"Redates to roughly 60 CE three papyrus fragments of the Gospel of Matthew"

Christmas Eve 1994 would have come and gone like any other, had it not been for three tiny papyrus fragments discussed in *The Times* of London's sensational front-page story. The avalanche of letters to the editor jarred the world into realizing that Matthew d'Ancona's story was as big as the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The flood of calls received by Dr. Carsten Peter Thiede, the scholar behind the story, and the international controversy that spread like wildfire, give us an inkling as to why the Magdalen Papyrus has embroiled Christianity in a high-stakes tug-of-war over the Bible.

Thiede and d'Ancona boldly tell the story of two scholars a century apart who stumbled on the oldest known remains of the New Testament--hard evidence confirming that St. Matthew's Gospel is the account of an eyewitness to Jesus. It starts in 1901 when the Reverend Charles B. Huleatt acquires three pieces of a manuscript on the murky antiquities market of Luxor, Egypt. He donates the papyrus fragments to his alma mater, Magdalen College in Oxford, England, where they are kept in a butterfly display case, along with Oscar Wilde's ring.

For nearly a century, visitors hardly notice the Matthew fragments, initially dated to a.d.180-200; but after Dr. Thiede redates them to roughly a.d. 60, people flock to the library wanting to behold a first-century copy of the Gospel.

But what is all the fuss about? How can three ancient papyrus fragments be so significant? How did Thiede arrive at this radical early dating? And what does it mean to the average Christian? Now we have authoritative answers to these pivotal questions. Indeed, the Magdalen Papyrus corroborates the tradition that St. Matthew actually wrote the Gospel bearing his name, that he wrote it within a generation of Jesus' death, and that the Gospel stories about Jesus are true.
Carsten Peter Thiede is a leading authority on ancient manuscripts (a profession that guided his career from the University of Bonn to the Huntington Library and now to the University of Maryland). In Eyewitness to Jesus, he tells the story of the latest scientific breakthrough in the study of the New Testament: the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The flood of calls received by Dr. Thiede in December 1994, reported in The Times of London, and the avalanche of letters to the editor that followed, tell half the story. Thiede and D’Ancona boldly tell the story of two scholars a century apart who stumbled on the oldest known remains of the New Testament--hard evidence that Jesus was a first-century historical figure.

Professor Thiede's story of two scholars and two centuries of scholarship raises basic questions about the Gospel narrative. Were the Gospel accounts written long after Jesus' death by Christians concerned with a new doctrine? How do we know the Gospel records were eyewitness testimonies? And, despite the flood of doubt surrounding the historicity of Jesus, is there definitive evidence that Jesus' Gospel stayed intact after his death by Christians concerned with a new doctrine? "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 confirmation 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 5) by those who "did not follow cleverly invented stories," but "were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16)."

Book Review: Eyewitness to Jesus (PDF)

Published Weekly

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The most far-reaching implication of Thiede's work is that the Gospel of Matthew, in addition to being the earliest Gospel written, could be an eyewitness. D'Ancona and Thiede detail the forensic science used to redate the Magdalen papyrus. Thiede then challenges the critical methods - historical and textual - that have been used by scholars to establish the traditional dating of the Gospels."

(From Publishers Weekly)

Library Journal

"D'Ancona, an assistant editor at the London Times, and Thiede, the noted papyrologist, offer their side of a raging controversy over Thiede's claim to have identified a Greek fragment of the Gospel of Mark from the Dead Sea Scrolls written no later than 68 A.D. and to have redated fragments of the Gospel of Matthew to not much later. If the early dating and other evidence cited and deduced are sustained, they will demolish some of the major tenets of liberal critical New Testament scholarship by establishing that at least Mark and Matthew were written by eyewitnesses or contemporaries within a Christianity that was well developed and separate from Judaism before the destruction of Jerusalem. Thiede mounts a scathing criticism of New Testament scholars. Although the book is a window into the value, possibilities, and methods of an arcane specialty, it is written in a conversational prose accessible to any educated non-specialist. Much background information on New Testament study and interpretation and the history of the discovery of the Matthew fragments help to maintain interest and relate the technical evidence to the reader's world. Recommended for public and academic libraries."

(From Library Journal)

About the Author

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(From Library Journal)
Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the Leper, when a woman came to him with a small bottle of fragrant oil, very costly; and as she sat at the table she began to pour it over his head.

-- ST. MATTHEW 26:6-7

We may start with the fact, which I confess I did not appreciate before the investigation, of how little evidence there is for dating any of the New Testament writings.


On Christmas Eve, 1994, The Times of London reported on its front page an astonishing claim made by the German biblical scholar Carsten Peter Thiede. "A papyrus believed to be the oldest extant fragment of the New Testament has been found in an Oxford library," the newspaper said. "It provides the first material evidence that the Gospel according to St. Matthew is an eyewitness account written by contemporaries of Christ."

The story concerned three tiny scraps of paper belonging to Magdalen College, Oxford, the largest of which is only 4.1 cm X 1.3 cm (15/8 in. X 1/2 in.). On both sides of the fragments appeared Greek script, phrases from the twenty-sixth chapter of St. Matthew, which describes Jesus' anointment in the house of Simon the Leper at Bethany and his betrayal to the chief priests by Judas Iscariot. Though the verses concern a crucial moment in the life of Christ, the scraps looked unremarkable in themselves. Yet Thiede, Director of the Institute for Basic Epistemological Research in Paderborn, Germany--argued that they were of astonishingly early origin, dating from the mid-first century A.D. He was

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manuscript (MS)</th>
<th>Contains:</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Eyewitness page ref.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magdalen Papyrus (P64)</td>
<td>Matthew 26:7-8, 10, 14-15, 22-23 and 31.</td>
<td>Before 66 A.D.</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead Sea Scroll MSS 7Q5</td>
<td>Mark 6:52-53</td>
<td>Before 68 A.D.</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead Sea Scroll MSS 7Q4</td>
<td>Matthew 3:9, 15; Matthew 5:20-22, 25-28</td>
<td>Before 66 A.D.</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris Papyrus (P4)</td>
<td>&quot;not much later&quot; than 66 A.D.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauline Codex (P46)</td>
<td>Paul's Epistles ??</td>
<td>85 A.D.</td>
<td>70-71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodmer Papyrus (II) (Johannine Codex P66)</td>
<td>&quot;near complete&quot;</td>
<td>125 A.D.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P32</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>175 A.D.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P45</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>150 A.D.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P77</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>150 A.D.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P87</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>125 A.D.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P90</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>150 A.D.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Rylands Greek 457 (P52)</td>
<td>John 18:31-33, 37-38</td>
<td>100-125 A.D.</td>
<td>115, 126, 138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 2683 (P77)</td>
<td>Matthew 23:30-39</td>
<td>150 A.D.</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P. Oxyrhynchus 2 (P1)</td>
<td>Matthew 1:1-9, 12, 14-20</td>
<td>&quot;not much later&quot; than P4 (ca. 100 A.D.)</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
His overriding instinct was evidently to send the papyrus somewhere where it would be safe. This it would certainly be at Magdalen. His alma mater had not even been able to distinguish the antika shops and bazaars of Egypt from a market actually was. Even a man as valuable than those in Greek. Sayce's Coptic and hieroglyphic script generally acquired goods, and scholars were frequently approached with papyri--those in the New Testament in the land of Tombs at Luxor. This is the only chapter of the 26th manuscript evidence on papyrus. By her son (now lost). Two months later, Huleatt himself wrote to the college librarian, H. A. Wilson, to check that the package had arrived and remarked regretfully en passant upon the recent robbery of mummies and papyri from one of the tombs at Luxor. This is the only record left to us of Huleatt's discovery and bequest of the Magdalen Papyrus--now the most widely discussed fragment of the New Testament in the world. Where might he have come upon it? The market in such treasures was prodigious and still underregulated, in spite of the efforts of the Antiquities Service to prevent the unauthorized sale of discoveries. Writing in 1895, the author Henry Stanley was scandalized by the contempt in which such regulations were held in Luxor and by the trade in mummies and other antiquities, many of them fake. "Oh certainly Thebes is the place to buy souvenirs," he wrote, recalling that one man had bought "three men's heads, one woman's head, one child's head, six hands large and small, twelve feet, one plump infant's foot, one foot minus a toe, two ears, one part of a well-preserved face, two ibis mummies, one dog mummy."

Such grotesque and ghoulish purchases would never have been to Huleatt's taste, of course. But Stanley's example illustrates the easy ability of antiquaries, authentic or otherwise. The antika shops and bazaars of Egypt were full of illicitly acquired goods, and scholars were frequently approached with papyri--those in Coptic and hieroglyphic script generally supposed by the natives to be more valuable than those in Greek. Sayce's memoirs make clear how liquid this market actually was. Even a man as conscientious as Huleatt might not always have been able to distinguish between a sale which was fully legitimate and one which was not, especially if the papyrus was a gift from one of his many admirers and acquaintances among the guests at the Luxor Hotel.

At some stage during his time in Egypt, Charles Bousfield Huleatt came upon three scraps of papyrus which he considered very important. Before taking up his next post, in Messina, he arranged for his mother to send them to Magdalen, which she did by recorded delivery in October, together with some rough notes by her son (now lost). Two months later, Huleatt himself wrote to the college librarian, H. A. Wilson, to check that the package had arrived and remarked regretfully en passant upon the recent robbery of mummies and papyri from one of the tombs at Luxor. This is the only record left to us of Huleatt's discovery and bequest of the Magdalen Papyrus--now the most widely discussed fragment of the New Testament in the world.

The argument was complex, based upon expert analysis of the Greek writing on the fragments and upon extensive comparisons with calligraphy on other manuscript fragments. A scholarly controversy was bound to follow, since Thiede was challenging the orthodox view that the tiny second-century fragment of St. John's Gospel in the John Rylands Library in Manchester was our earliest Gospel text. He was also making a claim which would have radical implications for our understanding of the Gospels and their origins. And--most important--he was doing so on the basis of physical evidence rather than literary theory or historical supposition.

The new claim clearly deserved a much broader audience than the comparatively small guild of papyrologists to whom Thiede's learned article was addressed. Here, it was alleged, was a fragment of the twenty-sixth chapter of St. Matthew remnants of a book perhaps 150 pages long--which might have been written in the lifetime of the apostle himself. If true, Thiede's argument had far-reaching implications. As one senior fellow of Magdalen put it at the time: "It means that the people in the story must have been around when this was being written. It means they were there."

* * *

If the papyrus was a gift from one of his many admirers and acquaintances among the guests at the Luxor Hotel, shortly to publish his claim in the Zeitschrift für Papyrologie, a specialist journal for papyrologists (scholars who study ancient manuscript evidence on papyrus).
The fragments were laid in a display cabinet in the Old Library, a magnificent but inaccessible room up a steep staircase in the college cloisters, which directly adjoin the President's lodgings. Gibbon used to labor over his books there and Magdalen Fellows still use the library as a quiet workplace away from the busier parts of college. It is Magdalen's inner sanctum—although the papyrus was scarcely treated as its holiest of holies. Instead, it lay among other college memorabilia—the corrected typescript of Lady Windemere's Fan, a portrait of Henrietta Maria exciting little attention among the members of the college.

Arthur Hunt's verdict effectively snuffed out the debate on the fragments' age until after the Second World War. He found a scholarly niche at Lincoln, while Grenfell returned to The Queen's College, which has remained a stronghold of papyrology throughout the twentieth century. In 1953, Colin Roberts redated the Magdalen papyrus to the later second century and established its relationship to two scraps at the Fundacion San Lucas Evangelista, Barcelona. That judgment was to stand until Carsten Thiede's redating, more than forty years later. By this stage, few Fellows of Magdalen even knew of the existence of the papyrus.

**Synopsis**

In 1901, a clergyman bought three small fragments of the Magdalen Papyrus, parts of the Gospel of Matthew, on the antiquities market in Egypt. He donated them to Magdalen College in Oxford, England, where they were placed in an inconspicuous display case and forgotten. But in 1994, Dr. Carsten Peter Thiede re-examined them and found that they were copies of the original Gospel of Matthew, dating to A.D. 40-70, and were in fact an eyewitness account written by one of Christ's contemporaries.

**Size**

- Length: 206 pages
- Height: 9.5 in.
- Width: 6.5 in.
- Thickness: 1.0 in.
- Weight: 16.0 oz.

**Publisher's Note**

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The story of two scholars a century apart—Reverend Charles B. Huleatt and Dr. Carsten Peter Thiede—who stumbled on a find as important as the Dead Sea Scrolls—three small papyrus fragments that have become the hard evidence confirming that St. Matthew's Gospel is the account of an eyewitness to Jesus. 24 photos.

**Industry Reviews**

"The authors give a review of New Testament scholarship from Michaelis to the members of the Jesus Seminar, describe the intricate workings of the science of papyrology, and recount the life and travels of [Rev. Charles B.] Huleatt, from his undergraduate days at Magdalen to his death with his family during the 1908 earthquake at Messina...Intelligent and controversial collaboration of scholarship and journalism."

Raphael
I think that this is good evidence for our foundation concerning God's word for us.
In memoriam

CARSTEN PETER THIEDE
(1952-2004)

German biblical scholar from the 20th century, best known for his textual criticism of the Dead Sea Scrolls, including the hopeful identification of the 7Q5 papyrus as a fragment of the Gospel of Mark. Thiede was an advocate for O'Callaghan's claims that numerous portions of the Qumran scrolls from Cave 7 are actually Christian New Testament texts from pre AD 70. The adduced texts are very fragmentary and ambiguous, and mainstream scholars have not agreed. In December 1994, Thiede's redating of the Magdalen papyrus, which bears a fragment in Greek of the Gospel of Matthew, to the later 1st century on palaeographical grounds provoked much debate.

In his book Jesus, Man or Myth?, Professor Thiede sought to present to the serious reader, anxious to make his or her way through the blizzard of differing views and judgments currently in circulation regarding the person of Jesus and the origins of Christianity, with a convincing account of the reality of the man, and of the trustworthiness of the sources upon which we have to depend for our primary information.