

## A Greek Papyrus Fragment with a Citation of Matthew 1:20

BRICE C. JONES

[bricejones@me.com](mailto:bricejones@me.com)

University of Louisiana Monroe, Monroe, LA 71291

This article offers a critical edition of a Greek papyrus fragment recently identified as containing a partial citation of Matt 1:20. It is currently only the second known Greek papyrus to preserve this particular New Testament passage. If my argument is correct that this papyrus was most likely used as an amulet, it would become the only extant amulet to preserve Matt 1:20.

---

### I. THE FRAGMENT

P.Mich. inv. 4944b is a light-brown Greek papyrus scrap that came to the University of Michigan in 1927 as part of a lot (inventory nos. 4926–4952) purchased in Egypt by Harold I. Bell and William L. Westermann from Maurice Nahman in the 1926/1927 season.<sup>1</sup> Bell's acquisition report ("Report on the Papyri in the Season 1926–1927") dated 9 May 1927 references the lot to which the fragment belongs:

The third lot consists of the papyri bought by Prof. Westermann and myself from Nahman. These were acquired in one lot but consist of very various papyri purchased by Nahman at different times and of different vendors. Some had arrived recently; others were selected by me from boxes of fragments which had apparently been in stock for a long time.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, while we cannot say anything about the provenance of this papyrus, we can at least establish that it came from Nahman (or from another dealer in Nahman's

<sup>1</sup>The fragment was part of the acquisitions of the papyrus cartel or syndicate headed by the British Museum in the 1920s and 1930s, on which see James G. Keenan, "The History of the Discipline," in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59–78.

<sup>2</sup>This report is accessible online at <http://www.lib.umich.edu/papyrus-collection/report-papyri-season-1926-1927>.

network), was purchased by Westermann and Bell, went to the British Museum, and was then dispatched to Michigan by Bell.<sup>3</sup>

The papyrus preserves a partial citation of Matt 1:20 in Greek. In this verse, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream instructing him not to fear to take Mary as his wife. There is currently only one other papyrus in the official list of New Testament manuscripts that preserves this passage, namely, P.Oxy. 2 (p<sup>1</sup>).<sup>4</sup> There are only nine majuscule manuscripts before the ninth century that preserve Matt 1:20, so if our dating is correct, our papyrus stands among the earliest textual evidence for this particular verse.<sup>5</sup> Besides a few orthographic variations, the text conforms to the NA<sup>28</sup> edition of the Greek New Testament.

The papyrus measures 10.8 × 2.7 cm, is broken on all sides, and contains two incomplete but legible lines of text written with the fibers (→); the back is blank. Partial letter strokes visible along the upper and lower edges demonstrate that text preceded and followed the two partial lines that are preserved on the papyrus. A faint, vertical crease is present near the center of the fragment, suggesting that the papyrus may have been (deliberately?) folded at some point. Inorganic tremata are present over two initial vowels in line 2 (ἰωσηφ, ὑιος). Κυρίου in line 2 is written as a *nomen sacrum* with the typical supralinear stroke, while Δαυεῖδ (l. Δαυίδ) in line 3 exhibits *scriptio plena*. A middle dot occurs before the direct address of the angel in line 3. The script is a sloping pointed majuscule. The hand bears a close resemblance to the ones found in the following manuscripts: P.Oxy. 1374 (late sixth century CE),<sup>6</sup> P.Mich. 685 (seventh/eighth century CE),<sup>7</sup> PSI 1372 (first half of eighth century CE),<sup>8</sup> and P.Amst. 21 (first half of eighth century CE).<sup>9</sup> Thus, though tentative, a late sixth- to early eighth-century date seems plausible.

The biggest question concerns this papyrus's *raison d'être*. The fact that there is no text on the backside (l) suggests that this is not a continuous text of the Gospel of Matthew. In New Testament textual criticism, a continuous manuscript is a manuscript "containing (originally) at least one New Testament writing in continuous fashion from beginning to end."<sup>10</sup> So what purpose did this scrap serve?

<sup>3</sup>Maurice Nahman (1868–1948) was a prominent Egyptian antiquities dealer based in Cairo through whom many of the Michigan papyri were purchased. See the brief biography in the premature obituary of Nahman by Jean Capart in *CdÉ* 22 (1947): 300–301.

<sup>4</sup>Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB) no. 2940, <http://www.trismegistos.org/text/61787>.

<sup>5</sup>The nine majuscule manuscripts are: 01, 03, 04, 05, 07, 019, 024, 035, 042. Data retrieved 10 March 2016 from the online version of the *Kurzgefaßte Liste*, <http://ntvnr.uni-muenster.de/liste>.

<sup>6</sup>Guglielmo Cavallo and Herwig Maehler, *Greek Bookhands of the Early Byzantine Period A.D. 300–800*, BICSSup 47 (London: University of London, Institute of Classical Studies, 1987), pl. 42b.

<sup>7</sup>Image at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-2879/6577r.tif>.

<sup>8</sup>Cavallo and Maehler, *Greek Bookhands*, pl. 54b.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pl. 54c.

<sup>10</sup>Eldon Jay Epp, "The Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament," in *The Text of the New*

We are faced with a variety of possibilities. Is it a mere biblical extract, such as we find in de Hamel Gk. MS 389 (John 5:43; LDAB 113922), O.Sarga 5 (John 2:1; LDAB 2826), and P.Amh. 3b (Heb 1:1; LDAB 3475)? Or is it an excerpt from a biblical commentary, liturgical fragment, homily, or amulet? In fact, several characteristics point to the category of amulet.

Christians frequently inscribed New Testament passages on amulets in late antiquity.<sup>11</sup> Generally, these passages were chosen for their apotropaic value. In other words, they were used as a means to resolve individual crises, which often included protection from demons, fevers, scorpions, headaches, disease, the evil eye, and the like. The text inscribed on the medium (papyrus, pottery, leather, gem, etc.) was considered to be imbued with divine power that, when recited, could render some desirable effect on a human situation or circumstance. Often the circumstance prompting the ritual is not specified; only the words of power are inscribed, such as a single verse or abbreviated narrative from Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

For example, P.Oxy. 1077 (LDAB 2959), a fifth- to sixth-century Greek papyrus amulet, opens with the phrase “Curative Gospel according to Matthew,” which is then followed by a citation of Matt 4:23–24—a narrative summary that depicts Jesus as a healer of every illness and infirmity.<sup>13</sup> This iatromagical ritual device appeals to Jesus’s healing in an effort to activate supernatural power for protective effect for the one who wore the amulet.<sup>14</sup>

The gospel passage cited in our papyrus is, in fact, ritually charged: it exhibits an utterance of an “angel of the Lord” (i.e., “Do not fear...”). There are many Christian amulets from late antiquity that invoke the aid of angels (who are often named), and our fragment would fit with the ritual literature of the time.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in

---

*Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes, SD 46 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 5.

<sup>11</sup> See Brice C. Jones, *New Testament Texts on Greek Amulets from Late Antiquity*, LNTS 554 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> David Frankfurter has referred to these abbreviated narratives as *historiolae* in “Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical *Historiola* in Ritual Spells,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin W. Meyer and Paul A. Mirecki, RGRW 129 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 457–76. This seminal article explains from a theoretical perspective how powerful words, episodes, or narratives draw sacred power into the realm of a ritual device’s owner.

<sup>13</sup> For the most recent critical edition of P.Oxy. 1077, see Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 60–65.

<sup>14</sup> For a general discussion of Christian amulets, see Theodore S. de Bruyn and Jitse H. F. Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets and Formularies from Egypt Containing Christian Elements: A Checklist of Papyri, Parchments, Ostraka, and Tablets,” *BASP* 48 (2011): 163–216; Ernst von Dobschütz, “Charms and Amulets (Christian),” *ERE* 3:413–30; Roy Kotansky, “Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets,” in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 107–37; Joseph E. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory*, STAC 84 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

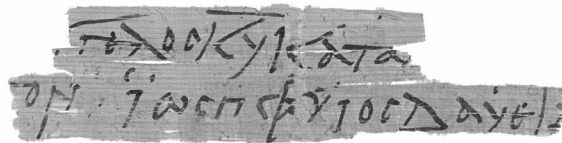
<sup>15</sup> E.g., P.Princ. 107, P.Iand. 6, P.Vindob. G 29831, P.Oxy. 1151, P.Oxy. 5073, the latest editions of which are found in Jones, *New Testament Texts*.

antiquity dreams were vehicles of divine revelation and supernatural assistance, and we encounter them frequently in biblical literature, “pagan” literature, the Greek Magical Papyri, and beyond.<sup>16</sup> The fact that a divine being *speaks* to Joseph within a dream is, therefore, ritually significant.

There is one Christian amulet that serves as a good parallel. P.Oxy. 5073 is a small third-century Greek papyrus amulet that cites Mark 1:1–2, the second verse of which reads: “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, ‘See, I am sending my angel [ἄγγελον] ahead of you, who will prepare your way.’” While not a quotation from Isaiah, the phrase “I am sending my angel” is found in a couple passages in the Hebrew Bible, both of which are placed in the mouth of God (see Exod 23:20, Mal 3:1 LXX). The original editors were surely correct to say that this passage “serves as a guarantee of angelic protection, an assurance from beneficent angels.”<sup>17</sup> While our papyrus does not specify the situation the amulet’s words are meant to resolve or address, the angel in the Matthean account (and in our papyrus) tells Joseph not to be afraid (μὴ φοβηθῆς). It is possible, therefore, that this scriptural passage, like Mark 1:1–2 in P.Oxy. 5073, was reappropriated in the context of a protective ritual.

In summary, while other functions of this papyrus slip cannot be ruled out, the designation of amulet is supported by its ritually charged content (angelic encounter, dream) and format (written only on one side, folded). The extant text is of no real significance to textual criticism, but the papyrus is nonetheless a nice addition to our evidence of late antique Christian artifacts.

## II. TEXT



P.Mich. inv. 4944b, 10.8 × 2.7 cm, sixth–seventh century CE. Image digitally reproduced with the permission of the Papyrus Collection, Graduate Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>16</sup>On dreams in ritual contexts in antiquity, see Samson Eitrem, “Dreams and Divination in Magical Ritual,” in Faraone and Obbink, *Magika Hiera*, 175–87.

<sup>17</sup>Geoffrey S. Smith and Andrew E. Bernhard, “5073,” in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri: Volume LXXVI (Nos. 5072–5100)*, ed. D. Colomo and Juan Chapa, EES.GRM 97 (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2011), 19–23, here 20.

1  
 ἄ]γγελος κυ(ριό)υ κατ' ἄν[α]ρ [ἐ]φ[άνη  
 αὐτῷ λέ]γον· Ἰωσήφ υἱὸς Δαυεῖδ  
 4 μὴ] φ[οβηθῆς

2. ὄναρ

3. λέγων | ἴωσηφ pap. | υἱος pap. | Δαυίδ

An angel of the Lord appeared [to him] in a dream saying, “Joseph, son of David, do [not] fear.”

### III. COMMENTARY

1 There is a vertical stroke visible toward the end of this line, perhaps the descending vertical of τ in ἐνθυμηθέντος.

2 ἄ]γγελος: ἰδού precedes ἄγγελος κυρίου in the New Testament passage. Based on the reconstruction above, there is room for this word. It is interesting to note that, in P.Oxy. 5073, mentioned above, the phrase ἀποστελῶ τὸν ἄγγελόν μου is also preceded by ἰδού.

ἄν[α]ρ: Read ὄναρ. The left hasta of ν is visible following the initial α, signifying that the last α of κατὰ was elided. The descender of ρ is also visible and is positioned precisely where we would expect it to appear. The ο > α interchange, while not all that common, is noted by Francis T. Gignac, *Phonology*, vol. 1 of *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, TDSA 55 (Milan: Cisalpino–La Goliardica, 1976), 287–88, who cites ἀπόσης (for ὀπόσης) in P.Mil. Vogl. 98 and ἀνόματα (for ὀνόματα) in P.Cair.Isid. 29ν; see also P.Oxy. 1478 (ἀνόματος), P.Oxy. 1566 (ἀνομασία), and P.Col. 181 (ἀνόμαται).

[ἐ]φ[άνη]: The long descending stroke of φ is visible; it descends into ι of Δαυεῖδ on the next line.

3 λέ]γον: As Gignac shows, the ω > ο vowel interchange “occurs frequently in all phonetic conditions throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods” (*Phonology*, 275).

Δαυεῖδ: Read Δαυίδ. As in π<sup>1</sup>, the name is written in full here, but it appears as a *nomen sacrum* in Codex Sinaiticus, that is, Δα(υί)δ. In another Christian amulet citing Matt 1:1 (BKT 6.7.1),<sup>18</sup> Δαυίδ is found as Δα(υί)δ.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Schmidt and Wilhelm Schubart, eds. *Altchristliche Texte*, Berliner Klassikertexte 6 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1910).

4 φ[οβηθῆς: It is not impossible that the text ended here, especially if the papyrus functioned as an amulet. The practice of ending a citation before its logical conclusion was not unusual in amulet production; see Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 182 and the papyri cited there. It seems that material deemed irrelevant for the ritual carried out was sometimes omitted, which may be the case here (i.e., the reference to Joseph taking Mary as his wife).