

The Bodmer and Mississippi Collection of Biblical and Christian Texts

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IT IS NOWADAYS a temptation in offering a paper on Biblical archaeology to deal with some aspects of the discoveries at the Dead Sea sites. I am, however, going to resist this temptation and shall discuss another group of discoveries which would have attracted more attention had the Dead Sea finds not stolen much of the limelight.¹

Biblical scholars have, none the less, heard something of the important Greek and Coptic papyri in the collection belonging to Dr. Martin Bodmer at Geneva, Switzerland, and have been able to study the published transcripts of some of these texts. Not all of them have been aware that large parts of two Coptic manuscripts belonging to the same find are to be found in another collection at the University of Mississippi.² It is the purpose of this paper to determine what can be divined about the history and importance of these texts from antiquity.

Some ten years ago we first heard rumours of the discovery of a number of important Greek papyri which had found a home in Dr. Bodmer's collection. Gradually information became more precise and a picture of the nature of this collection appeared before our eyes.

A few years afterward we began to hear of another collection acquired late in 1955 at the University of Mississippi. One manuscript is divided between the Mississippi and the Bodmer Collections; there is good reason for thinking that the two Mississippi codices and the bulk of the Bodmer manuscripts come from the same find.

I shall not give detailed lists of the items in the two collections but shall comment on certain characteristics of the find and on the significance of certain of its features. Details about the manuscripts at

¹ This paper was given as the Winslow lecture at the Episcopal Theological School at Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 27 April, 1961. I am grateful to the School for the invitation to give this lecture, to Dr. M. Bodmer for certain corrections and to Professor W. H. Willis for many comments and improvements.

² (To the same find also belongs a Coptic Joshua recently acquired by the library of Sir Chester Beatty, in Dublin.—Editor)

Oxford, Mississippi, will be found in a lecture by Professor W. H. Willis of the University of Mississippi.³ A list of the published Bodmer texts will be found at the end of this paper. Professor W. Till of Vienna has given details of the Bodmer Coptic texts.⁴

Where were the texts found? More than once in connection with the Bodmer papyri the statement has been made that their provenance is unknown. This is a correct and very proper avowal of the state of affairs. There are, however, several pieces of evidence that perhaps give us a clue.

First, P. Bodmer I, a papyrus of part of the Iliad, is on the verso of a roll on the recto of which is an administrative register of A.D. 208–9 connected with Panopolis. Panopolis is an ancient town of the east side of the Nile in upper Egypt, a little north of Thebes. Its modern name is Akhmim. It has, however, since been questioned whether the Homer is part of the same find as the Biblical and Christian texts.

Second, M. Michel Testuz has drawn attention⁵ to the tendency of the scribe of 1, 2 Peter to confuse *Γ* and *Κ* and on one occasion *Δ* and *Ρ*. M. Kasser, who was working on the Coptic texts in the Bodmer Collection, pointed out that this was a characteristic of Coptic scribes in the neighborhood of Thebes. The value of this indication is doubted by other Coptic scholars.

This brings us to our third piece of evidence, the evidence of Coptic dialect. Most of the Coptic texts are in Sahidic, and the Coptic Proverbs, P. Bodmer VI, is in an archaic form of the dialect influenced by Akhmimic and with resemblances to Old Coptic. P. Bodmer III, however, which contains John and Genesis i–iv.2, is in Bohairic, the dialect of the north, though in a Bohairic which reveals Sahidic influences and features. If we may treat this Bohairic manuscript as an intruder, the evidence of dialect is in favor of a provenance in the south.

The value of these hints is uncertain, but as far as they go, they point to the southern half of Egypt and within this area to a locality between Panopolis and Thebes. It is possible that documentary papyri, which may be part of the find, when examined may bring confirmation and precision to this tentative suggestion or may show it to be mistaken. We shall see the bearing of this suggestion shortly.

³ William H. Willis, "The New Collections of Papyri at the University of Mississippi." *Proceedings of the IX International Congress of Papyrology* (Oslo 1961) 382–392.

⁴ Walter Till, "Coptic Biblical Fragments Published after Vaschalde's Lists," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 42 (1959) 220–240, especially 227, 236, 240.

⁵ *Papyrus Bodmer VII–IX* (Geneva 1959) 32.

Before dealing with some of the more important texts in these two collections I must remark on one curious feature of the find. It consists of three groups of texts: (i) Classical Greek texts, (ii) Greek Biblical and Christian texts, (iii) Coptic Biblical and Christian texts. It is not unknown for Classical and Christian texts to be associated. There is the British Museum papyrus, Inv. No. 1532, of which there is also a fragment in Florence, *PSI* xii.1292. On the recto is an epitome of Livy published as P. Oxy. iv.668 and on the verso large fragments of the Epistle to the Hebrews, published as P. Oxy. iv.657. Both texts seem to be of the early fourth century. Greek and Coptic texts frequently appear in the same manuscript. One example will suffice. The same Hamburg papyrus of about A.D. 300 contains a large piece of the *Acta Pauli* in Greek, Canticles and Lamentations in Old Fayyumic, Ecclesiastes first in Greek and next in Old Fayyumic. What is strange about our texts is that we find all three, Classical Greek, Christian Greek and Coptic, together.

Let us try to imagine the circumstances in which such a library might come into being. First, the oldest texts in the collection are, as we shall see, Greek, both Christian and Classical. Next, the later their date, the more the Coptic predominates. I know of no Greek texts in the collection which can be dated to the fifth century though this seems a likely enough date for some of the Coptic items. This observation suggests that we have a monument of the gradual triumph of Coptic over Greek in the Christianity of upper Egypt during the Byzantine period.

As another example of this process we may recall Dioscorus of Aphroditopolis who wrote Greek verse of a sort in the second half of the sixth century. Literary and non-literary texts survive from him in the Cairo, British Museum, Berlin and other collections. I may quote from H. J. Milne⁶; "A Greek-Coptic glossary by Dioscorus (No. 188), published by H. I. Bell and W. E. Crum in *Aegyptus*, vi (1925), pp. 177-226 gives a glimpse into Dioscorus's workshop. It would be difficult to find a more perfect example of a literary tradition in the last stage of decay, although allowance must no doubt be made for the fact that Dioscorus was a Copt and had no innate feeling for the Greek language. He seems to have been overjoyed at the mere achievement of a metrical line, and, whether from a desire to spare his harassed Muse or from sheer complacency, never hesitates to

⁶ H. J. M. Milne, *Catalogue of the Literary Papyri in the British Museum* (London 1927) 68.

repeat his favorite effects. At no moment has he any real control of thought, diction, grammar, metre, or meaning.”

This consideration does not, however, enable us to write the history of the texts in detail. Before we make any suggestions about that history we must look at some of the texts themselves.

First, let us take the non-Biblical texts. These are the *Acts of Paul*, the *Nativity of Mary* or *Protevangelium Jacobi*, the *Ode of Solomon*, Melito's *Homily on the Pascha*, a fragment of a hymn and the *Apology of Phileas*. The *Nativity of Mary* is a known text; the interest of the manuscript lies in its date, third century A.D., and the form of the *Nativity* that it presents.

Of Melito the two collections have between them two manuscripts. The Greek manuscript, P. Bodmer XIII, fills in all the gaps except the first in the only previously known continuous Greek manuscript, the Michigan-Chester Beatty papyrus. The Coptic text at the University of Mississippi with some fragments at Geneva is a valuable witness to the text.

P. Bodmer X gives the Greek text for the apocryphal correspondence of St. Paul and the Corinthians, which is usually regarded as part of the *Acts of Paul*. The editor, M. Testuz, however finds reasons in the papyrus for treating the correspondence as an originally independent work of about the same date, *ca.* A.D. 175. There is also a Coptic papyrus at Geneva with fragments of the *Acts of Paul* giving a long stretch, hitherto unknown, of the text immediately before the Greek fragment in the Hamburg papyrus mentioned earlier.

The Greek text of the *Ode of Solomon*, P. Bodmer XI, is of great importance for those concerned with the origin of these well-known poems. The fragment of a hymn, P. Bodmer XII, and the *Apology of Phileas* (still unpublished) will likewise interest patristic scholars.

The Biblical texts are fewer than the non-Biblical but are very significant. First to be published was P. Bodmer II (1956) with a supplementary fascicle of 1958. This papyrus is a codex of about A.D. 200 or a little later, now containing John i.1–vi.11, lacuna of two leaves, vi.35–xiv.26, and considerable fragments of xv–xxi. Next is P. Bodmer XIV–XV of about the same date containing Luke iii.18–22, 34–iv.2, lacuna of one leaf, iv.34–v.10, 37–xviii.18, lacuna of four leaves?, xxii.4–John xi.45, 48–57, xii.3–xiii.11, lacuna of one leaf, xiv.8–30, xv.7–8. The third Greek Biblical text is 1, 2 Peter, Jude (P. Bodmer VIII, VII) of the third century. The fourth Greek Biblical text, P. Bodmer IX,

the only one published from the Old Testament, contains Psalms xxxiii and xxxiv, from perhaps the beginning of the fourth century.⁷

Among the Coptic texts are the Bohairic John, the Sahidic Exodus, the Old Sahidic Proverbs mentioned above and the two Mississippi codices. The first, the Crosby Codex, in addition to Melito, contains 2 Maccabees v.27–vii.41 (the Maccabean Martyrs), 1 Peter and Jonah, of perhaps the second half of the third century. Mississippi Codex II now contains the end of Jeremiah, Lamentations, the Epistles of Jeremy and Baruch and may belong to the second half of the fourth century. When it was complete it contained all the Jeremiah corpus. The first half of this codex, comprising the bulk of Jeremiah, is in the Bodmer Library.

Let us compare this library with another similar one, the Chester Beatty-Michigan papyri. When these papyri were complete they contained the following texts:

<i>Book</i>	<i>Papyrus</i>	<i>Date</i>
1. Genesis	P. Chester Beatty IV	IV ¹
2. Genesis	P. Chester Beatty V	III ²
3. Numbers–Deuteronomy	P. Chester Beatty VI + P. Michigan	II ¹
4. Isaiah	P. Chester Beatty VII + P. Michigan + P. Merton + PSI.xii.1273	III ¹
5. Jeremiah	P. Chester Beatty VIII	ca. 200
6. Ezekiel, Daniel (LXX), Esther	P. Chester Beatty IX + X + P. Scheide	III ¹
7. Ecclesiasticus	P. Chester Beatty XI	IV ¹
8. Gospels & Acts	P. Chester Beatty I + P. Vindob. 31974	ca. 200
9. Pauline Epistles	P. Chester Beatty II + P. Michigan 222	ca. 200
10. Revelation	P. Chester Beatty III	ca. 250
11. Enoch, Melito & Apocryphal Ezekiel	P. Chester Beatty XII + P. Michigan 5552–3	IV ²

⁷ A fifth Greek Biblical text, P. Bodmer XVII, of a date not earlier than the seventh century, contains Acts with some fragmentation and pieces of the Catholic Epistles, of which James is best preserved. But this papyrus does not belong to the original find, and was acquired later.

We notice at once the complete absence of Coptic texts. Next there is a remarkable predominance of Biblical texts. In the New Testament the Pastoral and General Epistles are lacking and they may not have been regarded as essential to a New Testament about A.D. 250. There are big gaps in the Old Testament, the most striking of which is Psalms. Thirdly, if we except these fourth-century codices, the second Genesis, the Ecclesiasticus and the non-Biblical codex, the whole library may be said to date from before the persecution of Diocletian, when the Roman government required Christians to surrender their Scriptures. Somehow or other this Christian Biblical library came through that storm intact or almost intact.

In the Isaiah codex is a number of Coptic glosses. They are in Old Fayyumic and are probably of the third century, perhaps some of the oldest Christian Coptic known. We know something about early Christianity in the Fayyum. In the persecution under Decius, A.D. 250, all inhabitants of the Empire were required to offer sacrifice and were given certificates (*libelli*) that they had done so, which they were to produce when authority required them. Our largest collection of such *libelli* comes from the Fayyum and its neighborhood. Professor J. R. Knipfing's edition of these texts⁸ gives a good picture of their nature. He suspected that two or three of these certificates had been issued to Christians, and it is known from other sources that Christians did fraudulently obtain such *libelli*. There is at least this evidence of Christianity in the Fayyum or its near neighborhood in the middle years of the third century. Perhaps it was from Christians of the Fayyum that this Christian Biblical library survived.

On the other hand we may suppose that in the Bodmer-Mississippi Library, if we may so call it, we have one or two survivors only from another Christian Biblical library which was not so fortunate—that in fact most of the Biblical volumes fell victims to the inquisition for the Scriptures in the persecution of Diocletian. This supposition is confirmed by one or two considerations. First, even among the texts which may reasonably be placed before A.D. 303, the Scriptures are in a minority: P. Bodmer II (John), VII–VIII (Jude, 1, 2 Peter), IX (Psalms 33, 34), XIV–XV (Luke–John), against P. Bodmer V (Nativity of Mary), X (Correspondence with the Corinthians), XI (Ode of Solomon), XII (Fragment of a Hymn), XIII (Homily of Melito). Of these the Ode of

⁸ J. R. Knipfing, "The Libelli of the Decian Persecution," *Harvard Theological Review* 16 (1923) 345–390.

Solomon could pass as not Christian at all and the Fragment of a Hymn might easily get by with a little goodwill. On the other hand, the papyrus of Luke–John, like the confessor bishops at the Council of Nicaea, bears the marks of harsh treatment. When it was found it was a book already mutilated, running from Luke iii to John xv, as its binding indicated. It had apparently lost the rest of its contents in antiquity. Perhaps it was only partly saved from destruction in the time of Diocletian.

Whatever we may think of this conjecture it is hard to believe that the surviving body of Greek texts represents the normal proportions of a Christian library in the latter part of the third and early part of the fourth century. This consideration is especially weighty as there is nothing to suggest that this library was other than a library of orthodox literature. There are no Gnostic or other heretical works in it. We cannot then explain the proportion of Greek texts in the library as due to the abnormal character of the Christianity implied by it. The destruction of the Scriptures under Diocletian remains an obvious explanation.

If the larger number of the Greek Biblical codices that, we suggest, may have belonged to the library in the third century perished in the persecution of Diocletian, it is possible to conjecture that they did not perish without a memorial. The evidence for this guess is to be found in the text of the surviving manuscripts, especially in P. Bodmer II and P. Bodmer XIV–VI.

In contrast to *P*⁴⁵, the Chester Beatty Papyrus of the Gospel and Acts, the two Bodmer Papyri closely resemble the Egyptian text as it is to be found in **NB** and the Coptic versions. This is the general impression one gets from the detailed studies of the text of the Bodmer John in recent years. It can be confirmed for the Bodmer Luke–John.

It would be generally agreed that the Nestle text, resting as it does on the critical editions of Tischendorf, Westcott and Hort, and Weiss, rests principally on **NB**. A collation of the Bodmer Luke–John (*P*⁷⁵) with this text reveals, once we have put aside sheer mistakes and trivialities of spelling, surprisingly few departures from it. Some of these departures are readings peculiar to the papyrus. Others bring it closer to the Coptic versions.

Let me give some examples of this last feature, first among them two readings where it goes with the Coptic versions alone. In the story of Dives and Lazarus, in the Sahidic version, Dives at Luke

xvi.19 is given the name Nineve. This now appears in the Bodmer Luke–John in Greek (*ονοματ<ι ν>ινευησ*), bearing out the statement of the scholia *ἐν τισιν ἀντιγράφοις τοῦνομα νινεύησ λεγόμενον*.

Secondly, at John x.7 Jesus says, according to all our Greek texts, “I am the door of the sheep” (*ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ θύρα τῶν προβάτων*). The Sahidic and one form of the Akhmimic Coptic have “I am the shepherd of the sheep.” Some scholars were inclined to treat this as a lucky guess of the Coptic translators. Now the Bodmer Luke–John gives us the Greek equivalent of the Coptic “*ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ποιμὴν τῶν προβάτων*.” Whatever the claims of the reading to originality, it is not a lucky guess of Coptic translators but a reading existing in Greek about A.D. 200. Quite apart from illustrating the relation between the papyrus and the Coptic versions, these two readings are evidence in favor of the view that the translators did not make substantial innovations in their text when they translated it, though of course they had to adapt their originals to the idiom of the Coptic dialects.

Let us take a few readings which the Bodmer Papyri share with only a few manuscripts mainly of the Alexandrian type. At John viii.57 most of our manuscripts read “Thou art not yet fifty years old and hast thou seen Abraham?”, *καὶ Ἀβρααμ ἑώρακας*; \aleph^* 0124 read *ἑώρακεν σέ*, “has Abraham seen thee?” This reading occurred also in the Sahidic and Akhmimic John (*ac*²) as well as in the Sinaitic Syriac. It now turns up also in *P*⁷⁵ and in the Bodmer Bohairic.

At John xiii.5 most of our texts have “he poured water into the basin,” *εἰς τὸν νιπτῆρα*; but *P*⁶⁶ and the Bodmer Bohairic have the reading *ποδονιπτῆρα*, “footbasin.” The origin of the reading is uncertain, but in any case we have another example of close contact between the Greek Bodmer texts and the Coptic versions.

John iv.11 begins “The woman says to him,” but in *P*⁷⁵ B *ac*² and *sy*^s, *ἡ γυνή*, “the woman” is left out, and so our editors print for the most part, “She says to him.” Whether the longer or the shorter reading is right, again a Coptic version and one of the Bodmer papyri are in agreement.

In general, except where a Bodmer papyrus stands alone or almost alone, it seems to have support in its reading from the Coptic versions. As we have seen, *P*^{66,75} sometimes stand alone except for the Coptic. These considerations are in favor of the suggestion that *P*^{66,75} are just the kind of manuscripts from which the Coptic versions were made.

At this point we are approaching a disputed point in the history of

Christianity in Egypt—the date of the translation of the Bible into the native language. A certain amount of the evidence will turn on the Coptic evidence, and here we find that Coptic scholars are divided. Some argue that the Coptic versions, or at any rate the oldest of them, were made before the third century. Others maintain that it was in the course of the third century that they came into being. The late Dr. Paul E. Kahle in his work on the Coptic texts from Bala'izah argued strongly for the latter conclusion,⁹ and I accept his view.

If the Coptic versions came into being in the third century, manuscripts written about A.D. 200 would be old enough to serve as Greek originals of such versions. As we have seen, the text of the Bodmer manuscripts has close similarities to that implied by the Coptic. We may then regard these Greek manuscripts as entitled by their age and texts to represent to us the kind of originals from which the Coptic versions were made. To that extent we may claim that the Greek manuscripts of Upper and Middle Egypt which fell victims to the persecution of Diocletian or to time have left a memorial behind them in the Coptic versions which are becoming increasingly known to us with each large discovery of texts from Christian Egypt.

Having touched on the relation of our Greek Bodmer papyri to the Coptic New Testament, let us return to a consideration of the significance of these papyri in other directions. For we would expect papyri of this date to be significant.

First let us give ourselves a warning. *P*^{66,75} with *P*⁴⁵ are our oldest papyri of any size for the Gospels and Acts. As we have seen, *P*^{66,75} agree with our Greek Alexandrian manuscripts of the fourth century and later. Westcott and Hort held that the Alexandrian manuscripts were right, and it is easy to be encouraged by the two Bodmer papyri in the view that Westcott and Hort were justified.

This, however, would be jumping to conclusions. If we think for a minute, we shall see that it is only a chapter of accidents that has given us these two papyri with this kind of text. If we go by the evidence available, there must have been about A.D. 200 New Testament papyri in being with the same varieties of text as are known to us from manuscripts of the fourth century or later. If Italy had enjoyed the conditions which make Egypt so likely a place for the survival of papyri, it is probable that we would have had papyri of early date

⁹ Paul E. Kahle, *Bala'izah, Coptic Texts from Deir el-Bala'izah in Upper Egypt I* (Oxford 1954) 257–268.

from Italy with a text like that of Codex Bezae and the Latin New Testament. Indeed it is not impossible that such texts may be found in Egypt. *P*⁴⁵ has not an Alexandrian but a Caesarean kind of text, and there are later manuscripts from Egypt which also have non-Alexandrian texts. We do not need to be swept off our feet by our two papyri because of their early date. Even when they agree they may still be wrong. For example at John iv.1 both read *ὁ κύριος* instead of *ὁ Ἰησοῦς*, which Johannine usage seems to require.

This conclusion is reinforced by another. I may best put it forward in the words of Dr. H. J. Vogels¹⁰: "Before we begin to explain the most important rules for textual criticism and their application, it is advisable to preface some remarks about sources of error. We have to distinguish among variants between unintentional errors, unavoidable as these are in the reproduction of a text by hand, and deliberate corrections, *i.e.* readings that cannot be caused by an error of a scribe, but must depend on deliberation and purpose. The distinction between the two kinds may sometimes well be a difficult one. For the most part it is not and it is always important. The number of readings which we can regard only as deliberate conjectures is considerably greater than those which merely reveal scribal errors. All deliberate conjectures are old. None of them as far as I can see is later than the fourth century, and by far the greatest number, if not all, go back to the second century. On the other hand, scribal errors are naturally to be found as long as the text is copied. Yet there is a number of widespread mistakes of respectable antiquity which ought to find particular notice in what follows."

As I have argued in a paper, "Atticism and the Text of the New Testament," to be published shortly,¹¹ further research only underlines Dr. Vogels' opinion. Apart from errors which can occur anywhere as long as books are copied by hand, almost all variants can be presumed to have been created by A.D. 200. Further, most of the types of text seem to be in being by this date too. Accordingly we cannot regard attestation by these two papyri as a substitute for considering each reading on its merits.

In another direction the papyri bring precision. As they date from about A.D. 200, roughly a century divides them from the writing of John, and they enable us to see clearly what is happening during that

¹⁰ Heinrich J. Vogels, *Handbuch der Textkritik des Neuen Testament*² (Bonn 1955) 162.

¹¹ To appear in the Festschrift for Professor J. Schmid of Munich.

century. Their variations are principally linguistic or stylistic. This is in keeping with the character of the second century, which was a century very conscious of style. It was the century when a new literary movement reached its full influence, the movement of Atticism. Second-century authors, in keeping with this fashion, tried to write like the classical authors of Athens of the fifth and fourth century B.C. and to ape Attic Greek. We can now study the effect of this phenomenon on the text of the New Testament with greater precision than before.

In terms of readings, do our two papyri contribute anything new to the text? First, we notice that the papyri have surprisingly few readings which we did not know of before. Most of their readings occur in Alexandrian manuscripts and in the Coptic versions. There are a few coincidences with one or two minuscules or out-of-the-way witnesses.

There are, however, a few readings apart from sheer errors which seem to be unknown hitherto. First we notice that, like the majority of variations, for the most part they are stylistic—a fact which does not surprise us in view of what has just been said. What is significant about some of these peculiar readings, especially in *P*⁷⁵, is that they look as though intrinsically they might be right.

At Luke v.1 our printed texts begin the verse *ἐγένετο δέ*, but for this *P*⁷⁵ has *καὶ ἐγένετο*. In general the tendency was to substitute *δέ* for *καί*. *καί* was increasingly overworked; *δέ* was the more elegant expression. Thus Matthew frequently replaces Mark's *καί* by *δέ*. Hence we may assume that *P*⁷⁵'s *καὶ ἐγένετο* is original.

Again at Luke xii.24 we have *οὔτε σπείρουσιν οὔτε θερίζουσιν* in our editions, "they neither sow nor reap," but *P*⁷⁵ has *οὐ σπείρουσιν οὐδὲ θερίζουσιν*, "they do not sow nor do they reap." This difference too is one of style. In the first century A.D. the particle *τε* and its compounds *εἴτε*, *οὔτε*, *μήτε*, are going out of use. Writers like Mark, John and Revelation probably do not use them, and apart from Acts no New Testament author uses them freely. In the second century, however, *τε* and its compounds came back in fashionable writing. This suggests that at Luke xii.24 *οὐ . . . οὐδέ* is right.

In *P*⁷⁵ Luke xvi.22 begins *ἐγένετο δέ ἐν τῷ ἀποθανεῖν τὸν πτωχόν*, "it came to pass when the poor man had died." Our other Greek witnesses omit *ἐν τῷ*, reading *ἐγένετο δέ ἀποθανεῖν τὸν πτωχόν*, "it came to pass that the poor man died." The difference in sense is slight

and the usual Greek text has a more regular construction, though there are enough parallels in Luke to the reading of *P*⁷⁵. In view of this it seems more likely that the usual reading is a correction and the reading of *P*⁷⁵ is original.

Since these three readings that I have instanced are minutiae, the reader may wonder why I have devoted time to them. Their very triviality is the answer. If the plausible novelties that our papyri bring us are no more significant than this, then it is not in their novelties that the importance of the Bodmer papyri lies.

Let me try to put this remark into its context. In editing an ancient text we have sooner or later to decide how far the wording that the author wrote has survived in the manuscripts. Sometimes, as with some speeches of Demosthenes for example, the wording has come down to us almost intact, and at nearly every point the original form of the text has survived somewhere or other among our manuscripts. Very rarely do we have to depart from their evidence and try to recover the original text by guesswork or conjecture. On the other hand the manuscripts of some of the plays of Euripides, the *Bacchae* for example, give us a very poor text, which can be mended at some places by conjecture, while at others we can only despair.

What is the state of affairs in the New Testament? If we take printed editions, we find that they do not print conjectures. Their text rests entirely on the manuscripts. If, however, we look at some commentators, literary critics and theologians, we find that on occasion they are prepared to rewrite the text freely. Mark particularly has suffered in this way. It has been suggested, for example, without manuscript evidence that the quotation in Mark i.2 and the whole verse Mark xi.25 are insertions. Lohmeyer, whose merits as a commentator in general are not here in question, was ready to rewrite Mark at ii.21 regardless of Marcan style, and his commentary takes similar liberties elsewhere with the text.

Which are right, the editors of the text or those who would handle it more freely? There are several considerations which are relevant to our answer to this question.

First, there is an unparalleled amount of evidence on the text. No other text from antiquity has come down to us in anything like so many manuscripts of independent value. Further, very few authors have survived in manuscripts written so soon after their own date.

Even Vergil, who is much more fortunate than most classical authors, cannot compare in this respect with the New Testament.

Secondly, while there is a vast number of variants and several types of text such as the Alexandrian and Western, there is no trace of one single recension affecting the whole of our manuscript tradition. Thus we know that for the Greek dramatists our manuscripts go back to the texts approved by Alexandrian scholars in the Hellenistic period. For the history of these plays before this period, in the fourth century B.C. for example, we are dependent on a few hints and inferences. The evidence of the manuscripts of the dramatists does not help us. There is nothing comparable in the history of the New Testament text to the Alexandrian archetype of the Greek plays.

Thirdly, within the manuscript tradition of the New Testament books, the characteristic style of each writer stands out clear and distinct. If the whole tradition of these books was corrupt to any considerable degree, this distinctness of style would be irreparably blurred. The style of Mark remains different from the style of Luke or John, for example. Further, if within the manuscript tradition we find some manuscripts giving a reading which conflicts with the style of the author, we find that others have a reading which agrees with it.

In this connection the first point to notice is that the peculiar readings of our papyri give no encouragement to the conjectures of the literary critic or the more adventurous kind of commentator. The peculiar readings are few and, as we have seen, where they have any claims to originality, they are concerned with details of style. This is not surprising when we read that the scribes of antiquity were much more concerned with style. But, as Bultmann had noticed,¹² in John variations were almost entirely stylistic in P⁶⁶. If we draw any moral from this, we will refrain from theological conjectures and the like and study with increasing exactness the language and style of our authors, if we are concerned to try to recover what they wrote.

In reaching this conclusion we do not in any way restrict the freedom of action of those who are concerned with the history of the material in our New Testament books before it was fashioned into them. All we can do is to ask that those who are concerned with this prehistory, if such I may call it, will be careful to distinguish their activities from those of the textual critic who is concerned with the history of the text after it has been written.

¹² Rudolf K. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Iohannes, Ergänzungsheft* (Göttingen 1957) 59.

It may have been that if there had been papyri of Mark and Acts of comparable date our conclusion about the text might have been a little different. We might have had to concern ourselves a little more with harmonization and the like, but “might have been” are not evidence.

The evidence of our papyri is reassuring. If they throw light on Christianity in Egypt, especially in the third and fourth centuries, and enable us to view the history of the New Testament books and their text with more precision, they cause no great surprise, but encourage us to proceed along the way in which we are already walking.

THE QUEEN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD
May, 1961

THE BODMER PAPYRI

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| PAPYRUS BODMER I | <i>Homère, Iliade, chants 5 et 6</i> (grec).
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| PAPYRUS BODMER II | <i>Evangile de Jean, chap. 1-14</i> (grec).
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