

Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International. 215 pages. Price: Unknown.

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On 24 December 1994 *The Times* of London reported the claim by the well-known German scholar Carsten Thiede that the three papyrus fragments of Matthew's Gospel held in Oxford since 1901 (known as the Magdalen College Oxford fragments or P64) date from the mid to late first century, and not from about 200 AD as most scholars agree. As reported by *The Times*, Thiede rest his case on a comparison of P64 with five recently discovered examples of handwriting from outside Egypt: three texts Cave 4 at Qumran (dated 68 AD), one from Cave 7 at Qumran (dated no later than 135 AD), and from the Greek Minor Prophets Scroll from Nahal Hever (also dated circa 135 AD). According to Thiede, the form of handwriting in these five manuscripts has the exact same style as that of P64 — thus his choice for a first-century dating.

Thiede's claim for a mid to late first-century date for P64 is, however, not his first controversial claim in regard to the redating of certain manuscripts. In 1992, in a book called *The Earliest Gospel Manuscript? The Qumran Fragment 7Q5 and its significance for New Testament Studies*, he claimed (in following the Spanish papyrologist José O'Callaghan) that a papyrus fragment (written in Greek) from Cave 7 at Qumran (7Q5) is part of Mark 6:52-53, and therefore also must stem from the mid first century.

In the first part of the first half of his book, Stanton gives an appraisal of Thiede's two claims. Like Thiede, he believes that P64 is very significant, but for different reasons. In following T C Skeat, Stanton believes that P64, P67 and P4 (which contains parts of Luke 1-6) are all from the same codex, most probably consisting of all four Gospels. If this is the case, P64 should not only be dated around the end of the second century, but its real significance should be noted: it is part of the earliest surviving copy of the four Gospels brought together in one codex — our earliest witness to a momentous development within early Christianity. In regard to Thiede's claim that 7Q5 = Mark 6:52-53, Stanton argues that this is highly improbable. Firstly, it is not conceivable that a copy of Mark's Gospel was to be found at Qumran. Stanton base this belief on three arguments: all of the some 42 papyrus fragments of the Gospels that thus far have come to light is from a codex. However, 7Q5 is written on a roll, like all the other Qumran writings. Furthermore, the Qumran community had little interest in writings in Greek, not to speak about an interest in Mark's Gospel, since there is a huge gap between the religious worlds of Mark and that of the Qumran community. The theory that 7Q5 is part of Mark's Gospel is, however, most unlikely on the basis of Stanton's second main argument. In 7Q5 there is a damaged letter in line 2

which, if it were to be a part of Mark's Gospel and, more specifically a parallel of Mark 6:52-53, should read *nu*. According to experienced scholars who recently looked at the original, this is, however, not possible. Since Thiede himself cannot prove the opposite, his thesis that 7Q5 = Mark 6:52-53 cannot be accepted.

In the second part of the first half of his book Stanton poses the question whether one could still argue that, in the light of recent discoveries (eg, those of Thiede) and modern scholarship (eg, the new interest in the historical Jesus), the Gospels contain 'truth'. If Gospel truth is understood not as *factual reliability*, but as a truth that wants to convey the *significance of Jesus*, he argues that the question should be answered affirmatively. The following points underscore his understanding of Gospel 'truth': an analysis and a comparison of the traditions in the different Gospels show that the traditions about Jesus were preserved primarily in the service of Gospel 'truth' rather than historical truth; although Q does not mention the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is a 'gospel of Jesus' in the sense that it contains Jesus' proclamation of good news; and the Gospels of Peter, Egerton, Thomas and 'Secret Mark' have no traditions that constitute evidence that the Gospels do not contain 'Gospel truth' or beg for a serious new reflection on the truth of the canonical Gospels.

In the second half of his book Stanton assesses the historical evidence in the Gospels for the actions and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. By reading the Gospels 'against the grain' it is possible to reconstruct a clear picture of the actions, words and intentions of Jesus. By concentrating on the 'aftermath' of Jesus, on those traditions in the Gospels that are critical of Jesus, and on those which were clearly an embarrassment to the later followers of Jesus, the following 'Jesus' emerges from the pen of Stanton: Jesus' deliberate turning to those on the margins of society made a profound impact on his followers; during his earthly life Jesus frequently referred to himself as God's Son (e.g. Mk 12:1-12, 14:36; Mt 11:27) and therefore it was only logical that after his resurrection Jesus was proclaimed as Lord and the Son of God; Jesus' actions and teachings were considered to be deeply offensive from a very early point in his life; because his teachings were a disruptive threat to the social and religious order of his day, he was called by some a demon-possessed magician/false prophet; Jesus was a follower of the Baptist and was severely influenced by him; by some of his actions and words Jesus made an implicit claim to messiahship; and because Jesus was a messianic pretender, he was killed as 'the King of the Jews'.

Some of Stanton's conclusions in the second half of his book in regard to the study of the historical Jesus are not new, and others can be seriously questioned. By now it has become clear that many scholars indeed understand Jesus as a sort of a 'radical social prophet' of his time, that he implicitly and explicitly criticized the temple and that he directed his intentions especially to the marginalized of his society. Whether Jesus indeed, however, understood himself to be a messiah or a messianic pretender, indeed, was influenced by the Baptist as much as Stanton implies and frequently referred to himself as God's Son, is another question.

Stanton's book is recommended to readers who are interested in a book that is popular rather than rigorous in its approach to the study of the historical Jesus. The first part of the book, where the theories of Thiede are discussed, is particularly noteworthy. The book also offers good reading in regard to the development of the traditions of and about Jesus up to the point when the four canonical Gospels were decided. Scholars who are interested in textual criticism will also find plates 1 to 9 very interesting and helpful in assessing Stanton's argument against the theories of Thiede. *Gospel truth: New light on Jesus and the Gospels* is a stimulating — and in some parts provocative — book that is worthwhile to read.