

I have asked my friend and colleague Jennifer Knust (Professor of early Christianity at Duke) to write some guest posts for us on the blog. Jenny has recently published the definitive study of the famous passage of the “Woman Taken in Adultery” (containing the line “Let the one without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her” – a passage not originally in the New Testament), a long, sophisticated, and learned book (co-authored with Tommy Wasserman), called To Cast the First Stone; and I had suggested she write about that for us. Maybe she will later. But for now she has decided to post about some very exciting current research she’s doing, as we speak: tracking down the history of a Christian manuscript that was plundered by the Nazis. Intriguing stuff. This will take several posts.

Jennifer Wright Knust
Duke University

*“In this kind of world no blueprint instructs us how to house
what we love against the winds of loss.”*

Alice Fogel, “Which Way the Winds Blow”

Part I: Manuscripts Present Good Opportunities

I suspect that many who read this blog are like me, eager to know the full story of a now notorious ancient papyrus fragment of the Gospel of Mark, once again in the news. you follow Bart, you are probably already aware of Dan Wallace’s announcement in a public debate in 2012 that a first-century fragment of Mark is in the possession of the Green family, the owners of the Hobby Lobby craft stores who, at that time, were busily amassing a collection of biblically related artifacts and manuscripts to be held in what would eventually become the Museum of the Bible (MOTB). This fragment, Wallace proposed, had the potential to certify an early date for Mark and, perhaps more importantly, to demonstrate that the followers of Jesus regarded the Gospels as “sacred scripture” within a few decades after their composition. In 2018, however, this papyrus was published not by the MOTB’s Scholars Initiative but in volume 83 of the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*. Editors Daniela Colomo and Dirk Obbink dated the document to the second or third centuries rather than the first, making it quite a rare find but incapable of substantiating Wallace’s claims, at least not to the degree that he had hoped. (In response to this revelation, Wallace apologized for his earlier statements:

[https://danielbwallace.com/2018/05/23/first-century-mark-fragment-update/.](https://danielbwallace.com/2018/05/23/first-century-mark-fragment-update/))

Now, a startling announcement by Mike Holmes, Director of MOTB’s Scholars Initiative, suggests that Obbink, Professor of Classical Studies at Oxford University, attempted to sell the Green family this papyrus fragment, which he did not own, as well as a few others (<https://www.ees.ac.uk/news/ees-statement-professor-obbink-and-sales-of-papyri-to-hobby-lobby>). Brent Nongbri, Roberta Mazza, Candida Moss, and Elijah Hixon (who gets the credit for first identifying “first-century Mark” as none other than “P. Oxy 83.5345”:

<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2018/05/first-century-mark-published-at-last.html>) are following the case closely. To keep track, I highly recommend regularly checking Brent Nongbri’s and Roberta Mazza’s blogs (<https://brentnongbri.com>; <https://facesandvoices.wordpress.com>), Elijah Hixon’s contributions to Evangelical Textual Criticism (<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com>), and articles by Candida Moss (like this one:

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/did-oxford-scholar-dirk-obbink-secretly-sell-bible-fragment-to-hobby-lobby-family>). Jerry Pattengale, one of these responsible for this debacle (and others), has recently published his version of the story

(<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/june-web-only/first-century-mark-pattengale-inside-saga.html>). This coming November I will be chairing a session of the New Testament Textual Criticism Section at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature addressing the scandal. Bart, Jill Hicks-Keeton, Elijah Hixon, Mike Holmes, Roberta Mazza, and Brent Nongbri will be there to inform of us about current developments and to reflect on how the episode of “first-century Mark” speaks to our discipline. I am very much looking forward to hearing what they will say!

I am not directly involved in this particular case — I am tracking the story like everyone else — but, as it happens, I was busily researching another possible manuscript theft when this story broke. The two episodes — so-called “first-century Mark” and the one I am studying — are very different. “First-century Mark” is a fragment of an ancient papyrus codex that was discarded in the rubbish heaps in and around late antique Oxyrhynchus (now Bahnasa), Egypt, a once-thriving metropolis. It was excavated by British archaeologists at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries and brought to England for further study (<https://www.ees.ac.uk/papyri>). Duke’s Greek manuscript 018 is a twelfth-century “menologion,” a collection of saints’ lives organized calendrically so that they can be read on the appropriate day (<https://repository.duke.edu/dc/earlymss/emsgk01013>). Duke’s copy is a beautiful example of a menologion for the month of December, as prepared by a Byzantine scholar known as “Symeon Metaphrastes” (“Symeon the Editor”) in the tenth century. A full set of the Menaphrastian menologion customarily includes ten volumes designed for devotional reading over the course of the church year. Duke’s is volume five, covering December 4-13 and telling the stories of Saints Barbara (December 4), Sabas (December 5), Nicholas (December 6), Ambrose (December 7), Patapias (December 8), Menas, Hermogenes, and Eugraphos (December 10), Daniel the Stylite (December 11), Spyridon (December 12), and Eustratios, Auxentios, Eugenios, Mardarios, and Orestes (the “five holy martyrs,” December 12). This manuscript traveled by some unknown (and likely circuitous route) from a location where it was employed in a Greek Christian liturgy to somewhere in Germany, then to a bookshop in Munich, and, ultimately, to Duke.

Clearly, the parties involved, their circumstances, and the manuscripts in question share little in common. Nevertheless, investigating one possible conspiracy while another unfolds has highlighted for me an oft unspoken truth of book collecting and collections: manuscripts are commodities preserved not only for the texts they contain, the wisdom they impart, and the histories they preserve but also for what they authorize and what they can buy. Manuscripts are grounds upon which contested cultural, religious, and theological knowledges have been established and demolished. They demand experts capable of reading and interpreting them; careers as well as fortunes are built by those capable of unlocking their secrets. They are also rare: papyrus rots away, parchment wears out, pages are damaged and lost, ink is rubbed off, natural and man-made disasters happen, and once valuable books are discarded or forgotten, only to be re-discovered again in some later age. Those who trade in and study these prized remainders are not disinterested, altruistic heroes but flawed human beings as tempted by greed, selfishness, self-justification, and self-aggrandizement as anyone else. The capacity of people to behave in less than salutary, even noxious ways when money, reputations, careers, and manuscripts are at stake is therefore not surprising.

Yet this is why on-going histories of ancient and medieval books are as worthy of attention as the manuscripts themselves: the way objects are treated mirrors the way people are treated, and vice-versa. When institutions, policies, and procedures condone or even simply overlook manuscript theft, such thefts will occur. When the lives and livelihoods of those

who own treasured objects are de-valued, discounted, or disparaged, their objects become vulnerable to seizure and are in fact often seized. If those who long to own fragments of papyri, moldy parchment manuscripts, and dusty old books are willing to look the other way (as they often are), histories of theft, plunder, confiscation, and abduction are covered over, lost, and forgotten. If institutions and governments set out to obfuscate — rather than make plain — the means by which objects are attained and retained, individual actors will not be held to account. If individual actors do not ask questions, query their own motives, and behave like responsible citizens — obliged to the care about the fate and lives of others beside themselves and not just to investigate their chosen objects of study — then these kinds of stories will be endlessly repeated. It is therefore up to all of us to ask: What are costs of what we want and who is paying those costs? The second part of this three-part series will begin to address these questions.



[Christian Manuscripts and Nazi Loot: Guest Post by Jennifer Knust](#)
[Is the Qur'an More Reliable than the New Testament?](#)