

The Jesus Papyrus - Five Years On

This is a book review of 'The Jesus Papyrus' by Carsten Thiede and Matthew d'Ancona. The USA edition of this book is called 'Eyewitness to Jesus'. The review is by Professor J.K.Elliott, Professor of New Testament Textual Criticism at the University of Leeds, England. He has no connection with the contents of any other page on this Web site.

Carsten Thiede is a freelance academic researcher in Germany. His book, *The Jesus Papyrus*, co-authored with a British political journalist, Matthew d'Ancona, and published by Weidenfeld and Nicholson in 1996 gained a certain notoriety; it has also been published elsewhere and in various translations. The USA edition has an equally tendentious title - *Eyewitness to Jesus*.

The so-called 'Jesus Papyrus' of the English edition is a small scrap, or rather three scraps, of Matthew's Gospel, which between them reveal some of Matthew 26: 7-8, 10, 14-15, 22-23, 31-33.

Despite the impression generated in the press, Thiede's book did not concern a newly discovered text: Magdalen College library, Oxford had possessed the manuscript (catalogued as no. 17) ever since it was presented to them by a former student in 1901. It had been studied and published by C.H. Roberts in a scholarly journal (*Harvard Theological Review* 46 (1953) pp. 233-7) and available to the academic world ever since. New Testament textual critics have long known it and refer to it as Papyrus 64 in the official registry of New Testament Greek manuscripts. It is part of another manuscript (originally given the number Papyrus 67), also containing a portion of Matthew, now in Barcelona. More recently, scholars have linked these two with Papyrus 4 in Paris, which is a fragment of Luke's gospel. When Biblical texts were discovered in the sands of Egypt it was not uncommon for dealers to maximize their profits by selling the finds in separate lots to different purchasers, hence portions of the same manuscript can be found in more than one library. Only after the separate texts are published can links be seen.

Thiede writes about Papyrus 64, virtually ignoring the Barcelona fragment and dismissing the Paris portion as a part of the same manuscript. In concentrating on the text of the Magdalen fragment Thiede reexamined the evidence for its date (circa 200 A.D.) proposed by Roberts in 1953. Thiede suggested that the fragment was probably much earlier and he proposed a new dating, namely mid-1st. century A.D. Most literary papyri do not carry a date - legal and personal letters may well do. The dating by scholars of these literary fragments is not an exact science. It is however not mere guesswork. Expert palaeographers are able to determine the rough parameters for the dates of their texts to within plus or minus 25 years; this is done on the basis of comparisons of the style of lettering in the literary texts with identical handwriting styles in texts whose dates are known. There was a tendency earlier this century to date Christian papyri too late, partly because it was not realised that Christian biblical papyri written in book (codex), as opposed to scroll, format - as nearly all of them are - began as early as has subsequently been proved to be the case. Thus several previously established late datings for these Biblical codices have had to be revised in favour of an earlier date. Almost sixty of our earliest surviving New Testament manuscripts are now accepted to have been written before 300 A.D. Papyrus 64, however, is not our earliest.

Thiede originally proposed his redating of Papyrus 64 in the technical German academic journal *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 105 (1995) pp. 13-20. A subsequent issue of the same journal (vol. 107 (1995) pp. 73-80) carried an article by Klaus Wachtel of the Institute for New Testament Textual Research in Münster (which is the main registry for these texts) where he successfully demolished Thiede's reasons for redating Papyrus 64 (and by extension Papyrus 67) as 1st. century. An even more devastating piece against Thiede appeared in the same journal in 1996 (issue 113 pp. 153-7) written by H. Vocke. And there the matter should have rested.

But Thiede is a great publicist. A few years earlier he had tried to capture a popular market with a book

that resurrected a theory which said that some of the very fragmentary Greek texts found at Qumran (the site of the discovery of the main Dead Sea Scrolls) were from New Testament texts: one in particular, known as 7Q5, was said to be part of Mark's gospel. The appearance of Christian texts in Qumran would be remarkable enough among the literary remains of an exclusive Jewish sect; the presence of a bit of Mark amid the remains of this library, apparently deposited there before 68 A.D. (that is, within a few years of the likely date of composition of this gospel), would be even more incredible. However, the identification of 7Q5 with verses from Mark is highly questionable as are other proposed identifications of these minute fragments with other New Testament texts. Thiede, though, accepts those identifications, and hence builds much about the history of Christian links with Qumran on a slender and highly controversial basis. His methodology is the same with the so-called Jesus papyrus: grand theories rest on uncertain foundations.

The acceptance of his article on Papyrus 64 in a forthcoming issue of a 'trade journal' was not enough for a publicist. The Christmas Eve issue of *The Times* in 1994 provided a timely and welcome platform, thanks to the intervention of Matthew d'Ancona, then a journalist on that paper. D'Ancona, who seems to have been either taken in by Thiede's persuasiveness or merely alert to sniffing out a 'good story' became Thiede's staunchest advocate and apologist not only in *The Times* but in *The Daily Mail* and elsewhere. Many column inches, reports, interviews and even a leader article in *The Times* gave Thiede's claims an unwarranted attention, that shows little sign of abating nearly five years on.

The initial interest in 1994 subsequently gave rise to the book *The Jesus Papyrus*. Comparatively few of its 163 pages concentrate on the essence of the article in the *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie*. Instead, the book is padded out with background information, and extraneous detail, including the revisiting of the other lost cause - 7Q5 and Mark. The book is full of errors and howlers: the ideas are Thiede's, the writing seems to have been ghosted by d'Ancona who has frequently ill-digested the necessary Biblical and textual background. I pointed out many of the errors in a review article in the quarterly Biblical journal *Novum Testamentum* 38 (1996) pp. 393-9. A paperback reprint of *The Jesus Papyrus* in 1997 added an 'Afterword' as an appendix which tackled me on my review but failed to address my main criticisms. The same technique of dodging and ignoring pertinent criticisms has characterised Thiede's reactions elsewhere to his many academic reviewers.

But whereas the professional journals were consistently hostile to Thiede's theories and to this book, the popular press was intrigued and sympathetic. I have collected a vast range of published reaction to Thiede. The American weekly *Newsweek* gave Thiede and his book generous support in Jan 23, 1995 and April 8, 1996. The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* (May 27, 1996), while more cautious, nonetheless gave the book publicity doubtless much enjoyed by the publishing houses involved. The magazine supplement to the French daily *Le Figaro* on 14 April, 1995 featured the story. Newspaper reports generally hyped the whole thing up, as is their style, but I doubt if any of this was unwelcome to the authors. Thiede could blind the non-professional with jargon and science, but when he spoke to professional palaeographers (of whom there are precious few in the world) none was convinced by Thiede's scholarship in this matter. The popular media can obviously represent opposition by academics to Thiede as the professional jealousy of disgruntled scholars who have singularly failed to produce a manuscript as revolutionary as Thiede claims to have done! The acknowledged inexactness of the scientific evidence for dating texts and the redatings that had already taken place in the scholarly world with reference to Biblical manuscripts were all pointed to as evidence that Thiede could be right: "There must be something in it" gullible folk may say.

This is not the place to rehearse or repeat all the technical evidence about the characteristic shapes of the Greek alphabet or the history of handwriting styles bandied around in the differing publications to substantiate or demolish Thiede's theories. These can be studied in the learned journals, reviews from some of which I include here. Suffice it to say that the most respected and experienced scholars who have examined the evidence are not convinced that the comparative texts which Thiede claims lead to his early dating actually do support his conclusions. (Often Thiede conceals this evidence, which, had he reproduced it amid his several publications on the matter, would have made the issues obvious to the

reader - perhaps he was banking on ordinary readers not to be able to track down the texts he adduces in support of his dating.)

Several of the most respected papyrologists and palaeographers have preferred not to get embroiled in the 'affaire Thiede', distancing themselves from the popular press and treating the matter to the proper silence of contempt such matters really deserve. Like indefatigable, single-issue politicians, Thiede is tireless in promoting his views, strangely impervious to or oblivious to responsible criticisms. To maintain a constant barrage of counter-criticism against such an author who relishes attention is an exercise few academics have the time, inclination or stomach for. One Biblical scholar who did rise to Thiede's challenges is Graham Stanton, now Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, who painstakingly and courteously demolished Thiede's new proposed dating of Papyrus 64, and with it the underlying hidden (evangelical) agenda. This Stanton did in various writings, most notably in a book *Gospel Truth?* published in 1995 and reissued as a second edition in paperback that same year. His is a dispassionate, well written and accessible antidote to what Thiede stands for and wrote about in *The Jesus Papyrus*.

The name 'The Jesus Papyrus' for the English edition to describe Papyrus 64 is Thiede's invention. Its usage is pure journalism. The name is intended to dupe the uneducated into believing that this first century dating is not only proven but that, by placing its writing as early as, if not prior to, 70 A.D., the actual scribe could well have been an eyewitness to the events described in Matthew's gospel - the scribe may even have been one of Jesus' apostles! Thiede does not, however, actually go so far as to claim that this scrap is our only surviving portion of the original composition in the handwriting of St. Matthew himself. We must await a sequel before we go that far!

In *The Jesus Papyrus* and in subsequent elaborations in the media Thiede's aims are clearly not merely palaeographical but evangelical. He belongs to those conservatives who wish to date the original composition of the Christian gospels as close to the time of Jesus as possible in order to claim thereby that their witness must be all the more reliable. In the early years of this controversy Thiede courted attention from ultra-conservative Roman Catholics in Germany, but he also attracted support from various evangelical quarters worldwide. The exercise is part and parcel of that tireless and timeless quest for the 'Jesus of History' and the ongoing efforts of certain Christian believers to anchor their faith in the reliability of the canonical gospels as historical sources and as the foundation documents of their faith. Christian believers not of a fundamentalist persuasion do not generally require being convinced that the alleged veracity of the written Christian message is necessarily dependent on an early date of composition. The more sceptical would point out that the conventions of ancient historical composition or of theological writing do not depend on eyewitness reporting. A humanist reader of a Biblical text will wish to have as good a copy of the text as modern scholarship can create, just as he would wish as faithful a version of a Classical text or of Shakespeare. Even if such a text is based on early manuscripts this does not in itself tell in favour of its basic historicity -nor does it tell against.

The date of composition of a New Testament gospel in relation to the events reported is not relevant for its historicity. To have an early manuscript fragment of a copy of a text which was made close to the probable date of composition of that text is not relevant either. Good reliable copies of a text - not just a Biblical text - are good not because they are old and close to the date of writing: they are good only if they are faithful copies of the original. In any case, there is nowadays no dispute among Biblical scholars that all the four New Testament gospels were composed in the first century although the precise dates and relative sequence of the compositions are open questions. It is improbable that we have any extant copy of any part of any of them earlier than the second quarter of the second century.

As far as the text-critical importance of the Magdalen fragments is concerned, there is nothing revolutionary or new about their form of the words of Matthew's gospel. Although some individual manuscripts of the New Testament in Greek (whatever their date) can sometimes yield unusual variants, errors and occasional glosses - as is the case in all literature whose preservation was dependent on the

vagaries of the scribes' competence - this particular scrap of Matthew is consistent with and agrees with the same wording known from countless other manuscripts which contain these verses. This manuscript tells us nothing different from the text known from other sources.

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Bibliography:

In addition to titles above, the following reviews in learned journals may be of interest:

E. Puech, *Revue Biblique* 102 (1995) pp. 570-84

P.M. Head, *Tyndale Bulletin* 46 (1995) pp. 251-85

P.W. Comfort, *Tyndale Bulletin* 46 (1995) pp. 43-57

D.C. Parker, *Expository Times* 107 (1996) pp. 40-43

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