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Fragments of Mark at Qumran?

Colin J Hemer

Dr Hemer, a research scholar in New Testament archaeology working at Tyndale House, Cambridge, offers some comments on a recent discovery, sufficiently newsworthy to find a place on the front page of The Times.

Great interest has been raised in the recent claim of J. O'Callaghan that New Testament texts of sensationally early date may be identified among the Greek fragments from Cave 7 at Qumran.¹ These fragments were discovered in 1955 and published in 1962, and were dated from the style of writing used. They attracted little attention compared with the Hebrew and Aramaic documents of the adjacent Dead Sea caves. Only two larger fragments were identified as from the Septuagint, and it was surmised that others might be of unidentified biblical passages. The largest of these (7Q5), a piece of papyrus about 1½ inches high with traces of four legible lines of writing, included one whole word (*kai*) and a possible letter sequence *-nnēs-*, which might give the word *egennēsen* (begat) and therefore suggested a fragment of a genealogy.

O'Callaghan, in a fresh study, reconstructed instead the name *Gennēsaret* and became convinced that 7Q5 contained a part of Mark 6: 52-53.² He adhered to a date in the mid-first century AD. If this were so, it would mean that we had a piece of a copy of the Gospel extant which was earlier than even conservative scholars have dated its composition. And he was encouraged by his unexpected results to look for New Testament placings for some of the other scraps. He has published, or intends to publish, 'probable' or 'possible' readings of Mark, Acts, Romans, 1 Timothy, James and 2 Peter. A comparable or only slightly later dating for some of these would be even more startlingly controversial.

My first criticism here concerns the smaller fragments. The chances of coincidence are far too great. 7Q6, 1, for instance, which O'Callaghan has placed as Mark 4: 28, consists of only two letters con-

sidered certain by the original editors, though we may fairly accept at least *-eit-* on one line followed by *-lē-* on the next. It is easy to show that these sequences are of frequent occurrence, and it would not be difficult to find them in association, separated by a suitable number of letters to fit a reasonable line length. I have personally found two 'identifications' which meet these requirements, in 2 Thessalonians 2: 15 and 2 Thessalonians 3: 14.³ And there must be scores of others in all kinds of impossible texts. In fact, the case for the exclusive identification of a two-line fragment, taken in isolation, seems precarious.

This doubt may however throw into stronger relief the more impressive case for the assignment of fragments where clearly legible letters extend over three or four lines. The latitude we have allowed in line length at once becomes restricted, and the mathematical chances against coincidence are multiplied for each additional line. It would be far harder to locate in a text five lines of two clear letters each, but if an identification were made it would be more likely to be correct.

For this reason the finding of Mark 6: 52-53 in 7Q5 merits more favourable consideration. If it were without other problems it would be most impressive. But there are two difficulties: (1) it depends on the assumption of a textual variant which is most unlikely to be original; (2) it depends on the assumption of an improbable spelling error of initial *t-* for *d-*, according to which the word *diaperasantes* is made from the one letter *t[-*. There must be grave doubt about a solution which hinges thus on textual special pleading.

The dating also seems an uncertain matter. There is evidently no necessary connection in time between the deposit of these documents, supposedly by Christians, and that of the scrolls of the Qumran sect in the neighbouring caves. The date depends in effect on palaeography, and it may be questioned whether a sufficiently precise dating may be upheld on that ground, while allowing that AD 50 is said to be the *latest* date of the style used for 7Q5 and others. The fragments are thought to be from scrolls, not the later codices, though Christians adopted the codex form very early. But to argue from that involves the assumption that we are dealing with Christian documents in the first place, and that is the very point at issue.

O'Callaghan's hypothesis must, I think, on the current showing, remain no more than a tantalizing possibility.

¹ The original article by O'Callaghan (in Spanish) and an important supporting comment by C. M. Martini (in Italian) are printed in *Biblica* 53 (1972), pp. 91-100 and 101-104. I have had access at Tyndale Library, Cambridge, to an unpublished English translation of both articles by W. L. Holladay. An English translation scheduled to appear with the June issue of *JBL* has now become available. The texts were first published in M. Baillet, J. T. Milik, R. de Vaux, *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert of Jordan. III Les 'Petites Grottes' de Qumrân* (OUP, 1962), p. 145 and plate XXX.

² Martini (p. 104) emphasizes his belief that the verses concerned are typically and definitively Markan and no mere detached scraps of Gospel tradition.

³ I hope to publish elsewhere a more detailed study of the possibilities of alternative reconstructions.