extract

Eastern Theological Journal

12/1
2026

Eastern **Theological Journal**

ISSN 2416-2213 (Print)
ISSN 3094-3167 (Online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.59241/etj.12.1

ETJ is a peer-reviewed academic journal,
published twice a year by the
St Athanasius Greek Catholic Theological Institute

It can be found in the list of publications
recognized as scientific journals by:

– the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR), in classification area 11
(History, Philosophy and Pedagogical Sciences)

– the Committee on History
(Történettudományi Bizottság II. FTO TTB [1901-] A)
and the Committee on Philosophy
(Filozófiai Tudományos Bizottság II. FTO FTB [1901-] A)
of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Magyar Tudományos Akadémia).

The Eastern Theological Journal adheres to the principles of Open Access and is hosted on the Open Journal Systems platform.

Annual print subscription for institutions: 55 €
Rate for private individuals: 22 €
CIB Bank
SWIFT: CIBHHUHB
IBAN: HU83 1110 0702 1920 4893 3600 0001
EU VAT NUMBER: HU19204893

Cover and typesetting: Katalin Balogh

Editorial Office

Eastern Theological Journal

Szent Atanáz Görögkatolikus
Hittudományi Főiskola
Bethlen G. u. 13-19
H-4400 Nyíregyháza, Hungary

Phone: +36 42 597-600

www.easterntheologicaljournal.com

www.szentatanaz.hu

Manuscripts should be sent to:
gyurkovics.miklos@szentatanaz.hu

Contents

Contributors of this volume

Riemer Roukema
Protestant Theological University, Utrecht, the Netherlands

Miren A. Aroztegi Esnaola
Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Rome, Italy

Miklós Gyurkovics
St Athanasius Greek Catholic Theological Institute,
Nyíregyháza, Hungary

Arsany Paul
University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA

István Szeszták
St Athanasius Greek Catholic Theological Institute,
Nyíregyháza, Hungary

Attila Tóth
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

Attila Jakab
Holocaust Memorial Centre, Budapest, Hungary

Wang Lijin
Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary,
Budapest, Hungary

Review of M. David Litwa, *Early Christianity in Alexandria: From its Beginnings to the Late Second Century,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 2024, 223 pp.

M. David Litwa is a prolific author who publishes monographs almost every year: *Simon of Samaria and the Simonians* (2024), *The Naassenes: Exploring an Early Christian Identity* (2024), *Carpocrates, Marcellina, and Epiphanes: Three Early Christian Teachers of Alexandria and Rome* (2022), *Found Christianities: Remaking the World of the Second Century CE* (2022), *The Evil Crerator: Origins of an Early Christian Idea* (2021), *Posthuman Transformation in Ancient Mediterranean Thought* (2020), *How the Gospels Became History: Jesus and Mediterranean Myths* (2019). The monograph devoted to Alexandrian Christianity in the second century—and which has not received much attention until now—is part of this series of publications. The author's aim is clearly stated in the title of the introduction: "Rethinking Earliest Christianity in Alexandria". According to the author: "A gloom seems to billow like a fog over the earliest Alexandrian church history, and scholars have but rarely espied more than a candle light glistening over the deep" (p. 1). At first glance, the reader might think that Litwa saw this sparkling candle and revealed its light.

The author's choice to focus on "apocryphal", "gnostic", and "heretical" writings and writers seems very reasonable. But when he says that "in fact, there are considerable sources indicating Alexandrian Christian figures and movements prior to 200" (p. 2) I remain sceptical anyway. All depends on what can be stated with certainty and what remains hypothetical. If assumptions continue to prevail, it will be very difficult to dispel the darkness. Similarly, I think that the "orthodoxy vs. heresy" binary has long been abandoned by research, and currently we tend to talk more about the diversity of early Christianity, marked by all kinds of conflicts (particularly doctrinal) within the religious

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59241/etj.12.1.201-207

reality we call "Christianity", but also with the surrounding Greco-Roman world in different places and times.

I also don't think that Eusebius when he "did not have data for earliest Alexandrian Christianity, he chose to report his own party's late and unreliable foundation legend" (p. 7). What does exactly "his own party" mean? Mark's activity in Alexandria is a "founding myth". It says more about the reality, power relations, and geo-ecclesiastical ambitions of the time in which it was written than about the time in which the event described is supposed to take place. Nor do I believe that the Markian myth is a "countertradition" intended to counterbalance and neutralize the Basilidean myth about Glaucias, the alleged interpreter of the apostle Peter (p. 9). In fact, it was the Basilideans who claimed that Glaucias *was* the interpreter (Clement, *Strom.* VII,106,4). We are not aware of any other sources on this subject.

The idea "that Christianity in Alexandria (...) appealed to Gentile populations in Alexandria from a fairly early period (the mid to late first century CE)" is undeniably appealing, but there is no evidence to support it. The same applies to the "multiethnic" character of the Christians of Alexandria "in the wake of the Diaspora Revolt (115-117 AD)" (p. 15). The term seems to be an anachronism for Alexandrian Christianity in the early centuries, which was undeniably Greek in culture, even if individuals may have had diverse origins. But did it really matter? Ethnicity in antiquity was not the same as in modern times.

What, on the other hand, seems quite interesting is the "distinctive character" of the Alexandrian Christian theology, which didn't emphasize a crucified Messiah. Litwa identifies six important topics, which he then attempts to find in the various authors and writings that he considers to be Alexandrian: 1) "a transcendent God", 2) "distinct from creative agencies", 3) "the manifestation of God as a primal Human (theandry)", 4) "the transmigration of souls", 5) "the rejection of corruptible flesh", and 6) "the deification of the mind" (pp. 15-16).

While the idea itself is commendable, its implementation seems much more problematic to me. Concerning the origin of the texts considered as Alexandrian, we mostly have hypotheses (often contradictory) rather than certainties, which Litwa also acknowledges. He is absolutely right to say that "the historian is charged to make the best of hypotheses by offering the most probable interpretations of reliable evidence" (p. 16), but he doesn't really justify his choices (see the table pp. 18-19). The reader gets the impression that the author deliberately favoured the Alexandrian hypothesis without really taking other opinions into consideration and without arguing. Thus, he rejects the *Letter of Diognetus* ("there is simply insufficient evidence, in my view, to determine provenance") but he accept *Barnabas* ("the hypothesis of an Alexandrian provenance, in my judgment, is strong") (pp. 16-17).

In terms of structure Litwa's book is composed of two parts. The first one is devoted to the "Beginnings" (pp. 21-88), the second to the "Early Christian Teachers and Movements in Alexandria" (pp. 89-180). In Chapter 1 (pp. 23-32), the author presents Philo of Alexandria, "representative of all Jews in Alexandria", and "the best window into Alexandrian Jewish Intellectual culture" (p. 23), as "Foreshadowings". May we remain sceptical about "all Jews"?! Although Litwa devotes several pages to present Philo's "select teachings", and "practice of the Jewish law", he says virtually nothing about the socio-political context in Alexandria at the time; e.g. the anti-Jewish riots in Alexandria in 38 AD is dealt with later (pp. 57-59). In Chapter 2 (pp. 33-39) he describes how "The Jesus Movement Enters Alexandria". He rejects the idea of a Palestinian "mission" and concludes that "we do not exactly know how the earliest followers of Jesus came to Alexandria" (p. 39); which is indeed true. However, we know one of Jesus' first Alexandrian followers, named Apollos, who is presented by Litwa in Chapter 3 (pp. 40-54). Unfortunately, there is no evidence that he was initiated into the "Way of the Lord" in his homeland. His activities tie him to Corinth,

not Alexandria. In my opinion there is no evidence that only two years after the bloody confrontation between the Jews and the Greeks in Alexandria "the Jesus movement(s) entered Alexandria early—by at least 40 CE (though probably earlier)—and swiftly appealed to educated persons in the city whether Jews or proselytes" (p. 55), as Litwa states at the beginning of the Chapter 4—"Factors Motivating Gentile Recruitment" (pp. 55-65)—and then attempts to prove it. Without knowing when and how Christianity took root in Alexandria, Litwa hypothesises "that between about 41 and 115 CE, pockets of Jesus devotees in Alexandria began distinguishing themselves from Jews by creating separate meetings with practices indicating a distinct group mentality and ritual life" (p. 65). Needless to say, we know nothing about this "ritual life". However, this newly constructed Christian identity is supposed to be represented by *Barnabas* and two Petrine texts (*Preaching of Peter* or *Kerygma Petri*, and *Apocalypse of Peter*), as can be seen in the Chapter 5: "Crafting a Christian Identity: Barnabas and Two Peters" (pp. 66-88). In reality, *Barnabas'* Alexandrian origin is still a possibility, not a certainty. A Syrian-Palestinian origin is also strong. Therefore, the argument remains weak. It is the same for the *Apocalypse of Peter*, not to mention the fact that the development of a Petrine tradition in Alexandria should be examined in greater depth. According to Litwa: "the Epistle of Barnabas, the *Preaching of Peter*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter* (...) testify to the fact that at least some early devotees of Jesus were—or at least aimed to be—organizationally and ritually distinct from Jewish communities in Alexandria at the time (about 100-135)" (p. 86). The problem is that after the revolt under Trajan (115-117), for a long time there would be no Jewish communities in Alexandria from which Christians would need to distinguish themselves.

In the second part of his book, Litwa moves on to the figures and writings that are thought to embody Christianity in Alexandria in the second century. They represent, he writes, "a new generation of

educated, Gentile theologians who set the pace of Christian thought in Alexandria for the next seventy years" (p. 88). Unfortunately, we know nothing about the ecclesiastical background of these figures, and we know their works only through later quotations and references (often contradictory) that tell us nothing about the socio-ecclesiastical context in which they lived and created.

In Chapter 6 Litwa presents "The Earliest Alexandrian Theologians: Basilides, Carpocrates, and Prodicus" (pp. 91-106). It seems rather difficult to say anything about their relationship with Judaism, both as a community and as a religious system of thought. The same applies to the Jewish Holy Scriptures. It is highly surprising to read "The Witness of Celsus" (p. 96-98), when there is no evidence that he ever lived in Alexandria; in fact, the opposite is most likely. We know practically nothing about Prodicus, but above all, it would have been better to distinguish this character from his followers. Can we really say that: "Basilides, Carpocrates, and Prodicus spoke of a transcendent and good God far above the Jewish creator and lawgiver" (p. 105)? We are entitled to have serious doubts about this. And the last sentence of this chapter is undoubtedly more ideological than historical: "Regardless of their later—often negative—reception history, the earliest Alexandrian Christian theologians played a vital role in the invention of the educated Christian intellectual, an ideal that helped to increase the legitimacy of early Christians as they accrued more social and intellectual capital in time to come" (p. 106). This statement certainly does not apply to the author of *Eugnostus*, but Litwa is quite right to take this text into consideration in Chapter 7 for the beginnings of Christianity in Alexandria: "*Eugnostus* and the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*" (pp. 107-120). In Chapter 8 the author presents "Julius Cassianus and Alexandrian Ascetic Culture" (pp. 121-136) by using a rather disparate collection of texts whose date and location is subject to discussion: the *Sentences of Sextus,* the *Testimony of Truth*, the *Gospel According to the Egyptians,* the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Exegesis of the Soul*. Chapter 9

is devoted to "Valentinian and Marcionite Currents" (pp. 138-149). But while we know that Apelles spent some time in Alexandria, we know nothing about his activities there. In the last Chapter 10 Litwa analyses "The Naassene Preacher" (pp. 150-167) whom he locates in Alexandria and considers to be a contemporary of Clement of Alexandria.

After reading the book, I still think that the darkness is by no means exaggerated, especially since Litwa acknowledges that many of his "historical conclusions (...) remain hypothetical" (p. 19). As a result, his monograph describes what could be rather than what actually was. From a methodological point of view, it could not be otherwise. Constructing a narrative that purports to be historical based on a series of hypotheses can only be a highly hypothetical reconstruction.

In my opinion another weakness of the book is the decontextualization of Christians from their Alexandrian socio-cultural environment. One gets the impression that Christians lived in a virtual vacuum, concerned only with themselves and their competing theologies. Even the relationships between the characters and the texts under consideration remain fragmentary. We do not so much have a picture as paintbrush strokes placed side by side.

Yet, Litwa's monograph is intellectually stimulating and enriching. He drew attention to a whole series of texts that deserve to be examined in greater detail and compared with other texts. To gain a better overview of Christianity during the first three centuries, it would be necessary to take into account almost all known works (and fragments) and figures, locate them geographically as far as possible, and use the results of network research. He is absolutely right when saying that the "Christian groups in second-century Alexandria cannot be easily separated from each other whether theologically or sociologically. Instead, a variety of independent teachers competed for attention and followers with no single circle of believers attaining clear (numerical or cultural) dominance." (p. 16)

According to the Litwa's monograph—which concludes with an impressive bibliography (pp. 181-219) and a very useful index (pp. 221-223)—, Christians in Alexandria in the second century represented a tiny minority, relatively invisible in the city's society, but they constituted a kind of intellectual nebula ("competing groups"), with a strong social background; people who had received a good education, were capable of producing knowledge (philosophical and theological), and had a certain socio-economic foundation that made all this possible. Alexandria seems to have been a veritable melting pot of diverse Christian thinkers in the second century, but unfortunately, these figures tell us almost nothing about the Christian community itself, its organisation, or its ecclesiastical life. In this sense, we can say that—thanks to Litwa—we may know a little more about Christians in Alexandria, but we still do not know the Alexandrian Christianity as a community—or communities—in the second century. Litwa's book suggests that, due to the extreme difficulty in accurately determining the place of origin and date of the sources, it may never be possible to establish with precision the development of Christianity in the first three centuries. For certain topics, we will remain trapped in hypotheses and conjecture.

Attila Jakab

HU ISSN 2416-2213

ISSN 2416-2213

9 772416 221003 >