

As you know, there is a good deal of discussion going on about the destruction of mummy masks in order to uncover New Testament papyri. One point that I am not seeing discussed strikes me as the most important of all, and I want to address that here.

But before doing so, I want to ask two questions, that maybe someone on the Blog can answer for me. The first is actually several questions: exactly how many masks are we talking about here? How many have been destroyed? And how many have been singled out for destruction? Don't we as a reading public have the right to know?

And second: am I right that the only way to know if a New Testament papyrus was used as part of the "paper mache" in the mask, that first the mask has to be destroyed? That is to say, this one mask - or these many masks? - is/are being destroyed not because it / they are known to house NT papyri, but in the hopes that they are. Right? So I return to my first set of questions: what is the yield here? How many masks are being obliterated from the earth before something of value emerges from them?

But now on to the point that I want to explore at length that seems to me to be the really important one. I personally think that there are no shenanigans going on when Dan Wallace and Craig Evans tell us that a fragment of the Gospel of Mark has been found and that it can, with reasonable certainty, be dated to the late first century. I'm not saying that I know they are right. Far from it. In fact, one of the most disconcerting things about this claim is that they are not making the papyrus available so real experts can study it and let us know what it really is and to what period it can be dated. But let's suppose that once it is published - now the date is no longer 2012, as originally stated, or 2015 as stated last week, but 2017 or later, for reasons no one will explain - it turns out to be a very early fragment of the Gospel of Mark. The question no one seems to be asking is: What difference will it make?

There seems to be a widely held sense that it will be one of the greatest finds of modern times and will somehow revolutionize our understanding of the manuscript tradition of the New Testament. Will it?

My sense from everything that has been said is that it is a small fragment with portions of some verses on it. It will need at least to be that, because otherwise it would be impossible for the discoverers to have determined that it comes from Mark, as opposed, say, to Matthew or Luke (since they often have the same stories as Mark, often with the same wording). There must be something characteristic of Mark's Gospel - for example, a verse found only there, or the wording of a verse only there - that makes it clear that it comes from Mark.

Now, let's say that scholars - once they are given the inestimable privilege of actually seeing the thing, in two years, or twenty years, or whenever - come to agree that it is from Mark and that it dates from, say, somewhere between 80-130 CE. They will not be able to get any *closer* to that either by dating the manuscript on the basis of its handwriting or by Carbon 14. You need at least a fifty year window. But suppose that's the window, and suppose the wording of the verses on the fragment are very close indeed to what we have already reconstructed based on other surviving evidence to be the oldest known form of the Gospel of Mark. Let me stress that if the wording were widely *different* from what we already think was the oldest form of Mark that (a) these evangelical scholars would not be excited about the find but, just the contrary, would be upset about it and (b) they would in that case argue that it is in fact not from Mark but from some non-canonical Gospel!

So let's suppose it is a small fragment with some verses that are virtually identical with the form of Mark as we already have constructed it. What will it tell us, then, that we do not already know?

I can't say, since I haven't been allowed to see the thing, but if how I'm imagining the case to be is right, then so far as I can tell, when it comes to helping us know the "original" text of Mark, or anything else about the text of Mark, it wouldn't actually help us a bit. That's because it would not be telling us anything that we don't already know, or think we know.

Let me explain. Just about every reasonably sentient and sober scholar of Mark's Gospel thinks that it was written around 70 CE -maybe a few years before, or a few years after, but around then. Moreover, every scholar on the face of the earth thinks that Mark's Gospel was copied soon after it was first put in circulation. Moreover, almost everyone agrees that some copies were better than others. I think everyone would agree that some of the early copies were all in all reasonably accurate, with a few mistakes here and there on a given page or in a given passage. Others may have changed a lot more things here and there, either by accident or on purpose. Others may have been way off base. I suppose you could argue that both Matthew and Luke produced "copies" of Mark - but theirs are really new editions with additional information added. So on one end of the copying spectrum of you would have copies that are just about like the original, with mistakes here and there, and on the other end of the spectrum complete re-editions of Mark.

Suppose a fragment of a reasonably accurate copy of Mark showed up. Suppose in fact that it contains, say, most of 3-5 verses, which are almost exactly like what we already think is the oldest form of Mark. What would it tell us? It would tell us we are right in how we imagine Mark was being copied. But we already think we're right. So what is the breakthrough? (As I will stress in a later post, I myself am ecstatic about the idea of a first-century copy of Mark showing up. But NOT for the reasons people typically assume. That is, it will NOT revolutionize our knowledge. How could it do that??)

Suppose the fragment has some differences from what we think is the oldest form of Mark. What would that tell us? It would tell us we are right - there were indeed copies with some variants early on in the transmission process.

Suppose it has lots and lots of differences. What would that tell us? It would again tell us we are right - there were indeed copies with lots of variants. (Although, I repeat, if this fragment is like *that*, our evangelical friends who are interested in destroying masks would not be all that excited about the discovery and would insist it actually is not a copy of Mark but of some other Gospel).

So what will the fragment do, once it is allowed to be published in two years or two hundred years? I am having trouble imagining a scenario other than the one that I have sketched out. It will tell us we're right. (As I will stress in a later post, I myself am ecstatic about the idea of a first-century copy of Mark showing up. But NOT for the reasons people typically assume.)

What would a first-century copy of Mark look like if it were to tell us we were *wrong*? It would have to be a very long copy of Mark (say, a number of chapters instead of a few verses), it would have to be shown incontrovertibly to be Mark, and it would have to be either *exactly* word for word what we already think was in Mark (that would show that very early cribes were being precise over long stretches of text, which seems to us now, based on what we know now, to be implausible) OR it would have to be *really* different

from what we already think was in Mark (that would show that scribes exercised more license than we currently think).

And so why are evangelical scholars so pumped by this find if it (as a small fragment instead of a reasonably full copy) almost certainly won't tell us something we don't already know? I'll pursue that question further in my next post.

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