

Malcolm Choat. *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri*. Studia Antiqua Austaliensia (SAA), no. 1. Turnhout/Belgium: Brepols, 2006. ISBN 2503513271. Pp. xiv + 217. \$49.28 USD, paper.

1. For the first time ever Greek and, above all, Coptic documentary papyri from 4th century Egypt that tell about religion are discussed in their entirety, i.e., in their arbitrary and ambiguous character. The content of these papyri corresponds to the various religious traditions that came together and intermingled with each other in those days. This study successfully experiments with a full-scale narrative description of the situation in Egypt in the 4th century by focusing only on specific issues and topics and excluding others.

2. Malcolm Choat, lecturer and researcher in the Ancient History Department Research Centre and the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University, Sydney, offers many invaluable methodological reflections, based on previous studies. They are occasionally little more than definitions, but they are always concisely formulated, showing an astounding awareness of the problems involved in this field of research. Choat's book is an essential step towards an in-depth study of the religious setting of Egypt in the 4th century. Especially his work on Coptic documentary papyri turns this book into an outstanding resource. Taken together with the results of the project *Papyri from the Rise of Christianity in Egypt* at Macquarie (see <http://www.anchist.mq.edu.au/doccentre/PCEHomepage.html>) that Choat actively participates in and that specializes mainly on the 3rd century, the indispensable information and observations of this stylistically very appealing study will certainly help readers to understand better the situation of the people of that time.

3. Choat begins by following Stuart Pickering's suggestion that the modern term 'religion' be replaced by 'belief and cult' (Preface, ix-x), as more appropriate for people's attitudes and practices late antiquity (ix). In his introduction (1-4) Choat defines his method and scope of research as follows (1): "This is a study of patterns of word usage within the documentary of public and private life, an essay which attempts to identify and interpret the impact of a society's belief, both personal and common, upon the documents which it generates." The attentive reader will soon realize that Choat seriously attempts to present his observations and conclusions in an essay-like style, which turns the book into a fascinating and very rewarding read. He focuses on specific terms in the papyri, such as 'priest' or 'deacon', on particular scribal features like the so-called *nomina sacra*, and on a comprehensive approach that allows Manichaean and other practices to be integrated in his book. Further, he wants to make his readership understand documentary papyri not only as isolated or secluded witnesses to a specific time (which they are for sure), but as documents that must be regarded as essential sources *together* with the literature produced in the same period of time, the late antiquity. Besides, he defines the term 'late antiquity' as lasting "from the late-third to the mid-fifth century AD", but specialises in the 4th century hereafter himself (2).

4. The following thirteen chapters deal with particular phenomena that have to do with 'cult and belief' in the 4th century: chapter two is about 'time and space' (5-9) and again contains well-considered statements proving Choat's consciousness of the limits of his own expertise (see p. 5, n. 10: "Given the uncertainty that remains, it seems wise to leave further investigation of the Christian epigraphic record in Egypt to experts") and the problems involved (p. 7, where Choat does not restrict his research slavishly to the 4th century, or in his description of the geographical

distribution of the papyri on p. 8). In chapter three, in addition to dealing with other issues, he defines the ‘context for the search for belief and cult’ (10-29) and copes with the problematic issue of how to determine a ‘Christian’ or a ‘pagan’ text, how to distinguish between documentary and literary papyri (17), and how to determine what actually constitutes the genre to which letters belong. Again Choat demonstrates the highest appreciation of the difficulties when he addresses the problem of “how representative the documentary papyri are as a source body” (16). Probably the most crucial point is to determine whether a document contains any expression of ‘religious sentiment’ or not (18-23). However, Choat is right in warning not to take everything we may find in documentary papyri too easily as a manifestation of a certain religious belief or conception, when he writes, for instance, that (28) “the phrase $\sigma\upsilon\nu\ \theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ tells us neither that the user ascribed to an exclusively monotheistic conception of divinity nor even whether behind its use stands any qualifiable belief.” Nevertheless, most instances where terms and passages can certainly be identified as ‘religious’ tell more about cult than belief (for example, officials, institutions, practices, buildings and holy spaces). Chapter four is about the language(s) employed in the papyri on which the investigation concentrates, Greek and Coptic (30-42). Above all, documents in Coptic and its dialects are still a problem, due the slow-moving publication process and the lack of both interest in them and resources to analyse them, which are obstacles for utilizing them in research. In addition, the notion widely accepted that Coptic is principally linked with Christianity is problematic (31), as the evidence of Manichaean letters in Coptic from Kellis demonstrates (40). Thus, Choat hesitates to draw conclusions from the data available at the moment.

5. In chapters five to seven Choat focuses on the terms employed in specific “belief-systems for fellow adherents” (3). In particular, chapter five (43-50) is dedicated to the ‘direct identification’ of believers, i.e., to the “explicit self-identification by a writer, or the designation of a person by another, as a member of a particular social group” (43). Here Choat deals with terms like Ἔθνος/-η , Ἕλλην , Ἰουδαῖοι , and Χριστιάνος and their derivatives. However, although these terms may tell something about the social and religious group people belong to, they are still ambiguous so that a reliable and definite assignment would be problematic (50). Next, chapter six sheds light on ‘onomastics’ (51-56): names are at the same time misleading and telling aspects of social life in those days. Name-change on conversion may lead the researcher astray, whereas other names precisely denominate people as Christians by their names (e.g., Petros, Thekla, and Johannes, according to Choat; 51 and 55). Chapter seven is about ‘the casual appearance of cult officials’ (57-73). A problem that arises in this field is to determine whether a cult official (Choat includes monks and any other “figures of religious veneration and authority” here; 57) was dealing with Christian, Jewish, Hellenic, or Egyptians cults, to mention only the most prominent possibilities. Especially the term πρεσβύτερος seems to be pivotal in that respect (see the table with papyrus documents mentioning a πρεσβύτερος on pp. 62-63), then πάππας and ἀπλ . The first, πρεσβύτερος , was transferred from its conventional usage as that for a position in the village administration to the designation of Christian priests briefly before the 4th century (72).

6. Again the next three chapters belong together, because they “deal with the way words and phrases are used in context; where the language discloses a connection with one or more belief system” (3). Thus, chapter eight focuses on the difficult task to differentiate between ‘citation, allusion, echo, and coincidence’ and a listing of documents that exemplify each category (74-100). Certainly, for scholars of biblical literature this is the quintessential chapter of the whole

book, although they should be warned that without the others and the concise methodological reflections established there they will not fully benefit from it. Here Choat sticks to the decision of editors and commentators in the first place before commenting on the problems these may bring with them. His attempts at defining the four categories may serve as role models for any future investigation into biblical phrases or verses in the documentary papyri, especially in the papyrus letters, and then, for sure, for any study of biblical quotations, allusions, echoes, and coincidences in any other (literary or non-literary) text. Be that as it may, again and as throughout the whole book Choat offers the required care, caution, and even suspicion when he evaluates the data he has worked on. For projects that deal with documentary papyri *and* biblical texts, like the *Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament* (Universities of Salzburg and Bologna) to mention at least one, Choat's fine definitions and methodology can be invaluable. In chapter nine 'words and concepts' are central (84-100). No matter if *πρεσβύτερος* is addressed once more, and *μονή*, *μοναχός*, or other terms are dealt with: Choat refrains from defining them semantically in a too narrow fashion, i.e., he allows additional information that modern readers may have excluded due to the fact that it is probably from a non-Christian background (see 100). Then chapter ten focuses on 'greeting, prayer, devotion, and farewell' (101-113), and in principle continues the kind of approach of the previous two chapters.

7. In the next two chapters Choat tackles problems biblical scholars are often confronted with: 'crosses in the margins' of manuscripts (114-118) and the so-called 'nomina sacra' (119-125). While in the first not only crosses are central (the staurogram, the simple cross, or the *chi-rho* sign, as Choat calls them) but also other symbols, isopsephism, and acrostics (see, for instance, *ἀμήν* and the "mysterious ΧΜΓ"), in the latter he shows a high degree of appreciation of the problems involved in the practice of suspending and contracting specific words or names. Repeatedly he warns of harmonizing and generalizing tendencies in respect of the great variety of *nomina sacra* in the textual witnesses of different genres. Nonetheless, he should have referred to the works by José O'Callaghan in that field of research ("Nominum sacrorum' elenchus in Graecis Novi Testamenti papyris a saeculo IV ad VIII", *StudPap* 10 [1971] 99-122; "*Nomina sacra*" in *papyris graecis saeculi III neotestamentariis* [AnBib 46; Rome: Biblical Inst. Press 1970]).

8. Chapter eleven is dedicated to the diversity and variety of the religious setting of fourth-century Egypt, above all referring to the terms 'Christian', 'pagan', 'orthodox', and 'heretic' but as well to 'Arian' and the like (126-134). Finally, Choat can conclude that (134) "[f]or all the literary accounts of such [i.e., theological and doctrinal] conflict, papyrological evidence for them remains rare."

9. In chapter twelve Choat consequently summarizes his findings and observations (135-149). Basically, he has—as he claims to have done—created a "pool of evidence" (148) for everyday life in the 4th century. This is achieved by integrating, for instance, Manichaean letters. Confidently, researchers may join in and state: "this contributes positively towards an understanding of inter- and intracommunity relationships in late-antique Egypt." Table 2 (150-171) offers the database from which Choat draws his conclusions, and the 'additional notes on individual texts' (172-177) allow the reader to participate in his evaluation of certain papyrus letters. Table 3 and additional notes (178-187) provide the essential data for Coptic documentary papyri from mid 3rd to early 4th century (178-187).

10. The book comes with a comprehensive bibliography (188-212), indices of Greek and Coptic words, papyri, and subjects (213-217). In addition, Choat supplies his readership with a preface and a list of abbreviations (ix-xiv).

11. All in all, the book is a captivating piece of meticulous research, basically comprising results and conclusions. Above all, Choat's concise and intelligent descriptions of categories, his appreciation of the difficulties involved, and his fine attempts at defining terms make his study not only a contribution to a better understanding of Christianity in late-antique Egypt but indeed a landmark study for an understanding of the 'religious' setting of fourth-century Egypt; and this is true, whether readers are interested in Christianity or in other religious traditions. Future studies in this field of research cannot do without taking Choat's work into account.

Thomas J. Kraus
Am Schwalbennest 5
91161 Hilpoltstein
Federal Republic of Germany

© Copyright TC: *A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism*, 2007.