. Furthermore, it could potentially shed some much-needed light on the origins of Christianity in Egypt in a period where relatively little beyond speculation and conjecture is known.²

Despite the initial stir that followed this letter's publication largely as a result of Parsons' editorial musings, whereby its "Christian" characteristics were scrutinized and evaluated, within a decade or so much of the

¹ In the preface to the letter Parsons wrote, "The writer encourages his brethren to amity, alludes to external enemies, looks forward with ragged nerves to future ordeals: many hints, small information. If the hand is rightly dated, it would be temerarious to look for a Christian context (15 ff. n.)." *P.Oxy.* XII, p. 144. In n. 15 Parsons follows up by considering the different facets of the letter that could indicate Christian authorship, suggesting a general epistolary analogy to *1 Clem.*, though he ultimately expresses some doubt that the peculiarities contained in the letter are actually Christian. However, in a later note on *P.Oxy.* XII 3057 Parsons seemed somewhat more convinced that a Christian context for the letter was a real possibility. See P. Parsons, "The Earliest Christian Letter?," in *Miscellanea Papyrologica* (Pap. Flor. VII, ed. R. Pintaudi; Firenze: Edizioni Gonnelli, 1980) 289.

² C.H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 1; B.A. Pearson, "Earliest Christianity in Egypt: Some Observations," in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (ed. B.A. Pearson and J.E. Goehring; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 132–134; H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Vol. 2): *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (2nd ed.; New York and Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000) 225–228.

interest the letter initially had generated tailed off.³ The scholarly consensus was that although the letter contained features that potentially pointed to Christian authorship, they were not compelling and were at best indefinite.⁴ However, in two recent treatments of the letter, by Orsolina Montevecchi and Ilaria Ramelli, they have attempted to reopen the debate as they have sought to demonstrate that it does in fact contain a number of characteristics that are best explained only within a Christian context.⁵ While the arguments adduced by Montevecchi and Ramelli are largely original, as they attempt to bring something new to the debate and are at times rather thought provoking, a critical analysis of their arguments reveals that they are ultimately unpersuasive as they do little to cogently establish that the letter was either written by a Christian or should necessarily be read within a Christian context. Not only are the alleged “Christian” features of the letter more easily explained within a context that does not require a Christian interpretation, but also both authors tend to rely on a considerable amount of special pleading to make their respective cases. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is not simply to prove that the letter could not have been authored by a Christian, though this should become relatively apparent, but rather to show that the arguments marshaled by Montevecchi and Ramelli in favor of Christian authorship are not compelling. Furthermore, that a non-Christian context for the letter is considerably more likely than a Christian one given the date of the letter combined with the fact that it contains no explicit Christian markers.⁶

³ O. Montevecchi, “Recensioni e Bibliographica,” *Aegyptus* 55 (1975) 302; C.J. Hemer, “Ammonius to Apollonius, Greeting,” *Buried History* 12 (1976) 84–91; E.A. Judge, *Rank and Status in the World of the Caesars and St Paul* (Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 1982) 20–23; G.R. Stanton, “The Proposed Earliest Christian Letter on Papyrus and the Origin of the Term Philalellia,” *ZPE* 54 (1984) 49–63; S.K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986) 95–96; S.R. Llewelyn, *NewDocs* 6 (1992) 169–177.

⁴ Hemer, “Ammonius to Apollonius,” 89, writes, “The difficulty is not in supposing that this could be a Christian letter, but in establishing that it is [...] The onus lies upon the one who would claim it as Christian. And yet there are probably many cases where this is a possibility. There may be hints consonant with it, and nothing to contradict it, but nothing to prove it.” Later S.R. Llewelyn echoed the same sentiment, “We conclude that the letter [P.Oxy. XLII 3057] gives no indication that the correspondents were Christian. But equally no evidence stands in the way of its being so accepted.” See Llewelyn, *New Docs*, 177.

⁵ O. Montevecchi, “THN ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗΝ ΚΕΧΙΑΣΜΕΝΗΝ: P.Oxy. XLII 3057,” *Aegyptus* 80 (2000 [2002]) 187–194; I. Ramelli, “Una delle più antiche lettere cristiane extracanoniche?,” *Aegyptus* 80 (2000 [2002]) 169–185.

⁶ For the most recent and detailed study of what constitute genuine Christian markers in documentary papyri, see M. Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth Century Papyri*. *Studia Antiqua Australiensia* I. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006) 43–125.

The "Christian" Aspects of P.Oxy. XLII 3057

For convenience a transcription of the letter along with a translation have been provided.⁷

<p>→ Ἀμμώνιος Ἀπολλωνίω τῷ ἀδελφῷ χαίρειν. ἐκομισάμην τὴν κειρασμένην ἐπιστολήν καὶ τὴν ἱματοφορίδα καὶ τοὺς φαινόλας καὶ τὰς 5 σύνριγγα<ς> σου καλὰς, τοὺς δὲ φαινόλας οὐχ ὡς παλαιοὺς ἔλαβον ἀλλ' εἶ τι μείζον ἐστὶν και- νῶν διὰ προαίρεσιν· οὐ θέλω δέ σε, ἀδελφε, βα- ρύνειν με ταῖς συνεχέσι φιλανθρωπίαις, οὐ δυνάμενον ἀμείψασθαι, αὐτὸ δὲ μόνον 10 ἡμεῖς προαίρεσιν φιλικῆς διαθέσεως νομί- ζομεν παρεστακέσαι σοι. παρακαλῶ δέ σε, ἀδελφε, μηκέτι λόγον ποιεῖσθαι πε- ρὶ τῆς κλειδῶς τῆς μονοκάμου. οὐ γὰρ θέ- λω ὑμᾶς τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς ἔνεκα ἐμοῦ ἢ ἄλ- 15 λου διαφορὰν τινα ἔχειν· ὁμόνοιαν γὰρ καὶ</p>	<p>φιλαλλη<λ>ίαν εὐχομαι ἐν ὑμῖν διαμένειν ἡμῖν. ἡ γὰρ πείρα ἐπάγεταί με προτρέψασ- θαι ὑμᾶς εἰρηνεύειν καὶ μὴ διδόναι ἀφορ- 20 μὰς ἐτέροις καθ' ὑμῶν· πείρασαι οὖν καὶ δι' ἐμὲ τοῦτο ποεῖν, χαρισάμενός μοι ὁ με- ταξὺ ἐπιγνώση ἀγαθόν. τὰ ἔρια ἂν ἦς εἰλη- φῶς παρὰ Σαλβίου πλήρη καὶ ἦ σοι ἀρεσ- τά, ἀντίγραφόν μοι· γελοῖα δέ σοι γέγραφα 25 διὰ τῆς προτέρας ἐπιστολῆς, ἃ παραδέξῃ- ἡ γὰρ ψυχὴ ἀνεμμένη γίνεται, ὅταν τὸ σὸν ὄνομα παρῇ, καὶ ταῦτα οὐκ ἔθος ἔχου- σης ἡρεμεῖν διὰ τὰ ἐπερχόμενα, ἀλ<λ>' ὑπο- φέρει. Λεωνῶς ἀσπάζομαι σε, δέσποτα, καὶ τοὺς 30 σ[ο]ὺς πάντας.⁸ ἔρρωσο, τιμωτάτα.</p>
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(Back →) Ἀπολλωνίω Ἀπολλῶ (?) ἐπισκέπτῃ ἀδ(ελφῷ).

Ammonios to Apollonios his brother greeting. I received the crossed letter and the portmanteau and the cloak and (l. 5) your good reeds. I received the cloaks not as old but as better than new because of your intention. I do not want you, brother, to weigh me down with continuous philanthropy, not being able to repay, but we suppose we only (l. 10) offer to you the intention of friendly disposition. I exhort you, brother, no longer to concern yourself with the key of the single room. For I do not want you, the brethren, on account of me or (l. 15) another to have any difference. For I pray that oneness of mind and mutual concord remain among you so that you are free from gossip and you are not like us. For the trial leads me to impel you to peace and not to give (l. 20) a starting point to others against you. And so attempt to do this for me, favoring me, which in the meantime you will recognize as good. Write to me if the wool you received from Silvanus in full measure is pleasing to you. I wrote ridiculous things to you in a (l. 25) former epistle, which you should disregard. For my soul becomes careless whenever your name is present, and this though it has no habit to rest on account of the things

⁷ The letter is written on a rectangular piece of papyrus that measures 13.5 cm by 23.5 cm (H x W). For the most part the papyrus is preserved with the exception of a small vertical tear near the left hand margin owing to a fold. The letter is written with a single hand that is clear, well formed, and displays semi-literary qualities. A digital image of the papyrus may be viewed at: <http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/POxy/papyri/vol42/pages/3057.htm>. To save space I have divided the letter into two columns. Orthographic errors in the Greek text have not been reproduced, but have been corrected in the transcription.

⁸ For the punctuation of l. 29, I have not followed the *editio princeps* but the suggested emendation given in P.W. Pestmann and H.A. Rupprecht, eds., *Berichtigungsliste der Griechischen Papyrusurkunden aus Agypten* (Vol. VIII; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 265.

that are happening, but it [soul] endures. I, Leonas, greet you, master, and (l. 30) all your people. Farewell, most honored friend. (back) To Apollonius, son of Apollo(?) surveyer, brother.⁹

This letter, which is rather lengthy by papyrological standards,¹⁰ addresses a number of disparate issues and may be divided into three different sections. In the first section (ll. 3–11), Ammonius thanks Apollonius for having sent certain items and then proceeds to acknowledge his generous philanthropy, noting that he is unable to match it.¹¹ Ammonius then proceeds to advise Apollonius concerning how he ought to deal with some dissension among associates (ll. 11–22). This section of the letter is particularly interesting as it reveals that Ammonius is a rather educated and refined individual given the sentiments expressed and his choice of vocabulary.¹² He thoughtfully and articulately exhorts Apollonius to avoid “strife” or “difference” (διάφορος) with his “brethren”, although the exact cause of the tension is not explicitly stated,¹³ and rhetorically prays that “concord” (ὁμόνοια) and “mutual affection” (φιλαλληλία) might prevail so that they may be “free from gossip” (ἀκαταλήρητος).¹⁴ Since this section of the letter contains much exhortation, this letter may effectively be categorized under the genre of epistolary paraenesis.¹⁵ In the concluding section of the letter (ll. 22–29), Ammonius inquires whether an item that he had previously sent to Apollonius was pleasing and in an act of sheer flattery asks him to disregard some remarks

⁹ Translation adapted from P.Oxy. XLII p. 145.

¹⁰ This letter contains roughly 190 words, whereas a typical first-century papyrus letter averaged only around 87 words. See R.E. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity, 2004) 163–164. For comparison Richards also notes that the letters of Cicero and Seneca respectively averaged 295 and 995 words and that Paul’s letters averaged 2,495 words.

¹¹ On the philanthropy of Apollonius and Ammonius’ apprehensiveness with it see *New-Docs* 6, 173.

¹² Assuming of course that this section of the letter accurately and precisely conveys Ammonius’ words and not those of the scribe, Leonas.

¹³ Perhaps the dissensions directly stemmed from some dispute that arose over “the key of the single room” that is referred to directly before Ammonius’ exhortation to harmony where he entreats Apollonius to no longer concern himself about it (i.e. the key).

¹⁴ As noted in the *ed. pr.* by Parsons (P.Oxy. XLII p. 146 n. 17), this is the first and only attestation of the word ἀκαταλήρητος. Subsequently, it has not reoccurred in the papyri or been found elsewhere. This is also the only time the word φιλαλληλία is ever used in the papyri.

¹⁵ Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 96–99. Concerning the genre of epistolary paraenesis, Stowers notes the following two observations: (1) the writer is typically the recipient’s friend or moral superior and (2) the writer recommends habits of behavior and actions that conform to a certain model of character and attempts to turn the recipient away from contrasting negative models of character. Note also the use of verbs παρακαλέω (l. 11), εὐχομαι (l. 16) and προτρέπω (l. 18) that are indicative of the paraenetic genre.

in a previous letter since “his soul becomes careless” whenever Apollonius’ name is mentioned.¹⁶

I. Crossed Letters

While there is nothing on the surface of the letter that would necessarily suggest it was authored by a Christian, as it contains no explicit markers or symbols that would establish Christian authorship and it is devoid of theological language and seemingly deals with a number of mundane issues, the opening section of the letter (ll. 1–3) has been thought to contain possible Christian elements. Noting the unusual and somewhat enigmatic reference to the reception of a “crossed letter” or “letter marked with a cross” (κεχιασμένην ἐπιστολήν) in l. 3, Parsons mused whether it contained some surreptitious allusion to the cross (crucifixion) and went on to note that the unusual supralinear stroke over the *chi* in *χ*αίρειν may have also had some significance on this front.¹⁷ Though he admitted this interpretation was unlikely and effectively discounted it because of the early date of the letter, there are a number of other reasons (beyond merely the date) that makes this interpretive possibility utterly untenable.¹⁸ Perhaps the most obvious is that there is no evidence that *χ*ιάζω, which has the meaning “to cross” in the shape of the letter *chi* (X), is ever used to refer to the crucifixion by any early Christian author,¹⁹ as *σταυρώω* with its implied reference to the shape of the *tau* (T) is always employed.²⁰ For example, in the *Epistle of Barnabas* 9.7, a letter that may well be contemporaneous with P.Oxy. XLII 3057 and may even be provenanced to the same geographic region,²¹

¹⁶ Reference at this point in the letter to “soul” (ψυχή) in no way suggests or even hints at a Christian context given that “soul” was employed in a variety of different non-Christian contexts. See especially J. Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). In letters of the first and second century “soul” only appears a handful of times: P.Oxy. LV 3806.14 (A.D. 15); BGU IV 1040.21 (II A.D.); P.Tebt. I 56.11 (II A.D.) where a petition is also made “to the gods” (l. 10).

¹⁷ P.Oxy. XLVII 3057 n. 15 (p. 146). I address these points here, because they have not been considered in previous scholarship.

¹⁸ As a freestanding symbol the cross (+) does not appear in any definite Christian context in the Pre-Constantinian period. See G.F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 2003) 58–64. The earliest definitive appearance of a cross (+) in a letter provenanced to Oxyrhynchus is in P.Oxy. LVI 3862.1, 34(?) (IV–V).

¹⁹ Neither the verb *χ*ιάζω nor the noun *χ*ιάσμα ever occurs in the LXX, New Testament, or the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.

²⁰ TDNT 7.572–73; M. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Trans. Josh Bowden) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 8–9.

²¹ L.W. Barnard, “The ‘Epistle of Barnabas’ and Its Contemporary Setting,” ANRW 159–207, who situates the letter in early-second century Alexandria.

the author specifically points out that it is the letter *tau* that symbolizes the cross. Likewise, Justin Martyr further reinforces this point when he draws a deliberate distinction between the sign of the σταυρός or cross (+), which signifies the crucifixion, and that of the χίασμα or rotated cross (×) in his *1 Apology*.²² Furthermore, the earliest pictorial representation of the crucifixion is the *staurogram* (Ϡ), which already appears in a few second or third century papyri, and clearly depicts the sign of a σταυρός (T).²³

While neither Montevecchi nor Ramelli attempt to argue that κεχιασμένη ἐπιστολήν should be taken as some veiled allusion to the crucifixion, both nevertheless believe it is a significant Christian indicator within the letter. On this front Montevecchi asserts, apparently influenced by Parson's mus-
ing that perhaps there is some connection between the phrase κεχιασμένη ἐπιστολήν and the supralinear stroke over the *chi* in χάρειν, that these two features of the letter are making a surreptitious reference to "Christ" (χριστός). She argues that κεχιασμένην ἐπιστολήν should be translated as "letter marked with an X" and refers to the phenomenon that may be noted in this present letter in l. 2, where the writer inserts a supralinear stroke over the *chi* in χάρειν, which she proceeds to argue is the earliest form of the *nomen sacrum* for χριστός. As the sender and recipient were Christians, as well as close friends based on the contents of the letter, Montevecchi argues that both would have been aware of the meaning implied by the *chi* with the supralinear stroke and when Ammonius informed Apollonius that he had received "the letter marked with an X", he was simply acknowledging the reference to Christ in a previous letter. As Montevecchi is aware that the form of the *nomen sacrum* she is alleging here is unusual, to say the very least, she argues that it had to be hidden within the letter since it was written in the wake of the persecution of Domitian when it was particularly unsafe for Christians and would have potentially been very dangerous for either Ammonius or Apollonius to make their Christian identities explicitly known.²⁴

²² *Apol.* 1.60. Here, Justin alleges that when Plato read Num 21:8–9, the incident of the fiery serpents, that Plato had supposed that it was the symbol of the χίασμα that Moses fashioned and placed a brazen serpent on it when in fact it was the "image of a cross" (τύπον σταυροῦ) that served as a type of Christ's crucifixion. Consequently, when Plato talked about the Son of God being placed, "crosswise in the universe" in the *Timaeus* (36b–c), Justin states that this was incorrect. In the LXX Num 21:8–9, when Moses made the "poles" upon which to place the fiery serpent, the word σταυρός is not employed.

²³ In P⁶⁶ the staurogram appears on ten different occasions in the nineteenth chapter of John (John 19:6 (x 3), 15 (x 2), 16, 18, 19, 25, 31; P⁴⁵ at Matthew 26:2; P⁷⁵ at Luke 9:23 and 14:27. On the staurogram see L.W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006) 139–152. See also K. Aland, "Neue Neutestamentliche Papyri II," *NTS* 10 (1963–64) 77–79.

²⁴ Montevecchi, "THN EPISTOLHN KEXIASMENHN: P.Oxy. XLII 3057," 191–194.

Though this interpretation is certainly interesting and merits some reflection, its plausibility is rather tenuous. Not only is there no evidence that *nomina sacra* were ever embedded within completely different words, as would be the case here if Montevocchi's interpretation were to be maintained, there is likewise no evidence in the first two centuries that an individual *chi* with a supralinear stroke was ever used as an abbreviation for $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\acute{o}\varsigma$.²⁵ Furthermore, it remains to be demonstrated how the alleged persecution carried out by Domitian can be so easily invoked and read into the letter at this point to explain the unconventional form of the *nomen sacrum*, as there is absolutely nothing definitive in the letter that would point to such a specific context and this is pure speculation on the part of Montevocchi.²⁶ Additionally, there may be a much simpler explanation for these apparent peculiarities that is not so sensational and does not require resorting to cryptic interpretations. A search of contemporaneous documents reveals that the letter *chi* with a supralinear stroke was sometimes used as the abbreviation for $\tilde{\chi}(\acute{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\iota\nu)$.²⁷ In such occurrences this abbreviation typically appears in the opening formula of address and is employed as a convenient space saver since $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\iota\nu$ was regularly used in address and

²⁵ In K. Aland's list of attested *nomina sacra* in the extant manuscripts $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\acute{o}\varsigma$ is never abbreviated with a lone χ . See K. Aland, ed., *Repertorium der Griechischen Christlichen Papyri. I, Biblische Papyri* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976) 420–428. However, in certain Latin epitaphs of the late third century X is sometimes used as the abbreviation for *Iesus Christus*, although this shorthand abbreviation does not occur with the supralinear stroke (*ICUR* I 10 (= *ICUR* N.S. III 8716) A.D. 268/69; *ICUR* I 17 (= *ICUR* N.S. V 13886) A.D. 291). See also Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 220.

²⁶ While the "persecution factor" has sometimes been advanced to explain why there are not more explicit Christian markers (i.e. *nomina sacra*, monograms, isopsephisms, etc.) in papyrus letters from the Pre-Constantinian era, such reasoning is often sensational and fails to adequately take account of other more probable reasons for the lack of such markers. Not every Christian would have been aware of such explicit religious markers as they only began to appear with some regularity when Christian self-identity became more established. Likewise, some Christians might have deliberately avoided putting such markers in their personal correspondences not for fear of persecution, but because they served no express purpose within the letter and were simply extraneous. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that most personal letters were sent via friends and acquaintances and there is no evidence that the state was especially interested in reading people's personal correspondences for evidence of cultic devotion, therefore causing Christians to deliberately obfuscate Christians markers in their letters. On these points see Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth Century Papyri*, 48–49; E. Wipszycka "La christianisation de l'Égypte aux IV^e–VI^e siècles. Aspects sociaux et ethniques," *Aegyptus* 68 (1988) 118–120; H.I. Bell, "Evidences of Christianity in Egypt During the Roman Period," *HTR* 37 (1944) 198.

²⁷ Contemporary examples where $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\iota\nu$ is abbreviated as $\tilde{\chi}(\acute{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\iota\nu)$: *BGU* II 612.2 (A.D. 57); *BGU* VI 1467.2 (A.D. I). At other times $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\epsilon\iota\nu$ is abbreviated with $\tilde{\chi}\bar{\alpha}(\tau\rho\epsilon\iota\nu)$: *P.Ryl.* II 94.4 (A.D. 14–37); *P.Ryl.* II 183.3 (A.D. 16); *R.Ryl.* II 183A.4 (A.D. 16); *BGU* IV 1079.2 (A.D. 41); *BGU* III 748.3.4 (A.D. 62); *BGU* III 981.1.4 (A.D. 79); *BGU* IV 1096.2 (I); *BGU* VI 1235.2 (I); *P.Ryl.* II 168.2 (9 Oct A.D. 120); *P.Ryl.* II 180.2 (A.D. 124); *BGU* VII 1564.2 (A.D. 138); *CPR* VII 53.2 (II). The abbreviations $\chi\acute{\alpha}\iota(\rho\epsilon\iota\nu)$ and $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho(\epsilon\iota\nu)$ are also attested, albeit less frequently.

the recipient would have had little difficulty apprehending the meaning of the abbreviation. A more plausible explanation therefore is that the scribe who wrote the letter either intended to abbreviate *χαίρειν* but after writing the initial *chi* with a supralinear stroke decided to write it out in full, without erasing the supralinear stroke, or out of scribal habit wrote the supraliner stroke over the *chi* after this letter was written and then failed to erase it.²⁸ While Montecvecchi is aware of this abbreviation for *χαίρειν*, she summarily discounts the former options since she believes the calculated spacing of the first two lines precludes such a possibility.²⁹ However, since *χαίρειν* is the last word in the opening formula and regardless of whether it was abbreviated or not, the spacing and alignment are nicely preserved, I am not sure whether the scribal possibilities just raised can be summarily dismissed, especially in favor of a cryptic interpretation for which there is no extant parallel.

Turning to the rather enigmatic reference of the “crossed letter” (τὴν κεχιασμένην ἐπιστολὴν) in l. 3, it is unlikely that it has any reference to the supralinear stroke over the *chi*. While it must be acknowledged that the verb *χιάζω* appears rather infrequently in documentary papyri and the reference is somewhat unusual given that this is the only attestation of the phrase, it should not automatically be assumed that the writer was being deliberately obscure and that the reference must be taken to convey a hidden meaning. A survey of the use of the verb *χιάζω* in documentary papyri reveals that it was typically used to refer to the “crossing out” or “canceling” of a document. Here, the verb is most often used in the context of canceling out of “loans” (δάνειον) by crossing them out, effectively “invalidating” (ἀκυρος) them.³⁰ While *κεχιασμένην ἐπιστολὴν* is without parallel a very similar phrase, “crossed writing” or “writing marker with a cross” (*κεχιασμένην γραφήν*), occurs on a few occasions in documents of the late first/early second century in the context of instructions for loan cancellations.³¹ Based on similar usage this would therefore suggest that *κεχιασμένην ἐπιστολὴν* should be interpreted within this context. Accordingly, while it could sug-

²⁸ I am particularly persuaded by the first possibility since the *alpha* in *χαίρειν* is unusually large, suggesting that the scribe may have temporally paused before writing it.

²⁹ Montecvecchi, “THN EPISTOLHN KEXIASMENHN: P.Oxy. XLII 3057,” 190.

³⁰ *P.Col.* X 249 (A.D. I) is one of a number of such loans that is particularly illustrative on this point since it is marked with a number of large crosses showing that it had been invalidated. A digital image of this papyrus may be viewed at: <http://wwwapp.cc.columbia.edu/ldpd/app/apis/item?mode=item&key=columbia.apis.p282>.

³¹ *SB VIII* 9765.16 (= *P.Oxy.* II 369 desc.) (13 Sept. 81)—... τοῦ δανείου συν γραφὴν κε[χ]ιασμένην εἰς ἀκύρωσιν...; *P.Oxy.* X 1282.34 (15 Nov. 83)—... τοῦ δανείου συγγραφὴν κεχιασμένην εἰς ἀκύρωσιν...; *P.Flor.* I 61.2.65 (8 Feb. 85)—... καὶ ἐκ[έ]λευσε τὸ χειρ[ό]-γραφον χιασθῆναι.; *P.Wisc.* I 14.18 (16 May 131)—... τὰ δὲ δάνεια χιασθέντα ἀποδοθήσεται τῇ Ἀσκληπιᾷδι...

gest that the previous letter sent by Apollonius to Ammonius was being invalidated, something that might not be unusual if it were an official letter or if the term ἐπιστολή is being used here in an extended sense to mean some kind of document in general, if it were a personal letter that was being referred to, then it would be more unusual. However, there is another interpretive possibility here. In some letters, a number of them dated to the early second century, a large cross (x) or a saltire pattern is contained on the address.³² It is believed that the primary purpose of these symbols was to help prevent the unauthorized opening of the letter. When a letter was complete and ready to be sent it was typically folded or rolled, affording some degree of secrecy, and was either sealed with clay or tied with a string. If it was sealed with a string, the sender might draw a saltire pattern on and around the string so that the letter could not be undetectably opened before delivery, which helped to preserve the confidentiality of the letter.³³ In this light, the reference to the “letter marked with an X” could potentially be interpreted as referring to the recipient’s acknowledgment that the previous letter arrived sealed, with no evidence that it had been tampered with or opened before delivery.³⁴

II. ὁμόνοια & φιλαλληλία

Moving to the next feature of the letter that has been taken as evidence of Christian provenance, this time by Ramelli (following Parsons), is a phrase that is employed midway through the letter. After exhorting Apollonius and his brethren to abstain from quarrelling (ll. 13–15), Ammonius rhetorically prays that “concord and mutual affection” (ὁμόνοιαν γὰρ καὶ φιλαλλη<λ>ίαν) might exist amongst them (ll. 15–16).³⁵ As the only other

³² P.W. Pestman, *The New Papyrological Primer* (2nd rev. ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 173. See *SB V* 7572 (Early II); *P.Mich.* III 202 (5 May 105); *P.Giss.* 11 (18 July 118); *BGU III* 423 (II).

³³ R.S. Bagnall and R. Cribiore, *Women’s Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC–AD 800* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2006) 33; K. Vandorpe, *Breaking the Seal of Secrecy: Sealing Practises in Greco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt Based on Greek, Demotic and Latin Papyrological Evidence* (Leiden: Papyrologisch instituut, 1995); E.G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, repr. 1980) 130, 139.

³⁴ Interestingly, *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057 may give two hints why Ammonius might have been concerned with keeping certain matters private. In ll. 15–18 and 27–28 Ammonius relates to Apollonius how he had been subjected to harassment from others and later warns Apollonius in ll. 18–20 “not to give others a starting point against you.” In the apparent context of internal quarrels it may be wondered if the threat prompted Ammonius to keep the contents of his letter confidential. For a similar interpretation see *NewDocs* 6.173.

³⁵ It should be pointed out here that the use of prayers (εὐχόμεαι) in letters is widespread in a number of different religious contexts and is in no way a decisive indicator of Christian authorship. See E. Wipszycka, “Remarques sur les lettres privées chrétiennes des II^e–IV^e”

parallel to the use of ὁμόνοια and φιλαλληλία in such close proximity can be found in one of the letters of the fifth century ascetic, Nilus of Ancrya, Ramelli believes that this verbal overlap can be cited as evidence of Christian authorship.³⁶ While commenting on James 4:5, Nilus writes, “What does the divine spirit love better than the unity (ἔνωσις) and concord (ὁμόνοια), and the mutual affection (φιλαλληλία) of the brethren?”. Yet, despite this parallel, it may be wondered whether it genuinely constitutes a compelling argument bearing in mind there is roughly a three hundred year gulf separating the epistles of Nilus and *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057 and the verbal overlap consists of only two words.

Turning to early Christian writings it should be pointed out that neither ὁμόνοια nor φιλαλληλία appear in the New Testament, although the former is periodically attested in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers (as well as the LXX).³⁷ While ὁμόνοια occurs rather infrequently in documentary papyri,³⁸ its use outside of papyri is fairly widespread.³⁹ On the other hand, the use of φιλαλληλία is more restricted as it is unattested in the papyri outside of the present letter.⁴⁰ In the first few centuries of the Common Era this term is confined almost exclusively to the writings of the mathematician Nicomachus, where it is used to describe the mutual friendship

siècles: À propos d'un livre de M. Naldini,” *JJP* 18 (1974) 205; A.M. Nobbs, “Formulas of Belief in Greek Papyrus Letters of the Third and Fourth Centuries,” in *Ancient History in a Modern University* (ed. T.W. Hillard et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 2.236–237.

³⁶ Ramelli, “Una delle più antiche lettere,” 182–183; Parsons, “The Earliest Christian Letter?,” 289; *P.Oxy.* XLVII p. 146. Nilus employs both ὁμόνοια and φιλαλληλία while commenting on Jas 4:5: ἐπιποθεῖ, φησὶν, τὸ πνεῦμα, ὃ κατόκησεν ὁ θεὸς ἐν ἡμῖν. τί δὲ ἐπιποθεῖ, καὶ στέργει, καὶ ἀγαπᾷ τὸ θεῖον πνεῦμα, ἢ τὴν ἔνωσιν, καὶ ὁμόνοιαν, καὶ τὴν φιλαλληλίαν τῶν ἀδελφῶν;... PG 79.144A (Ep. 146). However, it seems that unless an article has dropped out that Nilus is associating ὁμόνοια more with ἔνωσις than with φιλαλληλία.

³⁷ 4 Macc 3:21; 13:25; Ps 54:15; 82:6; Wis 10:5; 18:9; Sir 25:1; 1 Clem. 9:4; 11:2; 20:3, 10f; 21:1; 30:3; 34:7; 49:5; 50:5; 60:4; 61:1; 63:2; 65:1; Ign. Eph. 4:1f; 13:1; Ign. Magn. 6:1; 15:1; Ign. Trall. 12:2; Ign. Phld. 1:1; 11:2; Herm. Mand. 8 1:9; Herm. Sim. 9 15:2.

³⁸ The noun ὁμόνοια and its accompanying verb ὁμονοέω appear in the following documents: *SB* VI 9528.4 (late I/early II); *P.Oxy.* IX 1216.16 (II–III); *P.Oxy.* XLII 3065.22 (III); *P.Lond.* V 1911.13 (early IV); *SB* I 4827.5 (IV–VII); *SB* XIV 11957 r, ctr 10 (Late V); *P.Cair. Masp.* I 67004.11 (c. 567); *P.Cair.Masp.* II 67158.25 (28 Apr 568); *P.Cair.Masp.* III 67314 Fr. 3.40 (569–570); *P.Ness.* III 75.7 (late VII). The list does not include references to people bearing the name Ὁμόνια.

³⁹ In a number of first and second century coins from Thrace and Asia Minor ὁμόνοια is used in the context of “alliance” to celebrate or mark a treaty or a pact between two cities. See P.R. Franke and M.K. Nollé, *Die Homonoia-Münzen Kleinasiens und der thrakischen Randgebiete: I Katalog* (Saarbrücken: Saarländische Druckerei und Verlag, 1997).

⁴⁰ The closely related term φιλάλληλος occurs twice in two Byzantine marriage documents (*P.Lond.* V 1711 Fr.F. 56 (c. A.D. 566–573); *P.Cair.Mas.* III 67310 v.3 (c. A.D. 566–573)). For the most detailed treatment of the term φιλαλληλία see Stanton, “The Proposed Earliest Christian Letter on Papyrus,” 54–56.

that exists between numbers,⁴¹ and is used once by Diogenes of Lycia, the second century epicurean who employs the term to describe the conditions that will exist in a future utopia.⁴² It is therefore not until the third century, with Origen, that the term is first definitively employed by a Christian, after which its use by Christians becomes more widespread.⁴³ Consequently, there is no evidence that Christians had any exclusive command of either ὁμόνοια or φιλαλληλία in the first three centuries.

As for the sentiments expressed by Ammonius at this point in the letter, to avoid strife and contention by maintaining mutual affection and concord, it is clear that such sentiments had a wide circulation that transcended any (one) group. In *P.Oxy.* IX 1216, a letter dated to the second century (or third century) that begins with an invocation to the “gods” (ll. 3–4, ἐγὼ εὐχομαι ἀεὶ πᾶσει τοῖς θεοῖς περὶ σοῦ, . . .), the sender, in language that is very similar to that expressed by Ammonius, prays that “concord” might exist between him and the addressee (ll. 15–16. τοῦτο γὰρ εὐχομαι ὑμᾶς ὁμονοεῖν).⁴⁴ Josephus likewise reports when describing the Pharisees that they too sought “mutual affection” (φιλάλληλος) and “concord” (ὁμόνοια) among members of their own sect.⁴⁵ Even Dio of Prusa, in language reminiscent of *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057, urges his hearers to have “affection (φιλία) and concord (ὁμόνοια) toward others” (ἐκ τῆς πρὸς ἄλληλα φιλίας καὶ ὁμονοίας).⁴⁶ By reference to these and other contemporary examples it should be evident that even if early Christians were especially noted for maintaining harmony and affection among their coreligionists, such ideals were also shared by a number of other groups. Therefore, the mere use of such language does not establish or even necessarily point toward a Christian context.

III. Rank Reversal and Scribal Greetings

Turning to the concluding section of the letter (ll. 29–30), while it was once believed that it employed rank reversal because Ammonius referred to Apollonius as “brother” (ἀδελφός) throughout the body of the letter, but in the

⁴¹ Nicom. *Ar.* 2.19.1. Also cited by Iamblichus when quoting from Nicomachus (*in Nic.* 30.20; 33.26). See also Stanton, “The Proposed Earliest Christian Letter on Papyrus,” 58–60.

⁴² Diog. *Oen. Fr.* 56.8 (=NF 21.8). See Stanton, “The Proposed Earliest Christian Letter on Papyrus,” 61–62.

⁴³ Origen, *Adnot.Deut.* 17.28.10.

⁴⁴ Cf. *P.Oxy.* XLII 3065.20–22 (III).

⁴⁵ *B.J.* 2.166. Cf. *B.J.* 2.119 (Essenes).

⁴⁶ *Or.* 40.36.

conclusion appeared to address him as “master” (l. 29 δεσπότης) and this was thought to echo certain of Paul’s letters,⁴⁷ in light of a proposed textual emendation made in the *Berichtigungsliste* such an argument now appears largely irrelevant.⁴⁸ Instead of the punctuation contained in the *editio princeps* where Ammonius concludes the letter by addressing Apollonius as his “master”⁴⁹, it is more certain that the punctuation should be adjusted so that it is the scribe, “Leonas”, who is issuing this address: “I Leonas greet you master and all your people. Farewell most honored friend.” (Λεωνᾶς ἀσπασζομαί σε, δέσποτα, καὶ τοὺς ζ[ο]ῦς πάντας. ἔρρωσο, τειμιώτατε).⁵⁰ Nevertheless, given that any imposition of punctuation is both conjectural and interpretative and therefore potentially changes the original sense of what was being expressed in the letter, let it be supposed for the sake of argument that *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057 does employ a form of rank reversal at this point. Does this necessarily imply Christian authorship? A survey of letters dated to the first and second centuries reveal that forms of rank reversal occur with some frequency, especially in either initial greetings or valedictions where it is not uncommon for the sender to address the recipient as both “Lord” (κύριος) and “brother” (ἀδελφός) as a formulaic sign of respect and affection.⁵¹ Consequently, the presence of rank reversal in a

⁴⁷ Montevecchi, “Recensioni e Bibliographica,” 302, who notes that a possible analogy may exist with Philm 15–16 where Paul exhorts Philemon to receive Onesimus not as a “slave” (δούλος) but as a “beloved brother” (ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφός). In this earlier article she also argued that this increased the probability that *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057 was a Christian letter: “Non è un argomento decisivo, ma si aggiunge agli altri per rendere legittima l’ipotesi.”

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.* n. 8. Though it might be tempting to suppose that the use of the familial address, in this case ἀδελφός, could suggest a Christian context, it should be pointed out that such familial language is rather common in papyrus letters and cannot be used as a very conclusive marker of Christian provenance. See P. Artz-Grabner, “‘Brothers’ and ‘Sisters’ in Documentary Papyri and in Early Christianity,” *RivB* 50 (2002) 189–201; *NewDocs* 1.59–61; 2.49–50.

⁴⁹ In the *ed. pr.* it reads (ll. 28–31) “[...] but Leonas endures. I greet you, master, and all your people. Farewell, most honoured friend.” (αλ<λ> ὑποφέρει Λεωνᾶ· ἀσπασζομαί σε, δέσποτα, καὶ τοὺς ζ[ο]ῦς πάντας. ἔρρωσο, τειμιώτατε).

⁵⁰ According to this reading “endures” (ὑποφέρει) in ll. 28–29 is to be taken with “soul” (ἡ ψυχή) in l. 26. Ammonius is therefore stating that despite “pressing troubles” (ἐπερχόμενα) in l. 28 his soul is enduring. In the *ed. pr.* Parsons noted on p. 146 n. 28 that this reading had been suggested: “Dr. Rea suggests a stop before Λεωνᾶς; an additional greeting from some other person, perhaps from the scribe himself.” The hand with which the letter was written is very skilled as it is regular, neat, clear, displays semi-literary qualities, and the orthography is relatively good, which suggests the presence of a scribe and would seem to lend some additional strength to this reading.

⁵¹ *SB V* 7743.2 (I–II); *P.IFAO* II 41 Fr. B 10 (I–II); *P.Brem.* 9.21 (113–120); *P.Brem.* 54.16 (113–120); *P.Alex.* 25.27 (II); *P.Mert.* II 82.2, 7 (late II); *PSI* XII 1259.1, 27 (II–early III); *P.Oxy.* I 117.2 (II–III); *PSI* III 177.1–2 (II–III).

letter proves little in the way of establishing or even indicating the religious commitments of the sender.⁵²

Though Ramelli seemingly agrees with the emendation given in the *Berichtigungsliste*, which effectively negates any parallel being drawn to Pauline forms of rank reversal that could be used to bolster Christian authorship of the letter,⁵³ she insinuates that the scribal greeting somehow strengthens the case for Christian authorship since it has a number of parallels to certain NT letters.⁵⁴ Even though *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057 and certain letters of the New Testament were written by scribes who made their presence directly known, the most notable example in the NT being found at Romans 16:22 where Tertius sends his own greetings at the end of the letter,⁵⁵ such explicit scribal salutations, as Ramelli tacitly admits notwithstanding the fact that she only cites NT parallels, were very widespread. In a notable example Cicero informs his friend Atticus that if his scribe Alexis wished to send him greetings, then he really should put them in a letter of his own, instead of putting them in Atticus' letters.⁵⁶ Likewise, in *P.Oxy.* XLIX 3505, a letter dated to the first or second century that gives no indication it was authored by a Christian, the scribe who wrote on behalf of a certain Papontos makes his presence known at the end of the letter as he appends his own greeting, "I, Dionysius, greet you" (ll. 24–25, ἀσπάζομαι σε Διονύσιος) with the same language that is employed by Leonas in *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057. Additionally, other examples from contemporaneous papyrus letters could also be cited.⁵⁷ Ultimately then, regardless of the presence of explicit scribal greetings in

⁵² Even when forms of rank reversal are employed with the body of a letter (as opposed to the opening and closing formulae), which is considerably more uncommon, it still does not establish Christian provenance. In *NewDocs* 6.175–177, S.R. Llewelyn conducted a cursory examination of the use of ἀδελφός and δεσπότης within the body of various letters to see whether it could be used as a solid Christian indicator. On p. 177 he noted, "the master/brother distinction is not sufficient to indicate Christian authorship in the fourth century AD as both pagan and Christian authors could use it."

⁵³ While Ramelli appears to agree that the *BL* emendation is correct, based on her transcription of the letter and accompanying translation (pp. 170–171), she does point to 1 Tim 6:2 as another example of rank reversal where Paul invites slaves that have Christian masters to consider them as more than masters but as brothers and at least implies there is some additional parallel with *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057. See Ramelli, "Una delle più antiche lettere," 174–175.

⁵⁴ Ramelli, "Una delle più antiche lettere," 175, who cites Rom 16:22, 1 Cor 16:21, Col 4:18, 2 Thess 3:17, Gal 6:11, 1 Pet 5:12.

⁵⁵ Rom 16:22—ἀσπάζομαι ὑμᾶς ἐγὼ Τέρτιος ὁ γράψας τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἐν κυρίῳ.

⁵⁶ Cicero, *Att*; 5.20: "I [Cicero] am pleased that Alexis so often sends greetings to me; but why cannot he put them in a letter of his own, as Tiro, who is my Alexis, does for you."

⁵⁷ For similar scribal remarks at the end of a letter see *P.Mert.* II 82.19–20 (II) and *P.Mich.* VIII 482.8–10 (23 Aug A.D. 133).

certain letters of the New Testament, the fact that *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057 was written by a scribe who wished to greet the addressee has no bearing whatsoever on whether or not this letter should be read in a Christian context.

IV. ἐπισκέπτης as a Christian Office

Finally, Ramelli argues that the address preserved on the back of the letter (l. 31) likely contains a reference to a Christian office. In the *ed. pr.* the address reads “Το Apollonius [...], surveyor, his brother” (Ἀπολλωνίῳ Ἀπολλ^ω(?)⁵⁸ ἐπισκέπ(τη) ἄδ^ε(λφῶ)). The word translated here as “surveyor” is ἐπισκέπτης, which is abbreviated in the address as ἐπισκέπ. Given the close similarity of ἐπισκέπτης and ἐπίσκοπος,⁵⁹ Ramelli tries to make some connection between the two words, assuming that the former also refers to a Christian office, and insinuates that ἐπισκέπτης should here be understood as some kind of “inspector” or “overseer” of a Christian community.⁶⁰ She does this through a rather convoluted argument where she attempts to demonstrate that since the verb ἐπισκοπέω and the verb ἐπισκέπτομαι appear to have been used somewhat interchangeably in certain of the writings attributed to the Apostolic Fathers, this suggests that the noun ἐπισκέπτης could be used as a reference to an ecclesiastical office.⁶¹

Despite this line of reasoning there is no evidence the noun ἐπισκέπτης was ever used interchangeably with ἐπίσκοπος in early Christian texts, or that it was ever used by early Christian writers to refer to a specific ecclesiastical office. This noun is unattested in the LXX, the NT, the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, and is not used by a single Christian writer until at least the fourth century, when Ephraim (the Syrian) employs it to refer to the righteous who attended to the sick.⁶² Noting the rare, as well as late,

⁵⁸ As Parsons noted (*P.Oxy.* XLII p. 146 n. 31) what follows the abbreviation Ἀπολλ^ω () is uncertain. Is it a name, such as Ἀπολλ^ω(νίου), or is it a place Ἀπολλ^ω(νοπιλίτη)? The superscripted *omega* clearly suggests that it is an abbreviation.

⁵⁹ This similarity did not escape the notice of Parsons who pointed out in the *ed. pr.* (*P.Oxy.* XLII p. 146 n. 15) that ἐπισκόπ(ω) could not be read. Ramelli agrees with Parsons, noting “Il testo dà solo ἐπισκέπ- e, come fa notare Parsons, non sembra possibile leggere ἐπίσκοπος (31), poiché difficilmente, in un testo grafia chiara quale è quello della lettera, una E potrebbe confondersi con una O.” Ramelli, “Una delle più antiche lettere,” 176.

⁶⁰ Ramelli, “Una delle più antiche lettere,” 175–177.

⁶¹ On the attestations of the verb ἐπισκέπτομαι in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers see: 1 Clem. 25:5; Pol. Phil 6:1; Herm. Vis. 3.9.2; Herm. Mand. 8.1.10; Herm. Sim. 1.1.8; Herm. Sim. 8.2.9; 3.3; Herm. Sim. 9.10.4.

⁶² Ephr. *Interrogationes et responsiones* 2.197e: . . . οἱ τῶν καταπονουμένων ἀντιλήπτορες, οἱ τῶν χηρῶν προστάται, οἱ τῶν κατακειμένων ἐπισκέπται, οἱ πενήσαντες νῦν, καθὼς ἔπεν ὁ Κύριος. There is no hint that Ephraim uses οἱ ἐπισκέπται as a reference to a specific ecclesiastical office.

usage of this noun in patristic literature, in Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon* it is simply rendered as "visitor" with no implication that it was ever used as a reference to a Christian office. Furthermore, since the noun ἐπισκέπτης is well attested in contemporary documentary papyri and typically referred to the official who helped determine the areas under cultivation that were subject to taxation within a Nome⁶³—an administrative/geographic division within Egypt—is it not therefore more reasonable and plausible to suppose that when Ammonius addresses Apollonius with this title that he is simply referring to his office in this capacity and is not using an ecclesiastical title for which there is no parallel.⁶⁴ Here, the burden of proof lies squarely on Ramelli to show why, in the absence of any genuine evidence, ἐπισκέπτης should be understood as a reference to some ecclesiastical office within the context of *P.Oxy. XLII 3057*, whereas in other attestations in the papyri it clearly refers to government officials who assessed the areas under cultivation for tax purposes.⁶⁵

⁶³ On the office of the ἐπισκέπτης see H.C. Youtie, "P.Mich.Inv. 341: A Price of Wheat," *ZPE* 36 (1979) 79–80. For attestations in documentary papyri see: *P.Lond.* III 1171.63 (8 B.C.); *P.IFAO* I 7.12 (A.D. 26); *P.Oxy.* XLIX 3465.6 (A.D. 63/4); *P.Muench.* 3–1 64.18 (A.D. 86/7); *P.Ryl.* II 168.7 (A.D. 120); *P.Sarap.* 45.9 (A.D. 127); *P.Ross.Georg.* II 22.2, 7 (A.D. 154–59); *SB* I 4416.7 (A.D. 158–59); *P.Oxy.* II 589.1 (II); *P.Wisc.* II 55.8 (II); *SB* XVI 12691.3 (II); *P.Oxy.* XXXVI 2793.6 (II/III); *SB* XVI 12607.3 (II/III); *P.Flor.* I 6.14 (A.D. 210); *P.Oslo.* II 27.1 (A.D. 244); *SB* X 10556.11 (III); *P.Oxy.* XIV 1669.16 (III/IV A.D.).

⁶⁴ Since Apollonius worked as a "surveyor" (ἐπισκέπτης), it may be wondered whether this could help to explain the tensions alluded to earlier in the letter. Given that there is evidence that arguments and disputes periodically erupted over land assessments, since such measurements had tax implications, it may be wondered whether the tensions among the "brethren" were work related. For evidence of such disputes in the second century and third century at Oxyrhynchus see: *P.Oxy.* VII 1032 (A.D. 162), Petition, concerns a dispute arising out of some irregularity in the registration of a vineyard; *P.Oxy.* VII 1032 (III A.D.), Petition, complaint that land has been improperly assessed; *P.Oxy.* IV 718 (II A.D.), Petition, complaint that property has been improperly assessed; *P.Oxy.* III 488 (III A.D.), Petition, complaint that land has been improperly assessed (addition of an extra aroura).

⁶⁵ To make such an argument I believe that Ramelli is at the very least obligated to explain or justify her reasoning for the ecclesiastical definition of ἐπισκέπτης via a comparison with other attestations of this term in the papyri, which she fails to do. Interestingly, the very same abbreviation (ἐπισκέπ()) employed in *P.Oxy. XLII 3057* can be found in *SB* X 10270.14.3 (A.D. 221–23) where it clearly has to be taken as a reference to the nome official responsible for assessing land for tax purposes since this is modified by the adjective ἄβροχος (unflooded). In Egypt unflooded lands were typically assessed and levied at a lower tax rate than others sorts of lands (i.e. βεβρεγμένη (flooded)) since they were especially hard to cultivate given that they could only be watered with difficulty and were generally less productive than other sorts of land. See W.L. Westermann, "The 'Dry Land' in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt," *CP* 17 (1922) esp. 22–25.

Conclusion

Though this analysis confined itself to the most essential points marshaled by Montevecchi and Ramelli in favor of Christian authorship for *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057 and has not treated every single argument presented in their works, it should be clear that there are a number of compelling reasons for doubting their claims. While they do attempt to provide evidence that would support a Christian reading of the letter, they often do so via special pleading where cryptic interpretations and implausible conjectures are given greater weight than more practical explanations. Additionally, both works tend to seize upon every aspect of this letter that ostensibly shares some Christian parallel, which is then exhibited as evidence of Christian authorship, and fail to adequately acknowledge that such features are not exclusively Christian. On this front it would appear both works suffer from the same tunnel vision that plagued Eusebius when he attempted to argue that the Therapeutae, described by Philo in his treatise *On the Contemplative Life*, were one of the earliest Christian communities in Egypt.⁶⁶ Eusebius is certain the group is Christian and even goes so far as to reassure his readers of this fact since he can cite a few loose parallels this group shared with early Christians, namely, that they held all their possessions in common, they had a form of communion, and they allowed women to join their ranks.⁶⁷ Notwithstanding the assurances of Eusebius, the parallels he points out have failed to convince contemporary scholarship given their superficial nature combined with the fact that non-Christian groups could have likewise possessed such characteristics—not to mention that Eusebius also reads into Philo's account other Christian elements that are simply not present.⁶⁸

While this paper cannot absolutely prove that *P.Oxy.* XLII 3057 was not sent by a Christian or that it is not, as Montevecchi and Ramelli argue, an Egyptian counterpart to *1 Clement* written in the wake of the persecution of Domitian with the purpose of easing tensions and divisions in a fledgling Christian community at Oxyrhynchus,⁶⁹ it is hoped that this examination has cast a considerable amount of doubt on their claims. Given that this letter (like so many other personal letters preserved on papyrus) is fairly

⁶⁶ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.17.1–24. On the other hand, Philo argues that this group was a counterpart to the Essenes.

⁶⁷ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.17.6, 18–19.

⁶⁸ G.P. Richardson, "Philo and Eusebius on Monasteries and Monasticism: The Therapeutae and Kellia," in *Origins and Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Honour of John C. Hurd* (ed. B.H. Maclean; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 334–359.

⁶⁹ Montevecchi, "THN ΕΙΗΣΤΟΛΗΝ ΚΕΧΙΑΣΜΕΝΗΝ: P.Oxy. XLII 3057," 192–194; Ramelli, "Una delle più antiche lettere," 185.

laconic and contains a relatively high degree of implicit information that is shared between the sender and addressee, it naturally invites multiple interpretations. Consequently, establishing one particular reading over another is sometimes difficult. However, this does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid as the best reading is the one that seeks to situate the letter in its most probable context by reference to both internal and external factors and abstains, as much as possible, from unwarranted conjectures and possibilities.