

The production of apocalyptic literature was a widespread phenomenon throughout the entire ancient Mediterranean, but the Jewish and Christian texts have received the most attention from scholars and are preserved in numerous copies due to the religious importance they later acquired in many Christian traditions. However, Egypt, as all other Mediterranean regions, had its own apocalyptic literature, whose distinctive characters have been paralleled to those of the texts composed by Jews and Christians: prominent examples for the Ptolemaic and Roman periods are the so called “Oracle of the Potter” or the so called “Dream of Nectanebo”. Both texts are extant in Greek, but there can be no doubt that both, at the very least from a formal point of view, are dependent from Egyptian antecedents that are now lost.

A relevant problem for the scholarship devoted to the study of apocalyptic literature in Judaism and Christianity has always been the identification of the social function of these texts and of the cultural and intellectual identity of the groups who produced and read them. The present study will address the same issues, but with reference to the Egyptian apocalyptic texts, which present a very interesting and, to my knowledge, yet understudied profile. I will briefly discuss the case of the “Oracle of the Potter”, since it best illustrates how I intend to pursue this line of research.

The “Oracle of the Potter” is now extant in five fragmentary Greek copies: four among these papyri are dated to the second or the third century CE, while only one Oxford papyrus (only translated and described some years ago by L. Koenen) is still inedited and dates from the second century BCE. The latter text, moreover, is the only one that has been written on the recto of the papyrus: the other four have been preserved on the verso and very little is known from the original editors’ comments about the texts that appear on the recto. Where some information have been given by the first editors (this happened only for PSI 8 982 and for the Oxyrhynchus papyrus), we know that the texts on the recto are documentary in content (a list of personal names in the case of PSI 8 982) and that the handwriting of the apocalyptic passages resembles the careless, documentary handwriting that appears on the recto. There is no doubt that these features deserve further inquiry, because they might disclose very important information on the social and intellectual profile of the people who read and copied apocalyptic texts in Roman Egypt. If the connection between documentary handwriting on the recto and on the verso of these papyri is confirmed, one may be allowed to conclude that this literary genre met the interest not of a highly refined elite, but of people (village scribes?) who had received only a limited education and had only a limited command of writing skills.

