I received a lot of comments on my post about the academic fraud connected with an Oxford manuscript scholar, the Museum of the Bible, and certain enthusiastic evangelical Christians who are ironically willing to lie or distort the truth in order to prove their understanding of the truth. One question I received several times: suppose the manuscript that started the whole thing off, the alleged “first-century copy of Mark” — which turns out to be a tiny scrap that is NOT from the first century — suppose it *had* been a manuscript of the first century. Would that have revolutionized our understanding of Mark’s Gospel, the New Testament as whole, the historical accuracy of the Bible, or our views of the historical Jesus? TERRIFIC question. Here is how one reader asked it:

**QUESTION:**

For the sake of arguments let’s pretend for a moment that the fragment really existed and was precisely what it was claimed to be. That would surely be a stunning, miraculous find that all scholars would applaud. (And we can certainly understand why the Greens would want to acquire such a gem for their museum.) But in what possible sense does any of this prove—or even significantly support—the primary claim that what we now possess represents the original text of the New Testament?

**RESPONSE:**

There are a lot of ways I could respond to this. I was thinking hard about the issue even before the news broke and before we knew what this scrap of a manuscript actually is. And I posted on the matter in 2015, three years after we first heard that “a first-century copy of Mark” had been discovered and after evangelical scholars and representatives of the Museum of the Bible had lauded it as a major breakthrough that showed how liberal scholars are completely wrong about the accuracy of the Bible and would now have to admit they were wrong.

This, for example, was repeatedly claimed in public talks by Scott Carroll, head of acquisitions at the Museum of the Bible — naming me by name as the chief culprit. His talks were recorded on video, and in them he asserts that I had views about Mark (that it dates from the second century) that I have never had and that he must have known I have never had; but by saying that I claimed Mark dated from the second century, he could “prove” I was completely wrong, since now we have a manuscript dated before that time.

Why would he claim I had views I’ve never had, that are in fact contrary to everything I’ve ever thought, said, taught, and written for over forty years? Well, it’s not too hard to figure out why....

In any event, I wrote the post in 2015, a couple of years before any of us (except Scott Carroll and a couple of others) actually knew what the manuscript was. In it I tried to show why the manuscript was highly unlikely to change a solitary thing about what we think about Mark’s Gospel, let alone about anything else connected with the New Testament or the historical Jesus.
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 ...

The rest of this post is for members only. If you don’t belong, you can join and have access to this post — and hundreds of others, at least five a week! We still have free two-month memberships available for a few days; or you can pay a small fee to join for an entire year. Your entire fee goes to help those in need, whose numbers, alas, are not yet dwindling. Either way, why not join??

You need to be logged in to see this part of the content. Please Login to access.