



Conclusion

As Christians, our faith in the reliability of the New Testament and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit does not depend upon manuscript fragments and debates among scholars. At the same time we must recognize that we live in a world in which intellectual assaults are made every day against young Christians and those we would hope to lead to the truth. These assaults attempt to undermine what the Bible teaches and discredit the truths we hold dear. The more that we can know about the nature of such challenges and the evidence which does exist, the better prepared we are to answer these assaults.

Notes

- 1 Roberts, C.H. *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel, in the John Rylands Library* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935).
- 2 Roberts, C.H. "An Early Papyrus of the First Gospel." *Harvard Theological Review* 46 (1953):233.
- 3 Comfort, Philip W. "Exploring the Common Identification of Three New Testament Manuscripts: P⁴, P⁶⁴ and P⁶⁷." *Tyndale Bulletin* 46.1 (1995):43. While most scholars agree that the same scribe produced all three manuscripts, not all agree that they were a part of the same manuscript.
- 4 Thiede, Carsten Peter. "Papyrus Magdalen Greek 17 (Gregory-Aland P⁶⁴): A Reappraisal." *Tyndale Bulletin* 46.1 (1995):29.
- 5 Stanton, Graham. *Gospel Truth: New Light on Jesus & the Gospels* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press Int., 1995). See Chapter II, "First Century Fragments of Matthew's Gospel?" pp. 12-19.
- 6 This book was published in the US under the title *Eyewitnesses to Jesus: Amazing New Manuscript Evidence about the Origin of the Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1996) - Carsten Peter Thiede and Matthew D'Ancona.
- 7 What actually provoked Stanton's criticism of Thiede was an interview printed in late 1994 in which an interviewer of Thiede's wrote that P⁶⁴ was dated to the middle of the 1st century. In Thiede's much more reserved scholarly article cited above, which followed this interview, he suggested that P⁶⁴ "could be redated" to 70-100 AD. Thiede also argues that a fragment found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, known as 7Q5 is from a roll of the gospel of Mark. I don't find his evidence for this claim to be as convincing.
- 8 See Stanton, *Gospel Truth*. Chapter VI "Q: A Lost Gospel?" pp. 63-76.
- 9 Stanton, in referring to Thiede's claim admits that if it "...turns out to be correct, parts of the history of earliest Christianity will have to be rewritten from top to tail" (ibid. p. 4).
- 10 Kenyon, Fredric G. *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri*, fasc. 3, supplement 3.1, *Pauline Epistles, Text* (London: emery Walker, 1936). I was most fortunate to be able to secure a copy of this text when my brother made a trip to Ireland some years ago.
- 11 Wilchen, Ulrich. *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 11 (1935):113.
- 12 Kim, Young Kyu. "Paleographical Dating of P⁴⁶ to the Later First Century." *Biblica* 69 (1988): 248-257.
- 13 Kim offers the following groups of handwriting forms from P⁴⁶ (ⲁ Ⲃ Ⲅ Ⲇ Ⲉ Ⲋ) in contrast to the following "dominant" way in which these forms are found after the reign of Domitian (ⲁ Ⲃ Ⲅ Ⲇ Ⲉ Ⲋ Ⲍ Ⲏ). In addition to this Kim shows that a linguistic change, in which the Greek prefix *eg-* (εγ-), which is found in P⁴⁶, was replaced by *ek-* (εκ-) before the 200 AD. (pp. 254-55).
- 14 Comfort, Philip W. and David Barrett. *The Complete Text of the Earliest New Testament Manuscripts*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1999) pp. 193-98.



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Services

Sunday: 9:30 AM
10:20 AM
6:00 PM
Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter
Jeff Nunn
Kyle Pope

Deacons:

Dean Bowers
Eddie Cook
Bill Davis
Steve Dixon
Pat Goguen
Jack Langley
Neil Ledbetter
Brady McAlister
Walker McAnear
Lance Purcell
Rusty Scott

Evangelists:

Kyle Pope
Jason Garcia



New Testament Manuscripts from the First Century

By Kyle Pope

While Jesus was still upon the earth He promised His apostles that He would send them the Holy Spirit. Two important functions were connected with this promise: 1) the Holy Spirit would remind them of what Jesus had said (John 14:26), and 2) the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth (John 16:13). As a result of this, when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles, those things which they taught and wrote were the commands of the Lord (Matthew 10:19; 1 Corinthians 14:37). Their writings were called "Scripture" (2 Peter 3:16), and they were produced by the movement and inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21; 2 Timothy 3:16).



The Rylands Papyrus (P⁵²)

The New Testament which we read today came into existence through this means. Jesus promised that His words would not "pass away" but would endure longer than heaven and earth (Matthew 24:35). The fact that some 5600 handwritten manuscripts of the Greek New Testament have survived into modern times stands as a striking illustration of the truth of Jesus' statement.

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John Rylands Papyrus 52

Since 1935 most of the scholarly world has held that the oldest portion of a New Testament manuscript which had survived was a small papyrus fragment of the gospel of John housed in the John Rylands University library in Manchester, England. This manuscript (shown on the previous page), known as Papyrus 52 (P⁵²), was discovered in Egypt in 1920 and dated by C.H. Roberts to 100-125 AD. when he first published the fragment.¹ In recent decades



some profound developments and debates have been going on behind the scenes which may eventually move Papyrus 52 out of its place as our oldest surviving New Testament fragment.

The Magdalen Papyrus

In 1901 three small fragments of a papyrus of the gospel of Matthew were discovered in Luxor, Egypt and sent to the Magdalen College library in Oxford. Classified as Papyrus 64 (P⁶⁴), these fragments received little attention for over fifty years, until C.H. Roberts published the fragments in 1953 and revised their previous dating from the 3rd or 4th century to the late 200's AD.² In the years that followed Roberts and other scholars discovered that Papyrus 64 was actually part of the same manuscript as two other fragments Papyrus 67 (P⁶⁷), a fragment of Matthew housed in Barcelona and Papyrus 4 (P⁴) a near complete page from the gospel of Luke housed in Paris.³

In 1995 the German scholar Carsten Peter Thiede took another look at Papyrus 64 in light of recent discoveries. Thiede concluded that based upon comparison with other papyri known to date to the late 1st century and before, an earlier date of 70-100 AD. should be assigned to Papyrus 64 (and thus the other two papyri produced by the same scribe).⁴ This generated an uproar in the scholarly world. Graham Stanton, a liberal scholar who had written extensively on Matthew, published a book later the same year which began with a chapter dismissing Thiede's arguments because he had compared manuscripts from different locations.⁵ In response to this Thiede devoted an entire book to the subject in 1996 entitled *The Jesus Papyrus*.⁶

While it must be acknowledged that Thiede has a bit of a sensational flair,⁷ the evidence which he presents is reasonable and should not be so quickly dismissed. Some of Thiede's critics, including Stanton, hold the belief that the gospels were not verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit,



The Magdalen Papyrus (P⁶⁴)

but formed through an editorial process by the early church using a hypothetical text of Jesus' sayings they call Q.⁸ Such critics cannot escape the fact that if they accept a first century date for a surviving gospel manuscript their liberal theories crumble.⁹ This cannot avoid coloring their appraisal of Thiede's dating.

Chester Beatty Papyrus 46

Even more compelling than the issues which surround the Magdalen Papyrus are some matters which have received even less attention regarding a huge papyri manuscript containing almost all of Paul's epistles. Discovered around 1930, near Fayum, Egypt together with two younger manuscripts of the Gospels, Acts and Revelation it is classified as Papyrus 46 (P⁴⁶) and housed partially in Dublin, Ireland in the Chester Beatty Collection and partially in the University of Michigan, Special Collections Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This manuscript was published only a few years after its discovery in 1936, by Fredric Kenyon, who dated it to the early 3rd century.¹⁰ Papyrologist Ulrich Wilcken, around the same time dated it to 200 AD.¹¹ and his views became the dominant assessment among scholars.

Over fifty years later new discoveries and reevaluation of evidence was applied to Papyrus 46. Scholar Young Kyu Kim in a thorough and highly technical paper concluded that Papyrus 46 should be dated to the later 1st century before the reign of Domitian.¹² Kim compared handwriting styles and linguistic changes from papyri of various known dates and found that Papyrus 46 matched much more closely those found in late 1st century documents than those of the 2nd century.¹²

Unlike the uproar which would surround the redating of the Magdalen Papyrus, while the later dating still remains the dominant assessment, scholarly criticism of Kim has been much more reserved. Philip W. Comfort in his wonderful book *The Complete Text of the Earliest New Testament Manuscripts*, outlines Kim's arguments and after offering some comparisons of his own seems to conclude that while Kim could be right, he leans more towards the later dating.¹⁴ This is amazing, because if Kim's dating is correct it would mean that we could have a near complete copy of Paul's epistles which was penned before the end of the 1st century!



Chester Beatty Papyrus (P⁴⁶)