



STATEMENT DJ-028

BOOK REVIEWS

Eyewitness to Jesus: Amazing New Manuscript Evidence about the Origin of the Gospels

by Carsten Peter Thiede and Matthew d'Ancona

When I first read in the *Los Angeles Times* in early 1995, that an expert had reevaluated some papyrus fragments of the Gospel of Matthew and dated them to the first century, I realized this could have far-reaching ramifications for biblical scholarship. For the past two centuries, liberal higher critics have used literary arguments and the lack of manuscripts from the first century to support their assumption that the Gospels were written long after the events they describe.

If hard artifacts verify the dating of Matthew's Gospel as far back as A.D. 60, these artifacts would destroy the foundation of liberal higher criticism. Since some of these same scholars argue that Mark wrote the first Gospel, this discovery would push the composition of Mark to within 20 years, at most, of the events his Gospel describes. Taken together, the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and Luke's second volume, Acts, would give us a record of the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection indisputably written within the lifetimes of those who were eyewitnesses and who, therefore, could have disputed any untrue assertions. There would be no time for fabrications to develop, no time for a "Jesus of faith" to replace the "Jesus of history," no time for the church to evolve a supernatural story from a simple inspiring teacher, and no time for Christians to transform first-century events into second or third-century pseudohistory.

Although the literary arguments and philosophical presuppositions of the liberal higher critics have their own fatal flaws, their subjective nature sometimes makes them difficult to refute clearly. For example, a common liberal presupposition is that Jesus Himself never claimed to be God, so any deity statements attributed to Him in the Gospels must be later composition inserted in His name. A discovery that depends, not on changing theories of literary interpretation, but on empirical evidence from paper, ink, and penmanship, would refute the liberal theories with unmistakable finality.

I found another report of the discovery in a biblical archaeology magazine and realized that, if it could be verified, it would provide an even more important historical context for the New Testament than that provided for the Old Testament by the 1948 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is because it affirms eyewitness authorship.

Carsten Peter Thiede's work first appeared in a professional journal on which the London press reported. Shortly thereafter, Thiede collaborated with Matthew d'Ancona, the *London Times* editor who broke the story. The result is the very readable, clearly written *Eyewitness to Jesus*. Although the book is not overtly a Bible apologetic, it certainly lends itself to that. Those who want to learn more about this fascinating subject will also appreciate the book's helpful footnotes, glossary, and extensive bibliography.

In addition to Thiede's well-argued redating of the Matthew fragments, chapter six, "Scribes and Christianity," contains fascinating auxiliary information for understanding the literary and historical background of the New Testament. In this chapter Thiede discusses the multilingual society of first-century Israel; Jesus' childhood

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exposure to Greek culture in Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee, less than four miles from Nazareth; Jesus' use of Greek literary terms; Jesus' and Paul's familiarity with Greek drama; first-century scribal techniques; first-century "shorthand," especially customary religious abbreviations called *nomen sacrum*; and a summary of traditions regarding Peter's final days before his martyrdom. The contents of this chapter alone will enrich anyone's understanding and appreciation of the New Testament.

The Matthew fragments redated by Thiede are at Magdalen College (Oxford). They are called The Magdalen Papyrus (listed as Greek 17 and *p64*). There are three fragments written on both sides, together representing 24 lines from Matthew 26:7-33. Two of the three fragments are a little larger than 4 x 1 cm.; the other is smaller, 1.6 x 1.6 cm. Another two fragments, located in Spain, are called the Barcelona Papyrus (P. Barc. inv. 1/*p67*) and contain portions of Matthew 3:9, 15; 5:20-22, 25-28.

The Magdalen Papyrus surfaced in the modern world in 1901, when Charles B. Huleatt purchased it from an antiquities dealer in Luxor, Egypt. Nothing is known of the fragment's preservation before that time. Huleatt donated the fragments to Magdalen College, where they were given a cursory examination by Magdalen scholar Arthur Hunt, who tentatively dated them to the fourth century. In 1953, Colin Roberts redated the Magdalen Papyrus to the later second century and established their connection to the Barcelona fragments.

More than 40 years later Thiede reexamined the fragments, using state-of-the-art electronic scanners with close analysis of the paper, ink, letter formation, line length, and other factors to redate the fragments to around A.D. 60. Thiede's tests and skill appear to be well within responsible papyrology, although his conclusions have met with strong opposition from critics.

I have examined most of the critical articles and have found their criticisms less convincing than Thiede's conclusions. A layperson's paraphrase of one common criticism is that the papyrus must not be from the first century because there weren't any codexes (book-leafs) in first-century Jewish/Christian literature but only scrolls, even though the papyrus has all of the physical characteristics of a first-century document. As Thiede rightly points out, the argument against first-century codexes is an argument from silence — of the small percentage of recovered early manuscript portions, no indisputable first-century codex portion has been identified. If, however, the Magdalen/Barcelona codex *is* first century, then we do have an example of a first-century codex. Moreover, if critical assumptions are reconsidered, and cutting-edge papyrology tests are applied to other previously dated fragments, we may well find other early examples of codexes.

Time and careful scholarship will tell whether Thiede's redating is sound. If it is (and the more I study the issue, the more confidence I have in Thiede), we will have valuable affirmation of the eyewitness nature of the Gospel records, the uninterrupted and unchanging preservation of those testimonies, and our twentieth-century inheritance of "the faith that God has once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3) by those who "did not follow cleverly invented stories," but "were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16).

— *Reviewed by Bob Passantino*