

7Q5 = MARK 6.52-53
A CHALLENGE FOR TEXTUAL CRITICISM?

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Is it possible to make a positive identification of 7Q5 as part of the Gospel of Mark? If a fragment of Mark can be found in the caves from Qumran, then important hypotheses of the textual-criticism of the New Testament cease to be valid. With such an identification, solid proof would be available that the text of the Gospel of Mark was already written before AD 68. This would in fact be a revolutionary discovery, since many of those scholars who are involved in New Testament studies think that this particular Gospel was written shortly after AD 70.

In 1972 Jose O’Callaghan proposed the identification of some small fragments from Qumran as texts from the New Testament.¹ These have long been dismissed. However, in the same year, O’Callaghan published an identification of a small piece of papyrus²—the famous 7Q5—which would make an impact on the scholarly literature. This is especially due to the efforts of the prolific writer and bestselling author, Carsten Peter Thiede. He made himself an advocate of this scholarly hypothesis and claims that it is definitely proven that 7Q5 is in fact Mk

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1. J. O’Callaghan, ‘¿Tres probables papiros neotestamentarios en la cueva 7 de Qumrān’, *Studia Papyrologica* 11 (1972), pp. 83-89.

2. J. O’Callaghan, ‘New Testament Papyri in Qumrān Cave 7?’, *JBLSup* 91.2 (1972), pp. 1-14 (9) (= English translation of J. O’Callaghan, ‘¿Papiros neotestamentarios en la cueva 7 de Qumrān’, *Bib* 53 [1972], pp. 91-100).

6.52-53.³ Others, like most recently Stefan Enste, have set themselves the task to disprove the arguments of Thiede.⁴ Since the stakes are high, it is understandable that the ongoing debate is highly contro-versial. At the same time, there seem to be some emotions involved. Thiede claims that scholars who are close to textual criticism will not like his hypothesis, and this is indeed true. Thus, it might be helpful to discuss the basic questions of how to identify a papyrus, how to interpret the writing on it and how to supply the text for missing passages.

The well-known scholar Herbert Hunger has set a high threshold for the identification of the particular fragment 7Q5: ‘Angesichts des starken Dissenses innerhalb der Experten sei an eine Forderung der Vernunft und Logik erinnert. Wer eine sinnvolle Entzifferung eines Textes und dessen Identifizierung ablehnt, sollte sich verpflichtet fühlen, eine Alternative anzubieten... Ein ignoramus ist zu billig.’⁵ Thus, there seems to be a necessity to identify this scrap of papyrus.

How to Publish a Papyrus

Even if a discussion of the basic steps of working with a papyrus might seem out of place in a scholarly article, it will be shown later that this is of utmost importance for the question of what is written on 7Q5.

The first step is to read the text and to identify as many single characters as possible. For this it is often necessary to consult the original of a papyrus. Photographic reproductions can be misleading. 7Q5 probably ranks amongst the papyrus ‘bestsellers’ since the original and photographs of this piece have been read by many scholars with varying results. Despite the fact that a reading taken from an original is

3. As can be read in many popular articles in newspapers as well as in his books. Cf., e.g., C.P. Thiede and M. D’Ancona, *Der Jesus-Papyrus* (Munich: Luchterhand, 1996).

4. S. Enste, *Kein Markustext in Qumran: Eine Untersuchung der These: Qumran-Fragment 7Q5 = Mk 6,52-53* (NTOA, 45; Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag Fribourg / Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2000).

5. H. Hunger, ‘7Q5: Markus 6,52-53 — oder? Die Meinung des Papyrologen’, in B. Mayer (ed.), *Christen und Christliches in Qumran?* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1992), pp. 33-56 (39). Translation: ‘Given the level of controversy among the experts, it is necessary to bear in mind what logic demands. Whoever rejects a reasonable decipherment and identification of a text should feel obliged to offer an alternative. It is too easy to plead ignorance.’

generally more reliable than a reading taken from a photograph, many of the readings which Thiede took from the original are hotly debated.⁶

The second step is to transform the single characters into words or sentences. This is easy with large pieces, containing lots of characters, but can be very tricky for small pieces and tiny fragments. It might not even be possible to identify a single word in a tiny fragment. As mentioned above, Thiede claims that it has been proven that 7Q5 is Mk 6.52-53, while Enste claims just the opposite.

The third step is to interpret the papyrus, to show the consequences and the meaning of the particular piece, which might, in turn, provide an insight into the tradition of a special text, or might highlight a historical situation. The consequences of the allegedly positive or negative identification of 7Q5 have already been mentioned.

The statement of Herbert Hunger adds to the pressure. We are forced, as he claims, to make some identification of this fragment.

This article will not attempt to identify this much debated piece of papyrus. Its sole aim is to present the arguments of those who try to prove that 7Q5 is indeed part of a Gospel of Mark. Even if this might seem to be a very cautious approach—almost not worth the trouble of writing the article—it seems that this is the only way to deal with this papyrus. Even if the three steps of working with a papyrus—reading, identifying, interpreting—seem to be very easy, they do have their particular traps.

Reading 7Q5

Since it was Jose O’Callaghan who made the first positive identification of this papyrus, his reading is given below:⁷

Text
]ε[
]υτωγη[
]η. καιτι[
]γνησ[
 5]θησα[

6. Cf., e.g., S. Enste, ‘Qumran-Fragment 7Q5 ist nicht Markus 6, 52-53’, *ZPE* 126 (1999), pp. 189-94, who even furnishes reproductions of single characters to prove his point against Carsten Peter Thiede.

7. The reconstruction by O’Callaghan can be found in his ‘New Testament Papyri in Qumrān Cave 7?’, p. 9.

As can be seen, there is not much to be read, but much more to be added. According to O’Callaghan, only ten letters in five lines can be identified without doubt—this is an amazing average of two letters per line. However, Herbert Hunger wrote concerning this identification:

Man fragt sich, warum—im Vergleich zu vielen anderen Identifizierungsversuchen an neugefundenen Papyri—gerade die Zuweisung von 7Q5 an Markus einen derart heftigen Widerstand von seiten «skeptischer» Bibelwissenschaftler hervorgerufen hat. Die Antwort ist einfach: Durch das sichere Datum eines terminus ante quem (68 n. Chr.) ergibt sich als Konsequenz eine «Frühdatierung» neutestamentlicher Texte, mit der man bisher nicht gerechnet hat und auch nicht rechnen will. Am Rand des Symposiums in Eichstätt (18.–20. Oktober 1991) sagte mir ein Neutestamentler: «Wenn diese Papyrusfragmente...in die Jahrzehnte 40–60 zu datieren sind, bricht unsere ganze Einleitungswissenschaft zusammen.»⁸

Thus, identifying a piece of papyrus from Qumran as being part of the Gospel of Mark means nothing less than a major upheaval for New Testament studies. However, even some 30 years after this allegedly convincing identification,⁹ New Testament studies continue to exist and still use form criticism to analyze Mark’s Gospel.

8. H. Hunger, ‘7Q5: Markus 6,52-53 — oder?’, p. 39. Translation: ‘In view of the large number of attempts at identifying other, newly-discovered papyri, the question arises why exactly the ascribing of 7Q5 to Mark’s Gospel has met with such strong opposition from the (so-called) “sceptical” biblical scholars. The answer is simple: as a result of a securely dated terminus ante quem (68 AD), biblical scholars are forced to date New Testament texts earlier than they had previously done, which they are unwilling to do. At the Eichstätt symposium (18–20 October 1991) a New Testament scholar said to me, “If these papyrus fragments have to be dated to the decades between 40–60 AD, the entire foundation of New Testament studies collapses”.’

9. Cf. C.P. Thiede, ‘Papyrologische Anfragen an 7Q5 im Umfeld antiker Handschriften’, in Mayer (ed.), *Christen und Christliches in Qumran?*, pp. 57-72 (72): ‘Dagegen hoffe ich, gezeigt zu haben, daß es sehr wohl möglich ist, diesem Fragment... gerecht zu werden, wenn es mit den methodischen Verfahrensweisen behandelt wird, nach denen in der Papyrologie allgemein gearbeitet werden muß. Es mag durchaus sein, daß die Konsequenzen der Identifizierung eines Markus- und eines Pastoralbrief-Fragments in Qumran weitreichender sind als diejenigen von griechischen AT- bzw. Apokryphen-Fragmenten in der gleichen Höhle, oder auch eines Vergil-Fragments auf Masada, oder eines Menander-Schnipsels. Doch

Identifying 7Q5

The only word which can be identified is *καί*—not a word which helps us much with the identification of the papyrus since it is used rather often.¹⁰ For these few characters which can be read, the reading of such a common word is a major setback for the identification of the papyrus. However, O’Callaghan managed to get an identification using the double *nu* in line four. With the word *ἐγέννησεν* he was not successful, thus he tried *Γεννησαρέτ*, with fascinating results. He ends up with the following text for the fragment:

Text (reconstructed by O’Callaghan)	Letters per line
[συνηκαν]ε[πιτοισαρτοις]	20
[αλληνα]νταωγη[καρδια πεπωρω]	23
[μεν]η. καιτι[απερασσαντες]	20
[ηλθονεισΓε]γνησ[αρετκαι]	21
5 [προσωρμισ]θησα[νκαιεξελ]	21

To be able to identify so few characters within a literary text and yet be able to identify the text—taking into consideration the research tools of his time—was an astonishing feat of scholarly research. However, we face quite a few problems. If we set the positively identified letters in relation to the overall number of letters per line, we end up with roughly one letter out of ten which is preserved. Further, we should not place too much value on the word *καί* since it is really quite common. If we discount this word, which usually does not help us with the identification of a text since it is much too common, we end up with seven letters out of 105 letters or 6.7% of the text as being preserved. This is not much.

However, it has been claimed that much smaller pieces have been identified and not disputed in any way.¹¹ This argument is interesting and is usually used to discourage any academic who calls into question the allegedly positive identification of 7Q5.

das darf uns nicht daran hindern, den Tatsachen ins Auge zu sehen, selbst wenn das heißen sollte, liebgewordenen Vorurteile zu den Akten legen zu müssen.’

10. An index-search with the TLG shows 3,080,201 hits for this particular word. Even if many of these texts are later than AD 68, we are still left with quite a few instances of this particular word.

11. Cf. the arguments of Thiede, ‘Papyrologische Anfragen’, pp. 66-67.

However, this is a typical case of the scholarly malady which can be encountered most often in scholarly discourses where much is at stake or where emotions run high: wishful thinking. Using the positive identification of allegedly smaller fragments as argument for the positive identification of 7Q5 as Mk 6.52-53 is the wrong way to deal with this identification. First, these small pieces have often many more letters per line than 7Q5, which definitely makes the identification much easier. Secondly, they have not much bearing on the tradition of the text, thus they do not revolutionize one entire field of research. And what might be good enough to serve merely as another example that Virgil was still read, not really an astonishing thing, might not be good enough to prove an entire scholarly community wrong. Thus we should not be asking ourselves whether other small scraps of papyrus can be identified but, rather, how large a papyrus can be and still be misinterpreted: Peter Sanz had one half of a piece of papyrus measuring 12 cm by 14.5 cm which he published in his doctoral dissertation.¹² In six lines, more than 130 letters can be read without any doubt; thus we have an average of more than 20 letters per line, while only a few letters are unclear. There are no lacunae which would be a problem for the identification of single words, thus there is no dispute about the words which were read by this gifted papyrologist. Sanz gave a very thorough commentary on this piece and convincingly reconstructed the text. In addition, the famous Professor Gerstinger was supervising his work. However, this text had one problem. The second half of the papyrus was later found, making this piece larger than Sanz had estimated. Thus, his entire identification and analysis are wrong, even though he read the existing passages correctly.¹³ Is it really possible, looking at such evidence, to argue that the fact that tiny fragments have been identified without much debate justifies the positive and indisputable identification of 7Q5 as Mk 6.52-53? Is this really a scholarly argument? It seems to be rather the kind of wishful thinking which should be alien to scholarly research.

12. P. Sanz, *Christliche Papyri aus der Papyrussammlung der Nationalbibliothek zu Wien: Inauguraldissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde einer hohen philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Wien* (unpublished dissertation, Vienna, 1936), no. 28, pp. 172-78.

13. For the new edition, cf. J. Diethart and †K. Treu, *Griechische literarische Papyri christlichen Inhaltes II* (MPER, 17; Vienna: In Kommission bei Brüder Hollinek, 1993), no. 37, pp. 70-71.

Problems of the Identification

The alleged identification of 7Q5 as the text of Mk 6.52-53 has three fundamental flaws:

1. We have to change the text we read in order to find what we want to find. Only if the *tau* in line 3 actually was meant as a *delta* do we end up with the beginning of the right word. On the other hand, words beginning with *tau* and *iota* are not so rare that we can prove that this change is necessary, and that a word beginning with τ was not in fact written here. And with this we also have to assume that all other characters are not misspelled.

2. We also have to change the text of the Gospel as it is preserved in the textual tradition. Verses 52-53 of Mark 6 (according to the standard Greek New Testament edition NA²⁷) do not fit exactly the text to be found on the tiny scrap of papyrus:

Text (Mk 6.52-53)	Letters per line
[συνῆκαν] ἐ[πὶ τοῖς ἄρτοις]	20
[ἀλλ' ἦν α]ὐτῶν ἢ [καρδία πεπωρω]	23
[μέν]η. Καὶ τι[απεράσαντες ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν]	29
[ἦλθον εἰς Γε]γνησ[αρὲτ καὶ]	21
5 [προσωμίσ]θησα[ν.	21
3.1. διαπεράσαντες	

However, the words ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν do not fit into the alleged reconstruction, as can be seen if one compares this text with O'Callaghan's reconstruction. O'Callaghan writes concerning this problem: 'With respect to textual criticism, we note only one variant, the omission of $\epsilon\pi$ τὴν γῆν after διαπερασαντες. Now according to S.C.E. Legg, this omission is attested in other manuscripts.'¹⁴ Since he draws attention to an article by Carlo Maria Martini, a lengthy passage will be quoted here in order to show what is going on:

The omission of $\epsilon\pi$ τὴν γῆν in Mark 6:53, assumed so as to remain within the limit of the stichometric hypothesis, can be explained on the basis of the textual situation of the passage. It is true that the notices given by Legg (om. Cop^{bo. ed.}) and by the Synopsis of Aland (following which $\epsilon\pi$ τὴν γῆν would be omitted by sa bo) are not exact. Indeed both the Coptic versions render words by an expression which

14. Cf. O'Callaghan, 'New Testament Papyri in Qumrān Cave 7?', p. 10.

corresponds literally to εἰς το πέραν. They are therefore interpretive, but do not omit the phrase. For that reason there are no witnesses for the omission. But the text is a tortured one (the expression ἐπι τὴν γῆν ἤλθον εἰς Γεννησαρετ is presented in at least four diverse forms in the manuscripts) and the text preferred by the critics, that of B, is a bit overloaded (one does not know quite whether to link ἐπι τὴν γῆν with what precedes or what follows), so that a secondary omission, and even the hypothesis of a primitive *textus breviar*, do not appear impossible.¹⁵

Thus, the allegedly attested omission is rather a hypothesis of a possible omission or possible ‘textus prior’ which is nowhere attested. This hypothesis is called by Martini ‘not impossible’, but has to become an ‘attested omission’ in the arguments of O’Callaghan. One is tempted to stop here. Is this identification of the small papyrus 7Q5 really a scholarly work and not a hoax? As to the discussion of the text, one is tempted to ask why one would want to insert ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν if this disrupts the text. And why is it impossible to find one single proof of the ‘not impossible omission’ if this is what our text actually needs to be better Greek and more easily understandable? Or is it the other way around? Although we would like to be able to exclude these words from the text, since they were always attested in the Gospel of Mark, did copyists through the ages have problems with this passage but keep it where it belonged? This would mean that we are not allowed to strike these three words from Mark’s text, rendering the identification impossible.

3. The stichometry is also interesting. Only if we have roughly 21 letters per line can this identification be valid. If we have either fewer or more, we are again in difficulties. Now, we have no proof whatsoever of how many letters were written in one line of the papyrus.

Thus, since we do not definitely know how large the papyrus was, or how many letters per line were written, and since we do not definitely know that the alleged omission ever occurred, this identification can be called highly speculative—it is definitely not a ‘secure’ identification which can be used to overthrow other scholarly opinions. However, the hypothetical identification can be used to call into question the results of form criticism. If the answer is that this identification cannot be right since Mark cannot have been written at such an early point we know

15. C.M. Martini, ‘Notes on the Papyri of Qumrān Cave 7’, *JBLSup* 91.2 (1972), pp. 15-20 (19) (= English translation of C. M. Martini, ‘Note sui papiri delle grotta 7 di Qumrān’, *Bib* 53 [1972], pp. 100-104).

that something questionable is happening here also, since this is not a scholarly but rather a dogmatic answer. Textual criticism deals mainly with probabilities and not with archeological facts. This does not make the flaws in the scholarly debate of the supporters of 7Q5 = Mk 6.52-53 less problematic. One is tempted to say that the way in which some supporters of 7Q5 argue their case has definitely had the effect of weakening it. It shows rather that these questions in theology seem to be questions of faith even for scholars and not questions of academic research—which is a rather bad situation for theology.

As to the question of why another identification of this passage has not been put forward, over the years there have been quite a few proposals, in fact, that were ‘disproven’ as ‘highly speculative’ by Thiede and others. This article has attempted to show that the alleged identification of 7Q5 as a text of Mark’s Gospel is even more speculative than many others, albeit supported by well-meaning believers.