

The 7Q fragments reconsidered

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The following article sets forth a critical assessment of a fragment from Qumran which has been hailed in some quarters as evidence for an early composition and collected of certain N.T. documents. Dr. Hemer is a N.T. research fellow at Tyndale House, Cambridge. His PhD from the University of Manchester was awarded for research in the area of Biblical archaeology.

When a few mere scraps of papyrus were found in the exploration of Cave 7 at Qumran in 1955, there was little prospect of a popular sensation. It was at least significant that the contents of this cave had been found by archaeological exploration and not acquired indirectly through local dealers, for the finds could be properly studied in their archaeological context. The actual documents, however, attracted little interest. They were notable only for being written in Greek rather than in Hebrew or Aramaic. The whole series of about twenty fragments was published in 1962.¹ Two of the larger pieces were identified as from the Septuagint, a likely enough source for Greek texts found in a Qumran cave, one being from Exodus, the other from the apocryphal Epistle of Jeremiah. The whole group was found in close association and could be approximately dated from the evidence of the styles of handwriting. None of the hands could be placed later than the latter part of the first century A.D., and some of the fragments which have later claimed most attention were representative of a style in use only from about 50 B.C. to A.D. 50. C. H. Roberts, the foremost authority on these matters, affirmed these dates in 1962 with no possibility of knowing then the construction that would later be placed on them.

There the matter rested for nearly ten years. Then Dr. J. O'Callaghan, an eminent Spanish papyrologist working at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, in the course of cataloguing texts of the Septuagint, listed the two acknowledged fragments 7Q1 and 7Q2, and then turned to consider whether anything might be made of the other associated pieces. The

¹ M. Baillet, J. T. Milik, R. de Vaux, *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert of Jordan. III Les "Petites Grottes" de Qumran* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962), p. 145 and Plate XXX.

most immediately promising was that numbered 7Q5, which contained a probable letter-sequence-*nnes*-. That immediately suggested the word *egennesen* (begat): it was worth searching the OT genealogies as likely places to find another LXX identification. This produced no result, but the NT name "Gennesaret" occurred to him on impulse. He quickly found a passage corresponding closely to the fragment in Mark 6:52-53, and then located elsewhere in the NT possible correspondences with several other fragments. He has since published articles announcing and defending these identifications.³

These claims, if accepted, could be of dramatic significance. They could be used to maintain that a group of NT writings had already been collected at a date within the first century, and that most of the books thought to be represented in the find were in existence by the mid first century, or in some cases but little later. And the books involved include Acts, James, I Timothy and II Peter.

What should we make of these remarkable suppositions? Initial reaction has been mixed. In America some have accepted O'Callaghan's identifications with enthusiasm or with caution. In Britain the mood has been more sceptical, and on the continent the matter seems to have attracted less notice so far.³

³ The original article (in Spanish) and an important supporting comment by C. M. Martini (in Italian) are printed in *Biblica* 53 (1972), 91-100 and 101-104. Both have been produced in English translation by W. L. Holladay in a booklet issued as a supplement to *JBL* 92:2 (1972). See also O'Callaghan in *Biblica* 53 (1972), 362-367 and 517-533.

³ The present writer has collected a bibliography of over twenty items in little more than a year since O'Callaghan's original publication. The most important of the critical contributions, to which further reference is made in this note, are in my judgement those of C. H. Roberts, "On Some Presumed Papyrus Fragments of the New Testament from Qumran," *JTS* n.s. 23 (1972), 446-447, and P. Benoit, "Note sur les fragments grecs de la grotte 7 de Qumran," *Revue Biblique* 79 (1972), 321-324.

There are two grounds on which the basic hypothesis might seem open to challenge (1) the dating and context of the fragments (2) the actual NT identifications.

(1) need not detain us. Roberts evidently abides by his original opinion of the dating of the texts. If they are indeed authentic pieces of the NT, we may claim his authority for their remarkably early date.

(2) is the crux of the matter. If any one of the identifications were acceptable, the association of the group might indeed lend some plausibility to the idea that they represented a collection of OT and NT writings. But it must be strongly emphasised that this condition is not fulfilled. All the fragments under discussion are either (a) so brief as to permit multiple identifications by anybody prepared to take the trouble to search systematically for them, or (b) fitted to the NT only by conjectural alteration of the text.

(a) 7Q6,1, for instance, which O'Callaghan places at Mark 4:28, was originally published as containing *two* certain letters, a *tau* and a *lambda*, though *eit* followed by *le* on the next line are reasonably sure. But a collocation so brief is amenable to multiple conjectural identifications.⁴

(b) In 7Q5, the key "Gennesaret" fragment, the word *diaperasantes* is restored from an initial *tau* followed by a trace of a *curved* stroke. The *tau* is explained as a scribal error for *delta*, and the *curved* mark as a trace of the straight *iota* where the fibres are assumed to have been distorted at the edge of the papyrus. Now scribes *do* make errors, and a very early text *might*

⁴ For evaluation of the possibility of alternatives see Roberts (p. 447, on 7Q8), and cf. Hemer, *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1972), 125-128, on 7Q5,1. I hope to publish a similar study of the crucial 7Q5 in a forthcoming issue of *ZNTW*. See also *TSF Bulletin* 64 (Autumn, 1972), p. 11.

contain unexpected variants. But the secure identification of a fragment of less than a dozen clearly legible letters cannot be based on the assumption of the licence to postulate convenient but improbable scribal errors at will in those letters.

Two other weighty considerations must be noted (c) None of the four largest fragments support the NT hypothesis. We have seen that 7Q1 and 7Q2 are Septuagintal: 7Q3 and 7Q19 remain unidentified. The grouping of the documents, so far from corroborating the hypothesis, indicates that the pattern is otherwise. If the largest pieces are *not* from the NT, we have no reason to think the smaller are.⁵

(d) O'Callaghan based his readings on facsimiles. P. Benoit has since reexamined the original texts in the light of his identifications, and has thus been enabled to argue that some of the readings are untenable.⁶

O'Callaghan's hypothesis is an interesting example of the papyrologist's skill in plausible reconstruction. As such it is worth discussing and evaluating. But I think we should recognize the case against it as decisive. One may fairly maintain on other grounds an early dating of NT documents, but we must not seek to base an apologetic lightly upon an idea which will not, I believe, merit acceptance. Nothing is lost by recognizing the failure of a hypothesis. Nothing is thereby proved or disproved. But to cling to wishful thinking here against the weight of the evidence will, I fear, only harm responsible scholarship and bring a deeper disillusionment later.

⁵ The *whole* group should be studied together as presented in the original publication.

⁶ Thus in 7Q6,1 O'Callaghan argues from an assumed *eiten* and *plere* which Benoit rejects.