

A Note on Dionysius of Alexandria's Letter to Novatian in Light of Third-Century Papyri

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Near the end of the sixth book of Eusebius' *Historia ecclesiastica* where he briefly details the Novatian Schism at Rome he cites a letter written by Dionysius of Alexandria to Novatian urging him to be reconciled to the Roman church¹. This letter is unique since it is the only one attributed to Dionysius and employed by Eusebius that is cited in its entirety². When it is compared to other third-century letters from Egypt written on papyrus it becomes evident that it shares a number of similarities in terms of its length, format and epistolary style. Furthermore, it even shares some distinct parallels to the six extant contemporary Christian letters preserved on papyrus³. The cumulative force of these similarities would therefore suggest – notwithstanding the number of studies calling into question Eusebius' handling and reproduction of written source materials in his *Historia*

¹ Eus., h.e. VI 45 (GCS Eusebius II/2, 627,9-23 Schwartz).

² Eusebius even includes the opening address and closing valediction. Other letters of Dionysius either referred to or quoted in part by Eusebius include: *Epistula ad Fabianum* (bishop of Antioch) (Eus., h.e. VI 41f.44 [600,2-612,12; 624,6-626,9 S.]); *Epistula ad Germanum* (h.e. VI 40; VII 2 [596,5-598,25; 636,18-638,6 S.]); *Epistula ad Cornelium* (bishop of Rome) (h.e. VI 46 [626,24-628,28 S.]); *Epistula ad Stephanum* (bishop of Rome) (h.e. VII 2 [636,18-638,6 S.]); *Epistula ad Sixtum* (bishop of Rome) (h.e. VII 3-6.9 [638,6-642,11; 646,13-648,19 S.]); *Epistula ad Philemon* (presbyter at Rome) (h.e. VII 7 [642,12-646,4 S.]); *Epistula ad Dionysium* (bishop of Rome) (h.e. VII 7,6; 8,1 [644,23-646,4; 646,5-12 S.]); *Epistula ad Domitium et Didymum* (h.e. VII 11,20-26 [662,1-664,21 S.]); *Epistula ad Herammon* (h.e. VII 1.10.23 [636,6-16; 648,20-652,25; 682,25-684,20 S.]); *Epistula ad Brethren* (in Alexandria) (h.e. VII 22 [678,19-682,25 S.]); *Epistula ad Hieracem* (h.e. VII 21 [674,17-678,18 S.]); reference to the *Epistulae festales* in Eus., h.e. VII 20; 22,11 (674,8-16; 682,18-21 S.).

³ Papyrus Bas. I 16 (early 3rd century AD): Arian to his Brother Paul; Papyrus Vind. Sijp. 26 (mid 3rd century AD): Asclepius to his Brother Hierakammon; Papyrus Alex. 29 (mid 3rd century AD): Sotas to his Beloved Brother Maximus; PSI III 208 (mid 3rd century AD): Sotas to his Beloved Brother Peter; PSI IX 1041 (mid 3rd century AD): Sotas to his Beloved Brother Paul; Papyrus Oxy. XXXVI 2785 (mid 3rd century AD): Elders of Heracleopolis to Bishop Sotas. – The papyri are cited according to J.F. Oates/R.S. Bagnall/W.H. Willis, Checklist of Editions of Greek Papyri and Ostraca, BASPap.S 1, Missoula (Montana) ²1978 and updated editions online at <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html> (01/09/2010). On early Christian letters preserved on papyrus in general see M. Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto: Lettere private nei papiri dei secoli II-IV*, Firenze 1968 (reprint Firenze 1998).

*ecclesiastica*⁴ – that Eusebius has faithfully transcribed this letter and that it is a genuine copy of Dionysius' original letter to Novatian.

The letter cited by Eusebius is presented here in full:

Διονύσιος Νοουατιανῶ ἀδελφῶ χαίρειν.
 εἰ ἄκων, ὡς φῆς, ἤχθης, δείξεις ἀναχωρήσας ἐκὼν. ἔδει μὲν γὰρ καὶ πᾶν ὅτι οὖν παθεῖν ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ διακόψαι τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ ἦν οὐκ ἀδοξότερα τῆς ἔνεκεν τοῦ μὴ εἰδωλολατρῆσαι γινομένης ἢ ἔνεκεν τοῦ μὴ σχίσει μαρτυρία, κατ' ἐμὲ δὲ καὶ μείζων. ἐκεῖ μὲν γὰρ ὑπὲρ μιᾶς τῆς ἐαυτοῦ ψυχῆς, ἐνταῦθα δὲ ὑπὲρ ὅλης τῆς ἐκκλησίας μαρτυρεῖ. καὶ νῦν δὲ εἰ πείσαις ἢ βιάσαιο τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς εἰς ὁμόνοιαν ἐλθεῖν, μείζων ἔσται σοι τοῦ σφάλματος τὸ κατόρθωμα, καὶ τὸ μὲν οὐ λογισθῆσεται, τὸ δὲ ἐπαινῆσεται. εἰ δὲ ἀπειθούντων ἀδυνατοίης, σῶζων σῶζε τὴν σεαυτοῦ ψυχὴν. ἐρρώσθαι σε, ἐχόμενον τῆς εἰρήνης ἐν κυρίῳ, εὔχομαι.⁵

To begin, while this letter seems rather short and it could be supposed that Eusebius is merely providing an abstract or précis, since extracts of Dionysius' other letters quoted by Eusebius suggest that they could be quite lengthy, a survey of letters preserved on papyrus reveals that the this letter's length is typical. Though this letter only contains 108 words, the average length of a papyrus letter is about 100 words⁶. By comparison, the average length of the six extant Christian letters preserved on papyrus and dating to the third century is only 70 words⁷, and those Christian

⁴ G. Hata, Eusebius and Josephus. The Way Eusebius Misused and Abused Josephus, in: [without ed.] *Patristica. Proceedings of the Colloquia of the Japanese Society of Patristic Studies. Supplementum 1*, 2001, 49-66; G.P. Richardson, Philo and Eusebius on Monasteries and Monasticism. The Therapeutae and Kellia, in: B.H. Maclean (ed.), *Origins and Method. Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity. Essays in Honour of John C. Hurd, JSNT.S 86*, Sheffield 1993, 334-359; R. Grant, *Eusebius as Church Historian*, Oxford 1980, 63-83; cf. D. Mendels, *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity. An Essay on Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History*, Grand Rapids (Michigan) 1999, 162-177.

⁵ Eus., h.e VI 45 (626,13-23 S.). Translation by the author: "Dionysius to Novatian his brother greeting. – If, as you say, you were promoted unwillingly, you will prove it by withdrawing willingly. For one should suffer anything and everything rather than split the church of God. For martyrdom to avoid schism is not less inglorious than martyrdom to avoid idolatry. In fact, to me it is better. In one case he is a martyr for his own soul, but here for the whole church. Even now if you are able to persuade or to compel the brethren to come to harmony, your success would be greater than your error, and the one would not be reckoned but the other would be praised. If you should be unable to persuade the disobedient, save, save your own soul. – I pray in the Lord that you fare well cleaving unto peace". On this letter see C. Feltoe, *St. Dionysius of Alexandria*, London 1918, 50; J. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 2: *The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus*, Utrecht 1962-1986, 106f.

⁶ R.E. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing. Secretaries, Composition and Collection*, Downers Grove (Illinois) 2004, 163f., who also notes for comparison that the letters of Cicero and Seneca respectively averaged 295 and 995 words and that Paul's letters averaged 2495 words.

⁷ Papyrus Bas. I 16: 111 words; Papyrus Vind. Sijp. 26: 113 words; Papyrus Alex. 29: 39 words; PSI III 208: 37 words; PSI IX 1041: 55 words; Papyrus Oxy. XXXVI 2785: 53 words.

letters dating either to the later part of the third century or beginning of the fourth century is 85 words⁸.

Turning to the format of the letter, in terms of the opening address and valediction, it is remarkably similar to what is found in contemporary epistolary papyri⁹. First, it may be pointed out that the address is a simple yet a standard one in papyri where the name of the sender is given first in the nominative (Διονύσιος) followed by the addressee's in the dative (Νοουατιανῶ) and then the verb χάρω in the infinitive (χαίρειν)¹⁰. It may also be noted out that Dionysius' use of "brother" (ἀδελφός)¹¹ to refer to Novatian in the address is also well attested in the papyri, especially in Christian letters where familial epithets like ἀδελφός or ἀδελφή appear almost standard in the address¹². Turning to the valediction, it too is typical of what is most commonly found in the epistolary papyri¹³. Remarkably, it is very similar to the valedictions found in the six contemporary Christian letters, which all conclude with a rhetorical prayer (εὐχομαι) either "in the Lord" (ἐν κυρίῳ) or "in God" (ἐν θεῷ) for the well being of the addressee¹⁴:

⁸ Papyrus Col. XI 298 (= Papyrus Col. Teeter 6): 92 words; Papyrus Congr. XV 20: 76 words (few lacunae); Papyrus Gren. II 73: 101 words (few lacunae); Papyrus Gron. 17: 108 words (few lacunae); Papyrus Gron. 18: 102 words (few lacunae); Papyrus Prag. II 191: 32 words; SB XII 10800: 116 words; SB XVI 12304: 55 words. The six other Christian letters from this period were either too fragmentary or incomplete to determine a word count (Papyrus Giss. I 30; Papyrus Got. 11; Papyrus Princ. II 102; Papyrus Oxy. XII 1592; Papyrus Oxy. XX 2276; SB X 10255).

⁹ On the structure and form of epistolary papyri in the third and fourth centuries see G. Tibiletti, *Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d.C. Tra paganesimo e cristianesimo*, PUCSC.SSFL 15, Milano 1979, 1-18; H. Koskenniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefs bis 400 n.Chr.*, STAT 102/2, Helsinki 1956, 128-180. See also M. Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth Century Papyri*, *Studia Antiqua Australiensia* 1, Turnhout 2006, 11-15.

¹⁰ Choat, *Belief and Cult* (see note 9), 101f.; H.-J. Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament. A Guide to Context and Exegesis*, Waco (Texas) 2006, 17-21; F.X.J. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter of the Epistolary Papyri (3rd c. B.C.-3rd c. A.D.)*, *A Study in Greek Epistolography*, Chicago 1976, 50-55.62-64.

¹¹ This familial epithet is certainly meant to be taken figuratively and not literally. On the early Christian use of familial language see Matt 23:8; Acts 11:29; 1Cor 5:11; Lucianus, *Peregr.* 13 (SCBO, Luciani opera III, 192,11-29 Macleod).

¹² In all six Christian letters from the third century the recipient is identified in the address using familial language. However, while Christians commonly used familial language, whether figuratively or literally, to address their coreligionists such address was not exclusively Christian. On the use of familial language in the papyri see P. Artz-Grabner, 'Brothers' and 'Sisters' in Documentary Papyri and in Early Christianity, *RivBib* 50, 2002, 189-201; Tibiletti, *Le lettere private* (see note 9), 31-46.

¹³ Papyrus letters almost always employ the verb ῥωννυμι either as ἔρρωσθαι (mid. inf. perf.), as is the case in the letter of Dionysius, or less frequently as ἔρρωσοε (pass. perf. impv.) in the valediction. While the use of εὐχομαι does not appear as frequently it is not uncommon either. See Choat, *Belief and Cult* (see note 9), 102; Klauck, *Ancient Letters* (see note 10), 24f.; Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter* (see note 10), 69-77.

¹⁴ Given the consistent use of the nomen sacrum κ(υρ)ίω for κυρίῳ in the Christian papyrus letters it may be wondered if Dionysius may have also contracted κυρίος in his letter. The valedictory formula εὐχομαι ἐν κυρίῳ is exclusively Christian and does not appear

Dionysius (Eus., h.e. VI 45)	ἔρρωσθαί σε ἐχόμενον τῆς εἰρήνης ἐν κυρίῳ εὐχομαι.
Papyrus Bas. I 16,19f.	ἔρρωσθαί σε εὐχομαι ὀλοκλή[ρω]ς ἐν κ(υρί)ῳ.
Papyrus Vind. Sijp. 26,21-24	ἔρρωσθαί σε κύριε ἄδελφε, ἐν θεῷ πόλλοις χρόνοις εὐχομαι.
Papyrus Alex. 29,12-15	ἔρρωσθαί σε εὐχομαι, ἀγαπητῆ ἄδελφε ἐν κ(υρί)ῳ.
PSI III 208,11f.	ἔρρωσθαί σε ἐν θ(ε)ῷ εὐχομαι.
PSI IX 1041,15-17	ἔρρωσθαί σε εὐχομαι ἐν κ(υρί)ῳ, ἀγαπητῆ ἄδελ(φε).
Papyrus Oxy. XXXVI 2785,13-15	ἔρρωσθαί σε ἐν κ(υρί)ῳ εὐχόμεθα, ἀγαπητῆ πάπα σδ.

Turning to the body of the letter it too contains some characteristics that are typical in epistolary papyri. First, given the brevity of most of these letters it is common for the sender to promptly make a request right at the start of the letter¹⁵. While this could be done in a number of different ways, in letters sent between social equals or between persons for whom there does not appear to have been close personal bonds the request was usually prefaced with either εἰ or ἐάν followed either by δυνατόν ἐστιν (“[if] it is possible”) or δύνη (“[if] you are able”) whereupon the naming of the desired action was given¹⁶. Since this form of request was not as direct as other approaches, at the end of the letter either one of these two formulae might be reiterated to impress upon the recipient the sender's desire that the request be fulfilled. Turning to Dionysius' letter it is interesting to note that he makes his appeal to Novatian in roughly the same manner employing similar formulae, although he uses the negative form due to the delicate nature of the situation. He prefaces the initial request at the start of the letter with εἰ ἄκων (“if unwillingly”)¹⁷, whereupon he proceeds to detail the actual request, and then concludes the letter by reiterating his appeal with εἰ [ἰ] ἀδυνατοίης (“if you should be unable [...]”).

in papyri before the third century. See M. Choat/A. Nobbs, Monotheistic Formulae of Belief in Greek Letters on Papyrus from the Second to the Fourth Century, *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 2, 2001-2005, (36-51) 39.

¹⁵ Typically the opening section of the body a letter (after the proem) set the tone and outlined the letter's objective, thereby establishing the genre of the letter for classificatory purposes. According to Pseudo-Demetrius' (of Phaleron) handbook on letters, “Epistolary Types” (τύποι ἐπιστολικοί), he identified twenty-one different kinds (γένη) of letters. The type that most accurately reflects the genre of the Dionysius's letter is Demetrius' “Advisory” (συμβουλευτικός) letter, which sought to exhort/dissuade someone from a particular action by offering one's own opinion and judgment. See A.J. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists*, SBibSt 19, Atlanta 1988, (31-41) 37.

¹⁶ The most direct (and most common) way to make a request at the beginning of a letter was through the use of such verbs as δέομαι, ἀξιῶ, ἐρωτάω, or παρακαλῶ. By prefacing the request with either εἰ or ἐάν it blunted the force of a direct appeal and sounded less like a command and more like an invitation and was therefore considered more polite. On common epistolary clichés used to preface requests see H.A. Steen, *Les clichés épistolaires dans les lettres sur papyrus grecques*, CM 1, 1938, (119-176) 168-170.

¹⁷ While Dionysius prefaces the request with εἰ ἄκων, contending that Novatian's episcopal aspirations were put forth against his will, he goes on to ask him that he ἐκῶν (“willingly”) withdraw them. The tone of this request is meant to avoid direct confrontation and upset an already fragile situation by giving Novatian a way out.

Another noteworthy aspect of the letter for which parallels may be found in contemporary papyri has to do with its choice of vocabulary. When Dionysius entreats Novatian at the start of the letter to “withdraw” (ἀναχωρήσας) his episcopal claim, he employs the verb ἀναχωρέω. While this verb is usually translated “depart” or “withdraw” it literally means to “go up to the chora” (χωρά)¹⁸. This verb had a special resonance in Egypt as the entire countryside, outside of the three Greek cities (Naucratis, Ptolemais, Antinoopolis) and Alexandria, was officially designated as the chora and it (ἀναχωρέω) was frequently used in documentary papyri to refer to those persons who surreptitiously (and illegally) left their homes and withdrew to the chora to evade taxes or liturgical service¹⁹. It is therefore significant that this letter should employ this somewhat distinct verb that most commonly appears in papyri from the third-century, a time when Egypt witnessed a significant increase in the number persons abandoning their property and withdrawing to the countryside²⁰.

To conclude, on a number of fronts Dionysius’ letter to Novatian preserved in Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* VI 45 shares some remarkable parallels with contemporaneous letters preserved on papyrus. In terms of its length, format, and overall epistolary style this letter is characteristic of other third-century letters. Furthermore, its unique valediction is remarkably similar to what is found in the six extant Christian papyrus letters from the third century. The cumulative force of these similarities would therefore suggest that Eusebius has reproduced an accurate copy of Dionysius’ entire letter to Novatian.

¹⁸ This is not to imply that ἀναχωρέω should here be translated as “go up to the chora” instead of as “withdraw”.

¹⁹ There was a legal, as well as tax distinction, in both the Ptolemaic and Roman periods between residents of the chora and residents of three Greek cities and Alexandria. See D. Delia, *Alexandrian Citizenship During the Roman Principate*, ACSt 23, Atlanta 1991, 12f. On the flight from taxes, or ἀναχώρησις, in Egypt see Ph., *De specialibus legibus* III 30 (Philonis Alexandrini opera V, 158,6-11 Cohn/Wendland); N. Lewis, *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule*, Oxford 1983, 162-165. The term “anchorite”, which had a special resonance in Egypt among Christian hermits who lived in the chora, was derived from ἀναχωρέω.

²⁰ On the rapid upsurge of ἀναχώρησις in the mid to later part of the third century see S.L. Wallace, *Taxation in Egypt from Augustus to Diocletian*, Princeton University Studies in Papyrology 2, Princeton 1938, 348-352, who also cites pertinent papyri.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im sechsten Buch seiner *Historia ecclesiastica* zitiert Euseb einen Brief des Dionysius von Alexandria an Novatian, in dem er ihn ermahnt, sich mit der Kirche in Rom zu versöhnen. Dieser Brief ist unter allen Briefen des Dionysius, die von Euseb angeführt werden, insofern einzigartig, als er in voller Länge zitiert wird. Dementsprechend kann er mit zeitgenössischen Briefen auf Papyri aus Ägypten verglichen werden. Ein solcher Vergleich zeigt eine Reihe von spezifischen Parallelen in auf Papyrus erhaltenen Briefen aus christlichem wie nichtchristlichem Kontext. Auch wenn Euseb im Hinblick auf seine Art und Weise, Quellenmaterial selektiv zu benutzen und anzuführen, oft verdächtig ist, kann man jedenfalls in diesem Fall davon ausgehen, dass Euseb sorgfältig und zuverlässig eine authentische Kopie von Dionysius' Brief an Novatian wiedergibt.