Since the eighteenth century the canonical letters of the apostle Paul to Timothy and the one to Titus have been given the name “Pastoral Epistles.” This moniker is meant to capture the special character of these letters that marks their uniqueness within the Pauline corpus. They are the only letters written to individuals who are Paul’s delegates and, though ostensibly addressed to the delegates themselves, quite clearly have a wider readership in mind, for whom they give generalized instructions on church governance, individual behavior, and the proper exercise of delegated authority. Considered less situation specific than a letter like Galatians or 1 Thessalonians, the Pastoral are an odd mix of the personal and the public, of church order and personal exhortation, of instruction and command, of the particular and the general. Those qualities, in combination with other historical, theological, and stylistic considerations, have led scholars to ask repeatedly over the last two centuries what kind of texts these are, and led many to wonder whether Paul could or would have written them.

What does a third-century BCE Ptolemaic papyrus have to do with this question of the genre of the so-called Pastoral Epistles, 1 Timothy in particular? This paper will reconstruct the curious career of the Tebtunis Papyrus no. 703 in the 70 years since its publication in 1933, particularly at the hands of New Testament Pauline scholars, where it has recently been heralded by Luke Timothy Johnson as a key piece of evidence constituting “the discovery of a literary precedent” which

1 For Robert M. Grant, with thanks for the books (yes, the 587, but even more, the 33).
allows one, through solving the question of the genre of 1 Timothy and Titus, to demonstrate that they are authentic letters of the apostle Paul.

I. Discovery and Initial Publication

PTebt 703 was salvaged, along with a large cache of papyri, from cartonnage of mummies unearthed in the winter of 1899-1900 at Ùmm el Breigât in what was the Arsinoite nome. That group of papyri was held by B.P. Grenfell, who worked on them through the first World War. After a protracted illness Grenfell died in 1926, and the finds were taken up by a team headed by A.S. Hunt and J.G. Smyly. They were assisted on individual matters by the economic historian M. Rostovtzeff, whose most substantial contribution to the volume was his complete responsibility for the entry on the lengthy papyrus PTebt 703, for which he provided a transcription, introduction, partial translation, and extensive commentary. The Preface to the volume does not tell how those tasks fell to Rostovtzeff, but one can easily see how the contents of the document—detailed instructions on administrative oversight of the local commercial activity and royal taxes in the district—would have been a natural fit for the great economic historian of the Hellenistic period.

The papyrus itself is 32.5 centimeters high, containing 280 lines of reconstructed text in five columns on the recto, and another four columns on the verso (with verso column one corresponding to recto column five). The editor also includes six small “unplaced fragments,” none of which has more than three clearly distinguishable letters. In a few places on the papyrus a correcting hand has been at work. The text itself does not specify a date, but on the basis of paleography, contents, and plain, non-rhetorical style Rostovtzeff dated it to the third century BCE, perhaps as early as Euergetes I (Ptolemy III, reigned 246-221 BCE), a judgment supported by the fact that some of the other papyri belonging to the same load of cartonnage can be securely dated to his reign.\(^4\) Internal evidence is tantalizing, in that the author refers to \(\text{o} \iota \mu \acute{a} \chi \iota \omicron \omicron \omicron\) (“native troops”)\(^5\) who have run off from their work (perhaps

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\(^4\) Rostovtzeff, 67.

\(^5\) LSJ, 1085, s.v. \(\mu \acute{a} \chi \iota \omicron \omicron \omicron\).