

Like many of you I have many questions about the bizarre way the discussion of the so-called “First-Century Gospel of Mark” unfolded. I was intimately connected with the first announcement of the discovery, which was made precisely in order to trump me in a public debate. As it turns out the announcement was based on false information acquired through hearsay. But that’s the past, and Dan Wallace has apologized, so that is that.

There are still questions about how the affair unfolded, but I’m not going to go into that here. What there is now no longer any doubt about is the manuscript fragment that is involved. It is not from the first century but from the late second or early third. That’s not nearly as impressive but it is still mighty impressive. Until now we had only one manuscript of Mark that dated that early. Now we have two.

The other one is P45 (P means “Papyrus” manuscript and 45 means it is the 45th papyrus ms. discovered and published) which is highly fragmentary, but has portions from eight different chapters of Mark, and dates to the early third century. This one is now called P137. It is a tiny scrap, with letters from five lines on the front and back. The letters come from Mark 1:7-9 (not the entire verses, just some words/letters) on the front and 1:16-18 (again some words and letters) on the back.

It is definitely from Mark. It was a fragment discovered with many thousands of others in the archaeological dig at Oxyrhynchus Egypt, a dig begun by two British archaeologists Bernard Pyne Grenfell and Arthur SurrIDGE Hunt at the very end of the 19th century. These two had set out to discover ancient manuscripts (classical, biblical, documentary – that is, just papyri recording land deeds and divorces and civil law suits and... everything else one would write documents about). They had the very bright idea that the best place to find papyri was to dig in an ancient city’s trash heap, where worn out books and documents would be discarded. They brilliantly chose the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus and started digging the trash heap and struck gold almost immediately.

They found so many papyri that it was impossible for them to analyze and catalogue them all. In fact, they are still being published today well over a century later, in a series of volumes dedicated just to the Oxyrhynchus papyri. (It takes a long time to analyze and publish just a single papyrus: it’s a very complicated process, and most of the people doing the publishing have full-time day jobs) Just now volume 83 has appeared in the series. And in it is the edition of P137.

Because of the controversy surrounding P137, the owners of the collection, the Egypt Exploration Society (to see what this group is and what it does, see <https://www.ees.ac.uk>) , has not sent out the following notice:

[The Egypt Exploration Society5/25/2018 1:41 pm](#)

We have now uploaded a copy of the article to our website for those that do not subscribe to the volume: <https://www.ees.ac.uk/news/poxy-lxxxiii-5345>

If you click on the link you will be told that you can click on another link to see the analysis of the papyrus, a transcription of its text, and a photograph of the thing itself! It is papyrus 5345 in the collection, so when you look at the photos, that’s the one to look at. Here is the direct link to the analysis/transcription/photo:

<https://www.ees.ac.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=45d9d9f7-8df4-4e8f-9eb5-9af2b048ef60>

I'm sure many (most?) of you will be a bit disappointed by what you see. It's just a tiny scrap. What's the big deal?

Well it is a big deal for textual scholars. It is probably our earliest surviving fragment of any copy of Mark's Gospel.

(I might add that some people have asked me if the scholars dealing with this fragment were at all competent, given the shenanigans involved with its release. There is ZERO question of the experts' competence. Just [try to] read the analysis. It is not for the faint of heart. Skilled papyrologists are amazingly competent.)

Here is their Greek transcription of the papyrus. Letters in brackets are not found in the fragment because there is a hole/gap there. A single bracket toward the beginning or end of the line indicates that the rest of the letters are also not there from the beginning up to the bracket (at the start of a line) or from the bracket to the end of the line (at the end). The restored letters (inside the brackets) are virtually beyond doubt, however.

↓]μ. []

των [υ]π[οδημα

των αυτου εγ]ω εβαπτισα υμας υδ [ατι

αυτος δε βαπ]τισει υμ[α]ς π̄ν̄ι αγ]ιω και

εγενετο εν εκε]ιναις. [ται]ς ημερ [αις

→], εν] τη θαλα [σση ησαν γαρ αλιεις

και ειπε]ν αυτοις δευτε οπ]ισω μου και

ποιησω] υμας γενεσθαι αλι]εις ανθρωπω(ν)

και ευθυ]ς αφεντε[ς] τα δικ[τυα

So the front can be translated as follows (this is my translation)

Of his sandals, I baptize you in water but he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.
And it happened in those days.....

The back can be translated:

In the sea. For they were fishers. And he said to them, come after me and I will make you fishers of People. And immediately, leaving their nets....



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[We Do *NOT* Have a First-Century Copy of the Gospel of Mark](#)