

**Book Report: *The Earliest Gospel Manuscript?*
By Carsten Peter Thiede**

This book is short (80 pages) but packs an amazing punch! Thiede (1952-2004) was a papyrologist. He was a scholar in archaeology and New Testament studies but his work among the Dead Sea Scrolls papyri, as well as other New Testament papyri fragments, resulted in a couple of popular books which made the case for dating some existing and better-known papyri earlier than they had been traditionally dated.

The Earliest Gospel Manuscript?: The Qumran Fragment 7Q5 And Its Significance For New Testament Studies (Paternoster Press, 1992) advanced the controversial theory that papyri fragments discovered in Qumran cave 7 belong to the Gospel of Mark. What is nearly indisputable is that the writings, hidden away, have to predate the destruction of the Qumran community by Romans ca. AD 70.

Thiede (and other scholars before him) noticed unique features about the discoveries of Qumran Cave 7. First, the material of these small fragments – papyrus and not parchment. Most all Dead Sea Scrolls in all other caves were written on parchment. However, papyrus is more economical and typical writing material of the earliest New Testament manuscripts. Second, the language written on these small fragments – Greek and not Hebrew. Most all Dead Sea Scrolls in the other caves are Hebrew. However, it's believed the earliest New Testament manuscripts were all written in Greek.

Thiede suggests that there was a copy of Mark at Qumran, one of the earliest, and it was hidden and over 2,000 years deteriorated to a few fragments. Fragment 7Q5 could be Mark 6:52-53; 7Q6 could be Mark 4:28; and 7Q15 could be Mark 6:48.

The book is fascinating as it informs about copyist practices of a Scriptorium, such as has been excavated at Qumran. Furthermore, he extrapolates from the papyri fragments themselves, how a scroll would be written and rolled and torn and deteriorated to explain the fragments in their current shape. He says that if you have the whole Mark scroll missing this piece, this piece fills in the missing letters for these lines of Mark 6.

It is possible and it is controversial. I doubt it could ever be proved. Yet it's also been said. It's out there. Some more fragments discovered or assembled would help it a lot. But this is a more straightforward theory and less far-fetched than that the Dead Sea Scrolls somehow decode and/or debunk Christianity and its historicity rooted in early first-century Palestine.

As I reflected on Thiede's book, it occurred to me how Christians at Qumran in AD 68 would be no surprise. The gospel preached at Qumran would be no surprise.

Acts 1:8 explains how the apostles would be witnesses in all Judea. Then Acts 8:1, 4 showed how Christians were scattered throughout regions of Judea and they went everywhere preaching the Word. Well, situated just 8 miles south of Jericho and 13 miles east of Jerusalem, is Qumran. That village was certainly going to hear the Word. Perhaps preaching at Qumran in AD 35 might have been like preaching to an entire town of Saul of Tarsus types and Christians would not be welcomed there for very long. However, we know there were churches throughout Judea who heard about Saul's conversion (Gal. 1:22-24). What if one such church was in Qumran? Surely they would be collecting their own copies of Scripture, a Gospel of Mark or a book of James or a Gospel of Matthew...until the scorched-earth policy of Rome devastated all they could not hide.