

The Changing Scene and the Unchanging Word

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A Precious Fragment of the Gospel According to John



Dr. Machen

SOME weeks ago, there appeared in the daily newspapers a truly astonishing piece of information, to the effect that among certain documents belonging to the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England, there had been discovered a fragment of a manuscript of the Gospel according to John dating from the former half of the second century after Christ.

Certainly that was a most sensational piece of news.

Until recently the earliest of the known manuscripts of the New Testament were two fourth-century manuscripts, the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus.

These two manuscripts are written on vellum, which is an exceedingly durable writing material. But during the earlier period—say, up to, roughly, A. D. 300—the text of the New Testament was transmitted on a very perishable writing material, papyrus.

Until rather recent years no papyrus manuscripts of the New Testament coming from the period prior to the date of those two great vellum codices were known.

During the past forty years or so, however, great quantities of papyrus documents have been turning up in Egypt, where the dry air preserved them as was not the case in other parts of the ancient world; and among these papyrus documents are a few fragments of manuscripts of New Testament books. Of these the most important is "Chester Beatty Papyrus I," containing parts of thirty leaves (sixty pages) of a manuscript of the Gospels and Acts dating from the third century.¹

But now there has turned up a fragment of a manuscript of the Gospel of John which is said to be

actually a century earlier still, coming apparently from the former half of the second century!

As a friend remarked to me, the thing seemed almost "too good to be true." In such a case one felt a little inclined to distrust newspaper reports, lest false hopes might be aroused.

Now, however, a careful edition of the precious little fragment is actually in our hands, and the high hopes which we had received from the newspaper reports seem really to be confirmed.²

It is true, when one examines the photographic reproduction of the fragment, appearing opposite the title page of this edition, one is tempted just at first to feel disappointed. Only about ten words have been preserved complete, with parts of some fifteen more. The question might even seem to arise whether we can be sure that these words do indeed come from the Gospel according to John.

A little consideration, however, and an examination of the editor's discussion, will serve fairly well to remove such doubts. The upper margin and part of the inside margin of the papyrus leaf have been preserved. The words and parts of words that can be read are partly on one side of the leaf and partly on the reverse side. By an examination of the way in which these words and fragments of words stand in relation to one another, the editor can identify them as coming from John 18:31-33, 37-38. One may admire very greatly the skill which was necessary in order that the identification might be made; but about the correctness of the identification, now that it has been made, there seems to be little doubt.

Then arises the all-important question of date. What was the date of the manuscript from which this fragment has come? At this point we find confirmation of the early newspaper

¹ See *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri*, Fasciculus I. By Frederic G. Kenyon, Late Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum. London: Emery Walker Limited, 1933 and 1934.

² *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel in the John Rylands Library*. Edited by C. H. Roberts, M.A., Fellow of St. John's College, Oxford. With Facsimile. Manchester: The Manchester University Press, 8-10 Wright Street, Manchester, 15; And The Librarian, The John Rylands Library, Deansgate. MCMXXXV.

reports. Competent expert opinion puts the probable date as being in the early half of the second century.

The editor himself, Mr. C. H. Roberts, is thoroughly competent in this field, having been chosen by Dr. Arthur S. Hunt, collaborator with Dr. Bernard P. Grenfell in the editing of the famous Grenfell and Hunt Papyri, to take on the work of editing the portion of the Rylands collection left unpublished at the time of Dr. Hunt's death (see the explanation by the Librarian of the John Rylands Library on pages 7 and 8 of the edition). Then the editor has had his judgment regarding the date of the fragment confirmed by Sir Frederic Kenyon, Dr. W. Schubart (a well-known German palaeographer) and Dr. H. I. Bell, "who," as the editor says, "have seen photographs of the text and whose experience and authority in these matters are unrivalled" (p. 16). Dr. Schubart even says (translating his words as quoted by Mr. Roberts): "Many traits remind us even of the first century, but in general the style of the handwriting leads us rather into the second century" (p. 30, footnote 7).

No doubt great caution in such matters is in place, and it is quite possible that the early dating of this fragment may be disputed by some scholars. A word of caution is uttered, for example, in *The Times Literary Supplement* (London), for January 4, 1936. Nevertheless, it seems on the whole probable that the manuscript of the Gospel according to John from which this fragment comes was made not later than A. D. 150.

At any rate the editor is justified in saying that if the argument in his introduction is correct the fragment "is the earliest known fragment of any part of the New Testament" (p. 12). Whether he is also correct in going on to say that it is "probably the earliest witness to the existence of the Gospel according to St. John" depends upon the estimate which we attribute to other evidence. But at any rate this fragment certainly does seem to constitute an exceedingly important addition to the evidence for the early date of the Gospel.