

Sabine Huebner, *Papyri and the Social World of the New Testament*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-1-108-47025-1. Paperback, pp. xv + 192. \$24.99.

- [1] The book under review is an actual gem: Sabine Huebner, University of Basel, Switzerland, does exactly what theologians need: she offers insights in the world of the New Testament from the point of view of a papyrologist. The major strength of the book is its focus on the nonelite population, their everyday concerns and troubles, and what common people had to face when it comes to living under Roman governance, such as a Roman census. She forces the reader to consider what it was like to be a women in those days, especially in the early days of the church. She forces the reader to think about travelling and moving around in countries and between them. Huebner succeeds in providing text-based reliable and high-quality insights into the real and realistic world in which the New Testament stories played, its texts evolved, and its earliest manuscripts were written.
- [2] Huebner's volume reminds me of my own entry into papyri. As an advanced student, I wanted to know what the symbols, signs, and numbers at the bottom of the pages of critical editions of the Greek New Testament actually stand for. I craved to see and even touch the archaeological objects that stem from the very first centuries of Christianity. In order to get such a direct sensation, I decided to travel to the collection of papyri of the Austrian National Library in Vienna. And keyed to my first encounter with papyrus and parchment fragments there by Adolf Deissmann's *Light from the Ancient East*—I had just read some of the first paragraphs of his preface to the first edition and enjoyed his flamboyant praise of the beams of the light from the east that should be taken home from the countries it has originally been ignited—and by Wilhelm Schubart's fascinating *Das Buch bei den Griechen und Römern* (of course, the 2nd edition with illustrations from 1921) and Eric G. Turner's wise *Greek Papyri: An Introduction*, both of which I read on the train, I was completely under the spell of papyri, parchments, ostraca, and inscriptions. I realized that there is more to reading the New Testament as a collection of texts or simply weighing the pros and cons of the variants of a certain textual passage represented in various witnesses. Those archaeological objects were written upon by human beings in a world in which everyday life influenced writing and reading processes, in which literacy and illiteracy may have led to specifically different connotations than the ones we have today. These objects meant windows into a world of real people.
- [3] Thus, for me, it is more than welcome that Huebner starts off with "Egypt and the Social World of the New Testament" (1–17), a chapter in which she writes about "common people," "social classes," and "everyday lives," to repeat just some of the terms she employs on the very first page. She describes the exceptional peculiarity of Egypt for papyrus findings, provides clear pieces of information of Greco-Roman Egypt and the rise of Christianity, and relates to the first digging campaigns of Bernhard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt. With all of that she presents "a theoretical reflection on the methodological approach of the study" (15), before she briefly informs the reader about the structure of the book and the topics of the individual chapters that follow.
- [4] In chapter 2, Huebner embeds a case study into the overall topic of "The Social Milieu of Early Christianity in Egypt: Who Were the First Readers of the New Testament Gospels?" (18–28). P.Bas. 2.43 (illustrated by a color image on p. 20) is a letter from Theadelphia, a town "located in the northwest corner of the Fayum" (19) and dated by Huebner herself to the 230s, which would mean that this papyrus is the earliest Christian letter available

- today. We learn from this document about the way letters were sent from one place to another, the form such a letter had, the importance and impact of offices and services in Egypt in those days, and the social background of the brothers Arrianus and Paulus, who are sender and addressor and addressee of the letter. On the basis of this document Huebner writes about the *nomen sacrum* (e.g., the abbreviation of ἐν κυρίῳ as ἐν κ̄ω at the end of the letter) and the social milieu of early Christianity, and she takes the papyrus as “evidence for later readers of the Gospels” (25–28).
- [5] The next chapter (31–50) offers a case study of Luke 2:1–3 and the issue of “the Herodian Kingdom and the Augustan provincial census system” (31). In other words, it reflects on the census itself and the date that should be attributed to it. Again she refers to historical data and to a papyrus, this time to SB 10.10759, which is dated to 35 CE and is about the census of “five brothers together in the city of Arsinoe” (38, which also holds a color image of the papyrus).
- [6] Chapter 4 focuses on the “Discrimination and the Struggle for Women’s Equality in Early Christianity” (51–64), which, of course, includes a discussion of the Gospel of Mary and the two fragments of it kept in the John Rylands Library in Manchester (P.Ryl. 3.463) and the Sackler Library in Oxford (P.Oxy. 3525), both represented by color images (52–53). Huebner plausibly points at the interim popularity such a composition had among Egyptian Christians. Then she deals with “the position of women in Roman Egypt” (55–57), “women in early church leadership roles” (57–59), and the role women played or did not play in the Egyptian clergy and in ecclesiastical offices (59–63).
- [7] Chapter 5 opens with Matt 13:55 and the reference to Jesus as “the carpenter’s son” (65). The sections “The Trade of Carpenter in the Roman world” and “A Craftsman’s Household” (65–73) are richly illustrated by images of a funerary stele, a fresco, an ivory relief, and a papyrus document (P.Mich.inv. 4238), which preserves the “apprenticeship contract of a carpenter from Theadelphia in the Arsinoite dated to 128 CE” (71). Then Huebner discusses Jesus’s education, his potential craftsmanship, and his family (81–86).
- [8] Motivated by Luke 1:39 the next chapter is about “Travel by the Lower Class in Roman Times” (87–114), which again is richly illustrated by artifacts and maps and a dense *tour de force* through the history of travel in ancient times. Huebner also covers costs, accommodation, accidents, and, in general, the hardship of traveling in those days, into which she integrates “travel descriptions in early Christian texts” (107–13).
- [9] Chapter 8 starts with Luke 2:8–10, which describes the shepherds living in the fields and the apparition of the angel, so that the chapter title “An Occupation on the Margins of Society” (115–34) becomes self-explaining. Huebner explores the sociocultural background of shepherds in Greco-Roman antiquity, their tasks, conflicts with farmers, and the composition of flocks.
- [10] The book comes with a short afterword (135–37), a bibliography (165–82), an *index locorum* (183–88), and a general index (189–92). Notes are not given at the bottom of the pages but are arranged as endnotes according to the page numbers and chapters (138–64). The small booklet is richly illustrated and lavishly produced so that the reader is rewarded by various images of papyri, frescoes, reliefs, mosaics, statues, et cetera and led through the ancient world by means of diverse maps (see “Illustrations,” viii–x).
- [11] In her afterword (135–37), Huebner stresses the purpose and aims of her book, which “contain[s] original research on papyrus documents from Roman Egypt that both enhance our knowledge of multiple aspects of everyday life in Roman province and generate insights relevant to issues well beyond the scope of New Testament scholarship” (137). By focusing “on the protagonists and key episodes of the New Testament litera-

ture” *and* “the everyday lives and daily concerns and difficulties of members of the lower and middle classes” (136), such as a carpenter or shepherd, on the basis of documentary papyri, the book offers an enlightening and encouraging perspective on how to study the New Testament within its sociocultural environment or how to study the documents from Greco-Roman Egypt with a scrupulous look at the New Testament episodes. If I daresay, though it is pure speculation, not only would Deissman be pleased with Huebner’s fine, in-depth and vividly written case studies, but so too will anyone who seriously studies and works on the New Testament, be it as an interpreter or a textual critic.

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