

Bibles That Changed the World

P39 (The Gospel of John)



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P39 (The Gospel of John)

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1800s or early 1900s, a small fragment of John’s gospel was discovered, along with hundreds of thousands of other fragments, in a trash heap in the Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus. This fragment is only half a page from a codex, or bound book, of John’s gospel, but it contains enough information to tell us something about the people who produced it. And, perhaps more importantly, it offers some insight into the codex — a communication technology that changed the way the Bible was read and transmitted. Today, this fragment is known as “P39.”

EXAMINING THE ARTIFACT

We’ll examine P39 by considering four related areas, beginning with the artifact itself. Where was P39 found, and what does this fragment tell us about its original codex?

P39 gets its name from being the 39th New Testament text on papyrus to be registered in the official catalog of Greek New Testament manuscripts. Papyrus is a reedy water plant that was cut, soaked, flattened into sheets and dried, and then used for writing in the same way the modern world might use paper. In fact, the word “paper” is derived from the word “papyrus.”

Oxyrhynchus, the city where the fragment was found, was located about 160 miles southwest of modern-day Cairo on a branch of the Nile. It was a regional capital in Egypt during the Hellenistic period, and attracted large numbers of Greek settlers. Eventually, Oxyrhynchus became Egypt’s third largest city and retained its prominence through several centuries.

It became famous as a Christian center with many churches and thousands of adherents who lived in religious orders. In light of its prominent Christian history, two scholars from Oxford University, Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, led excavations in Oxyrhynchus from 1896 to 1907. They hoped to find Christian artifacts from this period — and they were not disappointed. According to their own reports, they and their team of local excavators found papyri documents faster than they could sort them. Over the course of their excavations, roughly 500,000 manuscript fragments were discovered and brought back to England.

The fragments they discovered include a wide range of classical literary texts like Homer’s epics, the philosophical writings of Aristotle, and the proofs of Euclid. But there are also personal letters, account receipts, governmental edicts and tax documents. These various types of papyri provide a remarkable view of everyday life in North Africa under the Greeks and Romans.

Among the Oxyrhynchus papyri, Grenfell and Hunt also found many Christian writings, such as early hymns, prayers, letters, and narrative accounts of the trials and

deaths of martyrs during the Great Persecution in A.D. 303. They even found apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works such as a work they called, “the Sayings of Jesus,” or in Greek, *Logia Iesou*. They found many biblical texts, too, including fragments of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Joshua, Job, the Psalms, and the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and, of course, John.

Fragments of ancient documents can tell us not just about the text, but sometimes about who was using a text or using that copy and how the people thought about that text as an item. Many kinds of documents were found at Oxyrhynchus. It’s the garbage heap of the ancient town itself, and they threw away all kinds of stuff: bills of sale, tax documents, letters from home from students asking parents for money, just everything. It is interesting that everything found there was thrown out, including copies of Scripture, probably because they got worn out and too ragged to use. But from this ancient garbage heap, we get all kinds of Greek literature, as I say, including tax records and everything else that people had to complain about, but also fragments of Christian literature, Scripture and non-Scripture.

— Dr. Michael William Holmes

Not all the fragments found at Oxyrhynchus remained in England. Grenfell and Hunt’s work was paid for by The Egypt Exploration Fund, which, in turn, was supported by subscribers. One way the Fund rewarded its donors was through “distribution papyri.” That is, as a show of gratitude, the Fund gave some of its papyri to its donors. P39 was gifted to Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1922. Much later, in 2003, it was purchased at auction, and sometime before 2010 it was acquired by Michael Sharpe Rare & Antiquarian Books in Pasadena, California. In 2010, the Green Collection of Oklahoma City acquired the artifact. And in 2012, the Green family gifted it to Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC.

Judging from the style of writing, P39 is a codex leaf from the third or fourth century. While some scholars have dated it as early as A.D. 150, recent radiocarbon dating provides a very high likelihood that the papyrus plant used to create this manuscript was harvested sometime between A.D. 207 and 326.

This particular leaf contains part of the Gospel of John 8:14-22. It’s split down the middle vertically, and only one half remains. But helpfully, the remaining fragment contains an ancient page number that reads “omicron delta” (OΔ), or 74. By determining how many words fit on a page and how many pages were contained in a typical papyrus codex, scholars calculate that the complete book likely held only the gospel of John. Still, while it contained only one biblical book, this codex wasn’t particularly small. Its letters are large, bold and generously spaced. And in comparison with many other early Christian papyri, there seems to have been no concern for how much papyrus was used. Scribes were typically paid by the line, and because P39 uses such large letters, the codex it came from would have contained more lines than other copies of John’s gospel, making it more expensive to produce.

These facts may suggest that the church or person that owned this codex was relatively well-off, or at the least had the patronage that could fund such a manuscript. Even so, this codex would have been less expensive than a similarly sized codex on parchment.

The large letters also may point to particular uses of this codex. For example, generous line spacing would have helped readers keep track of their place on the page. Large, bold script would have been easier to see in dim lighting, as well as easier to read by people with poor eyesight. In addition, ancient authors sometimes commented on the difficulty of reading small or cramped handwriting, even for educated and healthy individuals. So, the large format of P39 would have facilitated smooth and easy public reading.

JOHN'S GOSPEL AT OXYRHYNCHUS

We've seen that P39 is a fragment of the Gospel of John. Now, let's look at why John's gospel might have been particularly important to the Christians living in Oxyrhynchus.

John's gospel was written at a time when Jewish Christians had been persecuted and evicted from their synagogues, but when the church was nevertheless growing rapidly as many Gentiles came to faith. This is one of the reasons that John's canonical writings address the unified nature of truth and faith, as well as the importance of personal acceptance and harmony between believing Jews and Gentiles. In many ways, the community that first used P39 shared similar circumstances.

Many scholars have dated the P39 fragment to sometime between the third and early fourth centuries. During this time, Oxyrhynchus was inhabited by people with widely varied backgrounds and religions. And just as in John's day, the Christian community in Oxyrhynchus would have struggled with resisting the influence of other religions and cultures, but also with acceptance and harmony between its own members. Much of this struggle may have been due to the influence of Gnosticism on the early church.

Between the mid-second to mid-third century, around the time that P39 was written, Christianity struggled with and refuted a group of philosophies often called "Gnosticism." Gnosticism takes its name from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." It asserted that certain people were privy to secret knowledge and teachings, many of which completely reinterpreted the meaning of Scripture. The early church father Irenaeus largely used the apostle John's canonical writings to refute this heresy. Not surprisingly, Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, written around A.D. 200, was also found at Oxyrhynchus, along with several texts associated with Gnosticism. Listen to how Irenaeus used John's gospel to refute the Gnostics in *Against Heresies*, Book 3, Chapter 11:

According to these men, neither was the Word made flesh, nor Christ, nor the Savior ... Therefore the Lord's disciple, pointing them all out

as false witnesses, says, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”

Earlier, we mentioned that Grenfell and Hunt identified one of the non-canonical documents they found as the “Sayings of Jesus.” As it turns out, this was a fragment of a pseudepigraphal work called *The Gospel of Thomas*. Pseudepigrapha, or “false writings” contain untrustworthy teachings, and are often falsely attributed to famous and respected people. *The Gospel of Thomas*, for instance, is falsely attributed to Jesus’ apostle Thomas. A more complete manuscript of the Gospel of Thomas was found near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. Ultimately, the Gospel of Thomas was rejected by church fathers as early as Origen of Alexandria and Hippolytus of Rome at the beginning of the third century.

Some modern New Testament scholars have said that Thomas’s collected sayings claim to reveal a secret *gnosis* or wisdom that assists human souls in their return to the heavenly world. Others argue that the Gospel of Thomas isn’t actually gnostic literature, but that certain Gnostic groups used these sayings to support their doctrine. Either way, The Gospel of Thomas seems to view the material world as evil, created not by God but by secondary gods. It teaches that the kingdom of God is not an apocalyptic intervention by God into history, resulting in final judgment, but a state of transformed consciousness in those who discover this secret knowledge.

Significantly, the “Sayings of Jesus” papyrus is dated to the second half of the third century A.D. — essentially the same timeframe as P39. It’s quite possible that the church at Oxyrhynchus itself struggled against gnostic ideas even after the time of Irenaeus. If so, they might have emphasized the Gospel of John, such as by reading it in public worship or making and distributing the codices featuring only John’s gospel.

The Christians in Oxyrhynchus also may have found John’s writings encouraging during the Great Persecution. The Great Persecution began in A.D. 303 when emperors Diocletian and Maximian removed certain legal protections that Christians had enjoyed previously. During the years that followed, Christians in many parts of the Roman Empire were arrested and punished for their beliefs and practices. Their punishments were sometimes as extreme as death in a Roman arena. While Christians in some parts of the Roman Empire were spared from the persecution, those in Oxyrhynchus were not.

One early account of persecution in Oxyrhynchus records the trial of a Christian martyr named Dioscorus. He was a city-councilor from Kynopolis who had been arrested and brought before Culcianus, a Roman prefect of Oxyrhynchus who was well-known for his opposition to Christianity. The prefect began by praising Dioscorus’ Roman education and ordering him to make the required sacrifices to the emperor’s gods. But Dioscorus refused, saying, “I am not sacrificing to gods like these nor do I submit except to God alone.” Dioscorus was found guilty and likely put to death for refusing to worship the Roman gods.

The fact that the Roman government would target and kill Christians wasn’t new. When the apostle John wrote his gospel, the church had already come through the persecutions under emperor Nero in A.D. 64. Likely, it had also suffered under the emperor Domitian from about A.D. 89 to 96. Since that time, persecuted Christians have often drawn encouragement from John’s teachings.

From all appearances, P39 just contained the Gospel of John, and so questions have been raised as to why this gospel was so precious to those that first possessed it. And many scholars have suggested it's because of the theme of persecution that appears in the Gospel of John. There's a lengthy portion of that gospel that doesn't appear in the other New Testament gospels, and this material is often called Jesus' Farewell Address that appears in from the end of chapter 13 through chapter 17... And throughout this passage Jesus talked about the persecution that his disciples would face after he departed from them. In 16:33 Jesus reassured his disciples with those well-known words, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

THE CODEX

We know that this fragment of John's gospel was part of a codex. So, we should discuss the codex more broadly and how this technology changed communication in the ancient world.

We can think of a codex as being essentially the same as a modern book. It consisted of a collection of pages, typically stitched together in a way that allowed the pages to be turned as they were read. Some of the first people who widely used the codex were Christians, who often employed it to record and transmit the Bible.

Through the first century A.D., the most common form that writings took was the scroll. But in or around the first century, the materials used for scrolls began to be folded and bound into codices. Unlike modern books, which are mostly printed on paper, ancient codices were normally crafted from things like papyrus, parchment and vellum. Parchment and vellum both consist of animal skin that has been prepared for use as a writing surface. Fortunately for us, these materials are more durable than paper, and Egypt's dry climate protected them, so many codices and fragments of codices have survived until the modern day.

There are many possible reasons why the codex gained prominence as a communication technology. Obviously, it's much easier to turn to a page in a codex than it is to unroll a scroll. More importantly, though, a codex can hold about twice as much text as a scroll of the same size. This is primarily because a codex contains text on both the front and the back of each page, whereas a scroll typically contains writing only on one side.

This economy of the codex's physical form allowed for much longer documents than scrolls could contain. The typical scroll was about the length of the Gospel of Matthew. But after the codex was introduced, Christians began to collect all four gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — in just one codex. In fact, *Codex Sinaiticus*, which dates from the fourth century, originally contained *all* the books of the Bible. This

collection of books would not have been possible in a single scroll. The compact form of codices also made them more portable, and therefore easier to distribute.

Still, in most communities, scrolls overwhelmingly remained the most popular choice for texts through at least the second century A.D. Christians, however, began to use codices more than scrolls in a way that stands out in the surviving manuscripts. In fact, essentially all Christian biblical manuscripts we possess from the early centuries A.D. are codices or fragments of codices. In contrast, most non-Christian writings from that period are on scrolls.

Moreover, the manuscript evidence suggests that at least by the mid-second century, Christian codices exhibited some significant similarities. There were special abbreviations for words like “God,” “Lord,” “Father,” “Jesus,” and “Christ” — called *nomina sacra* in Latin, meaning “sacred names.” *Nomina sacra* appear almost universally in Christian scriptural manuscripts. Further, by the late second century, some writings began to be grouped together, and eventually were written in a single codex—such as all of Paul’s letters plus the book of Hebrews. And while there were individual gospel books, like the P39 codex, Christians eventually began to produce codices containing all four canonical gospels. Interestingly, while many codices containing some or all of these canonical gospels have been found, no codex has yet been found that binds together a canonical and non-canonical gospel.

IMPACT OF THE CODEX

When it first emerged, the codex changed the way the Scriptures were transmitted and read. Now, let’s consider the impact of the codex on communities of faith throughout the centuries.

To understand the significance of the codex, it’s helpful to look into the book culture of the Greco-Roman world. The Roman Empire was a place where written communication was commonplace. Now that’s not to say that a majority of people were literate, but rather that writing was everywhere. As we’ve seen, the wide variety of literary writings that were recovered at Oxyrhynchus provide tremendous evidence of this fact. Many slaves, for example, managed the households of the upper class and served as tutors for their children. So, they were required to read and write administrative documents. Letter-writing was common, too, and letter delivery was surprisingly fast because Roman roads and soldiers made travel easier and more secure. Buildings were covered in writing, both in the form of official inscriptions and public graffiti. For those who couldn’t read or write, scribes were available for hire. It’s not surprising that a culture that valued writing so highly would want an instrument — like the codex — that could transmit the written word as efficiently as possible.

But despite the advantages codices offered over scrolls, in Jewish communities, the scroll remained the only sanctioned medium for the Scriptures for many centuries. In fact, no Jewish Scriptures have been found in codex form prior to the eighth century. Scholars speculate that Jewish communities continued to use scrolls exclusively for

copying and transmitting the Hebrew Scriptures because rabbinic teachings and Jewish custom required it.

However, in the later centuries of the first millennium A.D., the Masoretes, a group of Jewish scribe-scholars, began to preserve and copy the Hebrew Scriptures. As part of their work, they added a variety of markings around the biblical text, such as vowels and marginal notations. Jewish law forbade placing any additional markings in the sacred scrolls of Scripture, so all this work was done in codices. Historically preserved examples of these codices include the Leningrad Codex, which contains the entire Old Testament, and the Washington Pentateuch. Most of our modern Hebrew Bible translations are based on the Masoretic text from these Jewish codices.

Christians, on the other hand, began using codices shortly after this technology was first introduced. The Christian community made and distributed many codices containing Scripture and other writings. And these writings were critical to the church's growth and ministries.

The invention of the codex had a major impact on the Christian use and access to writings. One, it probably reduced the cost somewhat because instead of writing on one side of a sheet of papyrus you're writing on both sides of it. So, it does reduce somewhat the cost of the materials. You still have to pay a scribe to write the whole text out, but now you're writing on both sides. It also served to distinguish Christian books from other books because the Christians were among the first to adopt the codex format, much more quickly than secular Greek writers did, and particularly Jewish writers who continued to use the form of the scroll. So, in some ways it was a visual signal that this is probably a Christian document. Not only did it reduce the price somewhat, which probably made access a little easier in that sense, but also made it easier to consult the text. Instead of a scroll where you had to roll through it, unroll the scroll out, you now could open up your volume anywhere. In Luke 4, for example, Jesus is given the scroll of Isaiah, and he will read from chapter 61. Think about everybody waiting there while he rolls through the scroll to get to the right place. With the codex form, you can open it up anywhere in the book and consult that section. And it changed people's access to texts that way. They could consult more easily, compare passages more easily, and it was just a format that facilitated the use of Scripture more than the scrolls did.

— Dr. Michael William Holmes

It would be hard to overstate the widespread impact of the codex on both Christian and Jewish faith and practice. Of course, even after Jewish communities began using codices for other purposes, Jewish synagogues continued to use scrolls of the Pentateuch or *Torah* in public worship, just as they had before. Even today, the Torah scroll is used in synagogues during ritual prayers. But for most other uses of Scripture, codices have become common. And, insofar as the modern paper book is simply a newer

version of the codex, we might say that codices have been the main way that Jewish religious writings have been transmitted and used in most settings. In Christian history, codices, and more recently books, have almost always been the primary means of transmitting and using Scripture and other religious works.

CONCLUSION

In Jewish and Christian traditions, books of Scripture, theology, worship and prayer have defined religious experience and education for centuries. Even in the modern age, many digital readers still format their books in ways that mimic the style of the codex, right down to the use of page numbers — just like the “omicron delta” in P39. It’s almost impossible to imagine what Jewish and Christian history would have looked like for the past two thousand years if we hadn’t had access to codices. But thanks to texts like P39, we get a glimpse of how this communication technology impacted countless communities throughout the world.

CONTRIBUTORS

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GLOSSARY

apocrypha – Early religious writings of dubious origin and authorship that are not considered part of the canon of Scripture by most authorities; (capitalized) a group of 14 uninspired religious books included in the Septuagint and Latin Vulgate but not in the Protestant or Jewish Scriptures

Aristotle – (ca. 384-322 B.C.) Ancient Greek philosopher and scientist who studied under Plato and founded the Lyceum in Athens

codex – A manuscript in book form made up of folded sheets called folios

Codex Sinaiticus – A Greek manuscript of the Bible handwritten in the middle of the 4th century that was discovered in a convent at the foot of Mount Sinai

Diocletian – (ca. 242-312 B.C.) Roman emperor from 284 to 305 who restored the Roman government after the empire was brought to the brink of anarchy in the 3rd century; published edicts in 303-304 B.C. that led to the violent persecution of Christians

Domitian – (A.D. 51-96) Roman emperor who was the first to persecute Christians outside of Rome

Euclid – Ancient Greek mathematician who lived in the 3rd century B.C. in Alexandria, Egypt; considered the “Father of Geometry”

Gnosticism – Early heresy from the first centuries after Christ; believed that material things were evil, including the human body; therefore, God would never take on the form of human flesh, so Jesus was not both God and man

Gospel of Thomas – Ancient pseudepigraphal and apocryphal document containing 114 sayings falsely attributed to Jesus; discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945; generally considered a Gnostic gospel

Great Persecution – Era of increased systematic and strategic persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire which began in A.D. 303 under Emperor Diocletian and ended in approximately A.D. 311

Hippolytus – (ca. A.D. 170-236) Theologian from Rome who wrote *Against the Heresy of One Noetus* in which he defended the Scriptures as the final authority in doctrine

Homer – Greek poet who may have lived in the 8th century B.C. and is credited with writing *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

Irenaeus – (ca. A.D. 130-202) Second-century bishop and early Christian writer who wrote *Against Heresies* in which he refuted Gnosticism and affirmed the validity of the four gospels

Leningrad Codex – The oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible; contains approximately 60,000 Masoretic notes

Logia Iesou – Greek phrase meaning “Sayings of Jesus”; name applied to an ancient apocryphal and pseudepigraphal text found at Oxyrhynchus, Egypt

Maximian – (ca. A.D. 250-310) Roman emperor under Diocletian from 286 to 305 who was known for being an excellent military general; enforced the persecution of Christians, particularly in Italy, the Iberian peninsula, and Africa

nomina sacra (singular *nomen sacrum*) – Latin phrase meaning “sacred names”; a set of Greek abbreviations for divine names or titles used in early Christian manuscripts

Origen of Alexandria – (ca. A.D. 185-254) Early Christian theologian from Alexandria; his works include: *On First Principles*, in which he defended the Scriptures as our final authority for Christian doctrine, and the *Hexapla*, a comparative study of various translations of the Old Testament

papyrus – Material from a reedy water plant that was cut, soaked, flattened and dried to be used as a writing surface; water plant from which an ancient writing surface was derived

parchment – A durable writing surface made from prepared animal skins; often used for ancient documents

Pentateuch – First five books of the Old Testament

pseudepigrapha – Literally, “false writings”; documents which contain untrustworthy teachings and are often falsely attributed to famous or respected people

radiocarbon dating – Method for determining the date of origin of ancient artifacts and objects by looking at the rate of decay in the organic material

scribe – An ancient Jewish scholar and teacher of religious law who served as a copyist, editor and interpreter of the Hebrew Bible

Torah – The books of Moses or the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, often referred to as “the Law”; known in Christianity as “the Pentateuch”

vellum – A type of parchment made from the prepared skins of a young animal (usually a calf) used as a writing surface

Washington Pentateuch – One of the oldest, most complete Masoretic codices of the Hebrew Torah; composed on parchment around the year 1000