

Appendix L: The Magdalen Papyrus

••302•• In the early 1800's, Egypt was *rediscovered* by the Western world. By the end of that century, avid tourism, antiquities marketing, serious archaeology, and blatant exploitation of national treasures for profit were in full force.¹

Egypt's climate ideally preserved fragile papyrus documents. Egypt became a rich manuscript source of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves (the *Septuagint*), very old copies of the Christian Greek Scriptures, early writings from the Christian school of Alexandria, and later chronicles of theological debates. From the mid-1800's through the early part of the 1900's, many of the earliest papyrus manuscripts were sold by private antiquities dealers to serious and amateur collectors alike.

In 1901, Charles Huleatt sent three small scraps of a Greek manuscript to his alma mater in England—the Oxford college of Magdalen. Huleatt was a knowledgeable papyrologist (one who studies ancient papyri manuscripts), who had previously acquired the fragments in Egypt. He tentatively identified these three scraps of papyrus as containing Matthew 26:7-8, 10, 14-15, 22-23, 31, and 32-33 (there is writing on both sides, giving a total of six brief passages) and dated them as coming from the third century. When the manuscripts arrived at Magdalen College, they were redated by a recognized papyrologist as coming from the fourth century.

Because these manuscripts were small (the largest is only 1 ⁵/₈ X 1 ¹/₂ in.) and presumably relatively late (dated in 1901 as coming from the fourth century), these small scraps of papyrus were relegated to an unimposing library display case. And there they remained until 1953. In 1953, a papyrologist by the name of Colin Roberts again redated them to the late part of the second century. Even with this earlier date, they commanded little attention.

Then, in 1994, Carsten Thiede, a well-recognized German papyrologist, publicly announced that these manuscript portions were from the mid-first century. *He dated them as having been written before 70 C.E.* His work was carefully based on the best available information and technology (including a laser microscope examination of the manuscript for faint ink traces).

If Thiede's date is accurate, *these papyrus fragments are the earliest known Christian Greek Scripture manuscript portions in ••303•• possession today.* (There are two additional fragments of the same manuscript in Barcelona, Spain. The Spanish fragments contain Matthew 3:15 and 5:20-22 on the *recto* [front], and 3:9 and 5:25-28 on the *verso* [back] portions respectively. If the date given to the Magdalen papyrus is ultimately confirmed, the Barcelona papyrus will be similarly dated to the mid-first century.) These combined papyri pre-date even the John Rylands fragment from the Gospel of John mentioned in Chapter 2. (That fragment is dated as early as 125 C.E.)

Needless to say, there has been much controversy over Carsten Thiede's announcement. Those who wish to de-emphasize inspiration want to date the Gospels from the second century. They want to prove the fabrication of a *gospel myth* by later Christians rather than acknowledging the Gospels as being eyewitness accounts of quotations and descriptions of Jesus himself. Finding a *copy* of the Gospel of Matthew which was written before 70 C.E. dispels any notion that the Gospels were a second century literary invention. Even those who fully acknowledge the early writing of the Gospels are reticent to surrender the long-established dates commonly accepted for previously published Greek manuscripts.

Much more work needs to be done before a final consensus will be reached among Greek manuscript scholars. Nonetheless, Thiede's work appears to be well-founded and convincing. The drama of new light on ancient manuscripts is not lost in examining this controversy.

The Magdalen papyrus contains a feature of particular interest to our study. In Appendix K, we evaluated *Nomina Sacra*. In the brief written material found in these three fragments, two *nomina sacra* appear. (The surrogate for *Lord* is used in verses 22 and the surrogate for *Jesus* is used in verse 31. Verse 22 in English would read "Ld, it is not I, is it?" Verse 31 would read, "Then Js said to them...") In both cases, the over-written line is no longer visible. There is no reason to believe, however, that the line was not originally written and has merely become too faint to see.

¹ All information in this appendix comes from *Eyewitness to Jesus*, by Carsten Peter Thiede and Matthew D'Ancona, published by Doubleday, 1996.

We have not included Carsten Thiede's early dates—nor their implications to this study—in this book. (He also argues for earlier dates for a number of the P manuscripts.) Nonetheless, in the context of our study of new light on the ancient Greek manuscripts, we must alert the reader to this recent controversy. The interested reader would find *Eyewitness to Jesus* worthwhile reading. (See the Bibliography for complete information.)