

Notes on the History, Contents and Purpose of the Papyrus Bodmer XIV-XV (P⁷⁵)

The Vatican Library was founded in 1451 by Pope Nicholas V, who, in his farsighted vision of the relations between theology and the humanistic culture of the time, entrusted it with the task of “facilitating the work of scholars.” Today the Library’s collections include a considerable number of rare books and manuscripts, making it one of the most important institutions of its kind in the world. Among its most precious treasures are several manuscripts of remarkable importance for the history of the text of the Bible, such as the so-called “codex B” (*Vat. gr. 1209*) and, since the end of 2006,¹ *Papyrus Bodmer XIV-XV* (P⁷⁵ in the system of sigla commonly used for New Testament papyri, which will be followed here).

When it was written, at the beginning of the third century, P⁷⁵ contained the entirety of the Gospels of Luke and John. Despite the damage caused first by its users, and later by its keepers, about half of the text of each Gospel has been preserved in satisfactory condition down to the present day.

The only edition of P⁷⁵ is from 1961, with a photographic reproduction and a transcription.² Almost half a century after its discovery, the philological importance of this papyrus is now firmly established. However, less attention has been paid to it as a witness to the formation of the New Testament canon and to the use of the Gospels in the liturgical celebrations of the earliest Christian communities.

The Discovery

As with most of the known New Testament papyri, whose number has now surpassed the one hundred mark,³ there are many obscure questions regarding the discovery and the provenance of P⁷⁵. It is likely, however, that this papyrus, like most others, was found in Egypt. It may come from a low hill in central Egypt called Jabal al-Tarif, which is in a region elevated enough to escape the periodical Nile floods; the date of its discovery may be situated with some likelihood around the year 1952.

Other manuscripts, as well as Greek and Coptic archival documents (around 40 volumes in all), have emerged from the same hiding place. It may be that all of them belonged to the library of a nearby Pachomian monastery which is now in ruins, and that they were hidden, presumably

¹ *Papyrus Bodmer XIV-XV* was formally donated to the Holy Father Benedict XVI in January 2007, but it had already been deposited in the Vatican Library at the end of November 2006 (see *L'Osservatore Romano* of November 29th, 2006, p. 7).

² *Papyrus Bodmer XIV, Évangile de Luc, chap. 3-24*, publié par Victor MARTIN et Rodolphe KASSER, Cologny - Genève: Fondation Martin Bodmer, 1961; *Papyrus Bodmer XV, Évangile de Jean, chap. 1-15*, publié par Victor MARTIN et Rodolphe KASSER, Cologny - Genève: Fondation Martin Bodmer, 1961.

³ A handy but somewhat outdated list of papyri may be found in K. ALAND - M. WELTE, *Kurzgefasste Liste der griechischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments*. 2. Aufl. (Arbeiten zur neutestamentlichen Textforschung 1), Berlin - New York: de Gruyter, 1994, pp. 3-16 (P¹-P⁹⁹). This list has been updated and annotated by Peter M. HEAD, “Some Recently Published NT Papyri from Oxyrhynchus: An Overview and Preliminary Assessment,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 51 (2000), pp. 1-16, who presents papyri P¹⁰⁰-P¹¹⁵; see also B.M. METZGER, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 2nd ed., Oxford: OUP, 1968, pp. 247-55, describing papyri P¹-P⁷⁶. The most up-to-date list seems to be that which is maintained by the University of Bremen, available on the internet site <http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/texte/Papyri-list.html> (P¹-P¹²⁴ as of September 9th, 2008).

in a moment of grave difficulty.⁴ In the years 1955-56, most of them were purchased on the antiquities market by two men, the Swiss collector Martin Bodmer and the Irish collector Sir Alfred Chester Beatty. Their respective libraries were in Cologne near Geneva⁵ and in Dublin; but some of the pieces are now kept in other public or private collections.⁶

Contents and Fabrication

As already mentioned, P⁷⁵ originally contained the entirety of the Gospels of Luke and John. This fact is of noteworthy importance for the history of the New Testament canon. However, it may be appropriate first to explain why the manuscript did not include the four Gospels which all Churches recognize as canonical today.

This has to do with the technique which was used in fabricating the volume. The books which were included in the New Testament canon had almost all been composed by the end of the first century:⁷ at a time, that is, when the scroll had been in wide use for a long time in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds⁸ and was the only format which was judged appropriate to works with any literary pretensions (a category which includes the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the Revelation, as well as the books of the Old Testament).

The scroll had many disadvantages, such as the impracticality of having to unroll it and roll it up again when it was to be read or consulted; this also led to rapid wear. Above all, the amount of text which it could contain was rather limited and conditioned the length of literary works, or required that they be subdivided into several books.⁹

The first century saw the appearance of another book format which was easier to handle and more economical: the quire or “booklet” made up of leaves of papyrus, leather or parchment, bound with a thread or simply inserted into a case. This type of book¹⁰ was used especially for less formal kinds of texts such as letters (that is, for all the remaining writings of the New Testament).

⁴ The papyri may have been hidden during the second half of the 7th century, during the consolidation of the Arab presence in Egypt, which had begun with the invasion of 642.

⁵ The Vatican Library also possesses *Papyrus Bodmer 8* (P⁷⁵), the oldest witness of the Epistles of St Peter, donated by Martin Bodmer to Pope Paul VI in 1969. The oldest witness to the Coptic translation of the Minor Prophets (*Pap. Vat. copto 9*), which was purchased on the antiquities market, probably comes from the same trove.

⁶ See James M. ROBINSON, “The Discovering and Marketing of Coptic Manuscripts: The Nag Hammadi Codices and the Bodmer Papyri,” *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*; Birger A. PEARSON & James E. GOEHRING, editors (Studies in Antiquity & Christianity), Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986, pp. 2-25; James M. ROBINSON, *The Pachomian Monastic Library at the Chester Beatty Library and the Bibliothèque Bodmer* (Occasional Papers of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity 19), Claremont: IAC, [1990].

⁷ At present the Second Epistle of Peter is the only book for which a later date is envisaged, namely the first quarter of the second century.

⁸ The codicological differences between the two types of scroll have been described by C. SIRAT, “La bible hébraïque: le rouleau d’Isaïe,” *Mise en page et mise en texte du livre manuscrit*, edited by Henri-Jean MARTIN et Jean VEZIN, Paris: Cercle de la Librairie-Promodis, 1990, pp. 56-9. The most important difference is the material used for the scrolls: papyrus in the Greco-Roman world, cured skins in the Hebrew one.

⁹ For this reason it has been supposed that the two parts of the most ambitious literary project of the New Testament, namely the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, were conceived as a single work, but that the two writings came to be transmitted separately because each one is of the length of a standard scroll.

¹⁰ It is mentioned in the New Testament: see 2 *Tm* 4:13: *φέρε καὶ τὰ βιβλία, μάλιστα τὰς μεμβράνας* “bring also the books, especially the parchments.” *Μεμβράναι* “skins” is a loanword from Latin which quickly acquired the meaning “notebook” or, simply, “notes.” The author of the Pastoral Letters intended to endorse the role of Timothy as “secretary” of St Paul and thus as a trustworthy depositary of his teaching.

The new format had a number of advantages over the roll: not only a much lower cost¹¹ and a greater ease of handling, but above all the possibility of transcribing a greater quantity of text in a single volume. The superiority of the codex over the scroll was understood very early on by the Christians, whose community life and evangelizing mission¹² required, for pastoral and apologetic reasons, a constant recourse to books, and in particular to the Scriptures. The adoption of the codex by the Christians was so immediate and so complete¹³ that it has been thought that it was in fact invented in Christian circles and adopted as a distinctive mark, in a sort of veiled polemic with the surrounding Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures, which were still tied to the scroll.¹⁴ However, the available evidence now indicates that the codex has pagan, perhaps Roman origins, since it is already mentioned by the Latin poet Martial (40-ca. 101 A.D.),¹⁵ so that its adoption by the earliest Christian communities seems to have been motivated by practical rather than by ideological considerations.

However, the codex itself, until well into the third century, had a fairly limited capacity (though it was always twice that of a scroll), due to the technique which was used, namely the stacking of folded sheets of papyrus to form a single quire.¹⁶ For mechanical reasons, it is impossible to stack and fold more than about fifty sheets, whose height and width are determined by aesthetic and commercial considerations.

As a result, a manuscript such as P⁷⁵ could not contain more than two Gospels.¹⁷ However, nothing prevents us from supposing that it might have been accompanied by another volume, entirely lost today, which contained the first two Gospels, those of Matthew and Mark.

A Witness to the Canon of the Gospels

The testimony of P⁷⁵ is exceptional in this connection. Very early on, beginning in the last years of the first century, in the liturgy and in the catechesis, the Christians began to use certain apostolic writings alongside the Hebrew Bible (which they knew almost exclusively through the Greek translation of the Septuagint), thus recognizing the inspired character of these writings. The outcome of this long and complex process, which later ended in the establishment of the New

¹¹ The lower cost and other advantages of the codex are partly due to the better utilization of the space available for writing, since in a scroll only one side was usually written upon, while the verso remained unused.

¹² Note the correspondence with the theme of the present Synod: "The Word of God in the Life and in the Mission of the Church."

¹³ The earliest known Gospel fragment, *Pap. Ryl. Gk. 457* (P⁷⁵), which contains a few words from Jn 18, comes from a codex written perhaps around the year 160. On the codex as a book format, the classic study is E.G. TURNER, *The Typology of the Early Codex*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977. For an update specifically concerned with New Testament manuscripts, see also S.J. VOICU, "Le rôle des centres de copie dans la fixation du canon du Nouveau Testament," *Le canon du Nouveau Testament. Regards nouveaux sur l'histoire de sa formation*. Sous la direction de G. ARAGIONE - E. JUNOD - E. NORELLI (Le monde de la Bible 54), Genève: Labor et Fides, 2005, pp. 221-35.

¹⁴ See C.H. ROBERTS - T.C. SKEAT, *The Birth of the Codex*, London: The British Academy, 1983.

¹⁵ See J. VAN HAELST, "Les origines du codex," *Les débuts du codex. Actes de la journée organisée à Paris les 3 et 4 juillet 1985*, éd. par A. BLANCHARD (Bibliologia 9), Turnhout: Brepols, 1989, pp. 13-35, esp. pp. 20-3.

¹⁶ This format is analogous to that of a modern school notebook or magazine.

¹⁷ The parchment manuscript begins to appear in the mid-third century, under improved economic conditions. Its construction out of multiple quires resembles that of a modern printed book, and its capacity is considerably superior, as is demonstrated by the two great Bibles of the fourth century, the *codices Vaticanus* and *Sinaiticus* (respectively *Vat. gr. 1209* and British Library, *Add. MS 43725*).

Testament canon,¹⁸ is much better known than the phases of the process itself.

However, we know, for example, that St Clement of Rome's *Epistle to the Corinthians* attributes a "normative" value to St Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians (and also, by implication, to his Epistle to the Romans: see *I Clementis* 47,1). A few years later, the Second Epistle of Peter reiterates the same idea, unfortunately without going into detail (see *2 Pt* 3:15-16).

The earliest witness to the use of the Gospels in the community goes back to the middle of the second century, when St Justin notes that the "memoirs of the Apostles" were read on Sundays in the liturgical assemblies (*Apologia*, 67,3). A comparison with Justin's overall usage indicates that the word "memoirs" refers to Gospel-type material,¹⁹ but that the apologist preferred to avoid the word "Gospel" (literally "good news"), which might have been misunderstood by his pagan readership.²⁰

Around the year 180, a famous passage in St Irenaeus of Lyons states that there are four and only four Gospels, mentioning their authors (that is, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), and interpreting this number as a symbol of universality (*Adversus Haereses*, III, 1,8). The polemical context of this work makes it practically certain that St Irenaeus, true to his policy of shunning innovation, is simply reporting here what had, in his day, become a stable Church tradition.²¹

A near contemporary of St Irenaeus is Tatian, a disciple of St Justin who, in his *Diatessaron*, melds the four Gospels into a single narrative, hinting, as it were, at the existence of an age-old problem, that of the divergences between the Gospel accounts.

At the beginning of the third century, a few years after St Irenaeus, we find two events of the greatest importance for the history of the New Testament, namely the first list of the books of the New Testament, the so-called *Muratorian Canon*,²² which shows that the situation regarding the acceptance of certain writings was still fluid; and the first commentary on the Gospel of John, which is the work of the Gnostic Heracleon and represents the beginning of the rich tradition of patristic systematic exegesis. Above all, it also shows that the position formulated by St Irenaeus was now accepted by all.

¹⁸ For the Catholic Church, the process was not formally concluded until the 16th century with the decisions taken at the Council of Trent.

¹⁹ Besides passages which are certainly quoted from the canonical Gospels, St Justin also quotes gospel traditions which may have been transmitted orally, or which come from lost documents.

²⁰ For a particularly clear example, see *Apologia* 66,3 Οἱ γὰρ ἀπόστολοι ἐν τοῖς γενομένοις ὑπ' αὐτῶν ἀπομνημονεύμασιν, ἃ καλεῖται εὐαγγέλια "The Apostles, in their memoirs, which are called Gospels;" see G. ARAGIONE, "Justin, 'philosophe' chrétien et les 'Mémoires des apôtres' qui sont appelées Évangiles," *Apocrypha* 15 (2004), pp. 41-56. One should note that the earliest witnesses to the normative character of the New Testament writings constantly give priority to a pastoral and liturgical perspective, accompanied by a concern for the orthodoxy of the texts, whereas today it is more common to interpret the notion of canonicity as a juridical concept or as a strictly theological and dogmatic one.

²¹ In fact, despite his lyrical language, St Irenaeus adopts and confirms a very rigid concept of the tetramorphous Gospel ("neither more than four, nor less than four, and only these four"), denying for all time any ecclesiastical value to any other gospels which existed in his day (regardless of their literary qualities), e.g. the *Gospel of Peter*, which was used by certain churches in the region of Antioch around 170 (see É. JUNOD, "Comment l'Évangile de Pierre s'est trouvé écarté des lectures de l'Église dans les années 200," *Le mystère apocryphe. Introduction à une littérature méconnue*, J.-D. KAESTLI - D. MARGUERAT (éd.) (Essais Bibliques 26), Genève: Labor et Fides, 1995, pp. 43-6), or the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*. The voice of St Irenaeus is a strong call to reject without hesitation the proposals to "reformulate" the canon of the New Testament, and in particular that of the Gospels, which, alas, have been recurring in recent years.

²² Its attribution to Victorinus of Pettau has been recently defended by Jonathan J. ARMSTRONG, "Victorinus of Pettau as the Author of the Canon Muratori," *Vigiliae Christianae* 62 (2008), pp. 1-34.

At this point we may return to our demonstration of the importance of P⁷⁵: before its discovery, we had a theoretical notion of the existence of a canon of the four Gospels, but no concrete evidence for the affirmation by St Irenaeus, and only a vague idea of how the Gospels looked to the Church and to the faithful.

A Bit of Philology

As already stated, P⁷⁵, whose fabrication must be placed in the first years of the third century, possesses an exceptional value from a philological point of view, not only because of its relative antiquity (it is, indeed, only slightly more than a century younger than the redaction of the Gospel of John, which tradition and modern exegesis both place around the year 90) and because of the quality of its text (an example of this is the not yet harmonized text of the Lukan version of the *Lord's Prayer*, *Lk* 11:1-4), but above all because of a fact which is in a certain sense rather odd, namely its agreements with the so-called "codex B" of the Bible (*Vat. gr. 1209*), of the fourth century. Recent research has shown that, despite the chronological gap and the geographical distance (P⁷⁵ is from Egypt, while "codex B" was produced in Palestine),²³ both manuscripts have preserved essentially the same type of text.²⁴

In any case, its proximity to "codex B" does not imply that both manuscripts are identical. Indeed, P⁷⁵ occasionally presents readings which link it to the later Coptic tradition, for example when it gives the name of *N<in>ive* to the anonymous rich man in the parable of poor Lazarus (*Lk* 16:19-31); in *Jn* 10:7, instead of "I am the gate of the sheep", the papyrus gives the variant "I am the shepherd..." These are readings which are otherwise practically confined to the Coptic tradition.

At another level, both manuscripts agree (together with many other manuscripts and patristic authors) in omitting the episode of the adulterous woman (*Jn* 7:53-8:11), whose style is noticeably different from that of the rest of the Gospel of John. This isolated Gospel fragment, which is well attested already in the fourth century, originally belonged to none of the four canonical Gospels; study of the manuscript tradition has shown that it was variously transcribed in different contexts (usually after *Jn* 7:52; but also after *Jn* 8:3; 7:36; 21:25; or even after *Lk* 21:38 or *Lk* 24:53).²⁵

These observations, taken together, are very reassuring as regards the transmission of the New Testament, if one thinks of the very small number of intermediaries which must be posited between the archetype of the Gospels and P⁷⁵. The papyrus offers variants from which we may deduce that it was copied from an Egyptian exemplar; this exemplar in turn must have been copied from an older manuscript of the two Gospels in which the "Coptic" variants had not yet been introduced. But this third manuscript, which was probably not produced in Egypt, was not descended separately from the lost archetypes of each of the two Gospels, but rather from a collection of the four canonical Gospels, which must have been formed in the first half of the second century. Even if we admit that the copies were made in rapid succession (and the reports which we have about the spread of Christianity in Egypt would hardly contradict this notion), it is difficult to imagine that the Greek

²³ See T.C. SKEAT, "The Codex Sinaiticus, the Codex Vaticanus and Constantine," *Journal of Theological Studies* 50 (1999), pp. 583-625.

²⁴ See Calvin L. PORTER, "Papyrus Bodmer XV (P⁷⁵) and the Text of Codex Vaticanus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962), pp. 363-76; C.M. MARTINI, *Il problema della recensionalità del codice B alla luce del papiro Bodmer XIV* (Analecta biblica 26), Rome: PIB, 1966.

²⁵ See the critical apparatus in the *Nuovo Testamento greco-italiano*, a cura di B. CORSANI e C. BUZZETTI..., Roma: Società Biblica Britannica e Forestiera, 1996, p. 273. A useful treatment of this passage may be found in G. ZERVOS, "Caught in the Act: Mary and the Adulteress," *Apocrypha* 15 (2004), pp. 57-114.

text of the Gospels could have reached a fairly peripheral location like the one in which P⁷⁵ was used, in an otherwise unknown Christian community, in a period of less than fifty years.

Early History (Purpose and Use)

The origin of P⁷⁵ and the earliest phases of its history may thus be reconstructed in a fairly satisfactory manner. The papyrus was copied by a professional scribe, although it is not a luxury product but rather a simple one destined for practical use. This may be deduced from its format (ca. 23 x 12 cm), from the fact that its margins are very narrow, and from the absence of any decoration. In fact, the only space left empty is made up of two blank lines which mark the passage from the Gospel of Luke to the Gospel of John.

Very likely P⁷⁵ was copied in order to be used for liturgical celebrations in a Christian community. With the passing of time, however (perhaps even after a short time), the manuscript became worn and began to lose pages. Only then, when it had become practically unusable, was the decision taken to bind it. The remains of the first and last folios were glued together to reinforce a very simple binding. Why? Partly because the Christians, like the Jews, were disinclined to throw sacred texts into the rubbish, and certainly would not have burned them. But very likely also because the manuscript had become a precious relic, which had perhaps come to be used as an amulet applied to the sick in order to plead for healing, according to a practice which is well attested down to the present day.

Once the manuscript was reduced to this condition (one quite similar to its present state, in fact), it was preserved, as already mentioned, together with many of the other Bodmer and Chester Beatty papyri, probably in a monastery which followed the rule of St Pachomius, the founder of Egyptian monasticism who died in 347. This means that the manuscript arrived at the monastery after it had already been copied and used for about a century in a church or chapel to whose identity no clues have remained.

The “New” Fragments

The extent of the papyrus which was donated to the Vatican Library is not identical with that of the manuscript described in the *editio princeps* of 1961. Indeed, the rather surprising discovery has been made that, for unknown reasons, certain fairly extensive fragments were left out of the edition. These fragments have been recently published and seem to come from the ancient binding, which was restored in the early 1980's.²⁶ However, for at least one of these fragments, which was mentioned as early as 1976, this explanation is unlikely.²⁷

In addition, there are vague allusions in the bibliography to the existence of around thirty further minuscule fragments (containing an average of one or two letters on each side) which have never been published.

No doubt it is fair to say that research on *Papyrus Bodmer XIV-XV* has not yet reached its conclusion...

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²⁶ See Marie-Luise LAKMANN, “Papyrus Bodmer XIV-XV (P⁷⁵). Neue Fragmente,” *Museum Helveticum* 64 (2007), pp. 22-41; J. M. ROBINSON, “Fragments from the Cartonnage of P⁷⁵,” *Harvard Theological Review* 101 (2008), pp. 231-252.

²⁷ See Sarah Alexander EDWARDS, “P⁷⁵ under the Magnifying Glass,” *Novum Testamentum* 18 (1976), pp. 190-212 (with a drawing of the fragment).