

The Truth About the Magdalen Papyrus

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Unreliable information is being circulated among the supporters of the King James Only view that the recently discovered Magdalen Papyrus, allegedly dated AD 60, proves that the King James Version is correct and that most modern versions are incorrect. This claim seems to be traced to a gross misinterpretation of a recent book by Matthew d'Ancona and Carsten Peter Thiede entitled *Eyewitnesses to Jesus*.¹ Such irresponsible information gives the false impression that there is an essentially complete manuscript of the Greek New Testament that dates from a period within the lifetime of the Apostles, and that this manuscript supports the *Textus Receptus* text tradition that underlies the King James Version. Such an impression is far from the truth.

The Magdalen Papyrus P⁶⁴, also known as Magdalen Manuscript Greek-17, is actually associated with two other fragmentary papyrus manuscripts (P⁴ and P⁶⁷) that are now commonly recognized to have originally been part of the same ancient document,² Thiede being one of very few dissenters. Papyrus P⁶⁴ contains portions of 10 verses from Matthew (26:7-8, 10, 14-15, 22-23, 31-33); papyrus P⁶⁷ contains portions of 9 verses from the Gospel of Matthew (3:9, 15; 5:20-22, 25-28);³ and papyrus P⁴ contains portions of 90 verses from the Gospel of Luke (1:58-59; 1:62-2:1, 6-7; 3:8-4:2, 29-32, 34-35; 5:3-8; 5:30-6:16).⁴ Thus, if one accepts the commonly accepted view that these three manuscripts were originally part of the same document, then the total amount of text that remains from that document is portions of 109 verses out of the 7,959 verses of the entire New Testament, that is, 1.37 % of the text. Otherwise, if one accepts Thiede's view, then

¹ This title is the American paperback edition of *The Jesus Papyrus* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1996).

² Philip W. Comfort, "Exploring the Common Identification of Three New Testament Manuscripts: (P⁴, P⁶⁴, and P⁶⁷)," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46:1 (1995), 43-57.

³ Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2nd ed., trans. by Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 100; Philip W. Comfort, *Early Manuscripts & Modern Translations of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), 58-59.

⁴ Aland and Aland, 96; Comfort, *Early Manuscripts*, 32-33.

the total amount of text that remains is portions of 10 verses, or 0.125 % of the text.⁵ This is a very small sample of only two (or perhaps one) out of twenty-seven books—hardly enough to prove much about the nature of the entire text.

While the manuscript is alleged to be a recent discovery (not by Thiede, however), it actually has been known in academic circles for almost a century. Charles B. Huleatt purchased it in Luxor in 1901 and presented it to the Magdalen College Library in Oxford, England.⁶ Colin H. Roberts studied and published it in 1953,⁷ and it has been the object of scholarly discussion for almost half a century—hardly a recent discovery.

While some King James Only advocates allege that the date of the papyrus fragment is about AD 60, the expert papyrologists do not support this date. Most authorities date the fragment at about AD 200.⁸ One exception is Thiede who concluded:

The fragments of Matthew's Gospel in the Old Library of Magdalen College, Oxford, henceforth to be listed as Magdalen Greek 17 rather than 18, remain the oldest extant papyrus of that gospel; but it may be argued that it could be redated from the late second to the late first century, some time after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.⁹

Thus it appears that the alleged date is based on the opinion of one scholar, against the judgment of most others, and that the King James Only interpreters have “adjusted” the date back in time by 20 to 30 years. But that is not the worst problem.

The most significant allegation is that this fragmentary papyrus manuscript fully supports the King James Version against all other modern translations.¹⁰ However, the evidence is the exact opposite of that. Most textual experts indicate that the fragment is of

⁵ If the original document consisted of only the Gospels, as most scholars suppose, then the total number of verses would be 3,779, and the percentages would be 2.88 % and 0.265 % respectfully, still a very small percentage.

⁶ Comfort, *Early Manuscripts*, 58-59.

⁷ *Harvard Theological Review* 46 (1953), 233,37.

⁸ Peter M. Head, “The Date of the Magdalen Papyrus of Matthew (P. Magd. Gr. 17 = P⁶⁴): A Response to C. P. Thiede,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 46.2 (1995), 251-85; Aland and Aland, 96, 100; Philip W. Comfort, *The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 81.

⁹ Carsten Peter Thiede, “Papyrus Magdalen Greek 17 (Gregory-Aland P⁶⁴): A Reappraisal,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 46.1 (1995), 40.

¹⁰ Obviously they mean the Greek *Textus Receptus* tradition that underlies the King James Version.

the Alexandrian tradition, and more like Codex B than Codex Aleph. Here is the evidence:

The variant readings of P⁶⁴ are recorded in the Nestle-Aland critical text of the Greek New Testament.¹¹ Of the three places in Nestle-Aland where the fragment has variant readings, two agree with Codex Aleph and B against the Byzantine reading,¹² and one that Thiede regards as similar to the Byzantine text, but that most others regard as differing from both the Alexandrian and Byzantine traditions;¹³ Thiede noted three other unique variants that differ from both the Alexandrian and Byzantine tradition.¹⁴ If all six variants are included in the evaluation, then two agree with Aleph and B against the Byzantine text, three are rather unique, and one debatable one may partially support a Byzantine reading. The ratio is five to one against the Byzantine text, or perhaps six to zero.

The Nestle-Aland text records four variant readings for P⁶⁷. If that papyrus fragment is regarded as originally part of the same document as P⁶⁴, then these readings also affect the evaluation of the ancient manuscript. Papyrus P⁶⁷ always supports the reading of Codex Aleph. Twice it supports the reading of both Aleph and B against Byzantine,¹⁵ once the reading of Aleph against Byzantine,¹⁶ and once the reading of both Aleph and Byzantine.¹⁷ The manuscript never supports the Byzantine text against the joint witness of Aleph and B. The ratio is three to one against the Byzantine text.

¹¹ Eberhard Nestle, Kurt Aland, and others, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1981).

¹² Matt. 26:8, 23.

¹³ Matt. 26:22; Thiede proposes that this variant is similar the Byzantine reading; but Peter M. Head regarded Thiede's improvements as debatable, and supported Roberts' original reconstruction (p. 260-61). The letters are not clearly identifiable at that point.

¹⁴ Matt. 26:14, 31, 32; Thiede, *Papyrus Magdalen*, 32-33.

¹⁵ Matt. 5:22, 26.

¹⁶ Matt. 5:28.

¹⁷ Matt. 3:15.

The Nestle-Aland text records 45 variant readings for P⁴. If that papyrus fragment is regarded as originally part of the same document as P⁶⁴, then these readings also affect the evaluation of the ancient manuscript. Papyrus P⁴ usually supports the readings of Codex Aleph and B. Once it supports a reading contained in Aleph, B, and Byzantine,¹⁸ and once a reading in B and Byzantine.¹⁹ Three times it has a unique reading not found in Aleph, B, or Byzantine.²⁰ In 30 instances it supports the reading of both Aleph and B against Byzantine,²¹ and in 9 instances it supports the reading of B against Byzantine,²² and in one instance it supports the reading of Aleph, against Byzantine.²³ While this manuscript has a few unique readings where it stands essentially alone, it always agrees with Aleph or B or both. It never supports the Byzantine text when it stands against both Aleph and B. Thus the ratio for this manuscript is 43 to 2 against Byzantine. If all three papyrus fragments are included in the analysis, then the ratio is 52 to 3 against the Byzantine text, giving the Byzantine text the benefit of the doubt. So, whether all three fragments of that ancient document are considered, or only P⁶⁴, the weight of evidence is against its support of the Byzantine text or its later deviant descendant the *Textus Receptus*.

In conclusion, the evidence indicates that the Magdalen Papyrus is not a recent discovery, it is very likely not dated in the first century but in the late second, and it does not support the Byzantine readings against both Aleph and B. Therefore, it is a serious mistake to claim that this manuscript supports the King James Only view.

¹⁸ Luke 1:77.

¹⁹ Luke 6:7.

²⁰ Luke 1:68; 3:9, 28.

²¹ Luke 1:66, 69, 76; 3:14, 17, 22, 31, 32, 37; 4:1, 29; 5:33, 34, 36, 38, 39 (3x); 6:1, 3, 3, 7, 7, 9, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 16.

²² Luke 1:63, 70, 75; 3:14; 6:2, 3, 4, 4, 9.

²³ Luke 3:33.