

Introduction

THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE BODMER

During the 1950s and 60s there came to scholarly attention manuscripts of an importance for determining the original wording of the New Testament equaled only by the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri of the 1930s. For Bodmer Papyrus II (abbreviated P⁶⁶, the Gospel of John) and Bodmer Papyrus XIV–XV (P⁷⁵, the Gospels of Luke and John) have now emerged alongside of the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri P⁴⁵ (the Gospels and Acts), P⁴⁶ (the Pauline Epistles), and P⁴⁷ (the book of Revelation) as priceless witnesses to the third-century Greek text, much as Codex Sinaiticus () and Codex Vaticanus (B) had provided nineteenth-century scholarship equally unexpected access back to the fourth-century text. These most recently emerging manuscripts are part of the fabulous Bibliothèque Bodmer created by the Swiss bibliophile Martin Bodmer at Cologny near Geneva.

Martin Bodmer (1899–1971) came from a distinguished Zurich family that had, at the dawn of the German Enlightenment, as its most distinguished ancestor Johann Jakob Bodmer, one of the rediscoverers of the Middle Ages. Before he was twenty-five Martin Bodmer himself had endowed a foundation to fund an annual literary prize named after the Zurich author Gottfried Keller. Bodmer came to focus his own energies toward creating a library of “world literature,” “what has shown itself to be decisive for the growth and refinement of the human spirit and thereby conquered the world.” “Ultimately world literature means what is valid across national and temporal limits in the writing of the various

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peoples.”¹ The Bodmer collection came to have five foci: Homer and antiquity; the Bible; Dante and the Middle Ages; Shakespeare; and Goethe.

At the opening of the Second World War, Bodmer offered his services to the International Committee of the Red Cross, for which purpose he moved in 1940 to its headquarters in Geneva. He helped that organization distribute a million and a half books to internees and prisoners of war. After the war he traveled for the Red Cross to troubled areas around the world. About a month before his death, he created a private foundation for the maintenance of his library and the publication of its more important manuscripts, controlled by a self-perpetuating board currently made up of: a member of the Bodmer family, a representative of the Department of Education of the Canton of Geneva, two professors from the University of Geneva, and a lawyer. The library is located near the center of the village of Cologny, a suburb of Geneva. It consists of two older buildings connected by a newer underground vault and exhibit hall.² It is open to the public on Thursdays and for scholars by appointment.

Already in 1947, Bodmer published a book titled *A Library of World Literature*³ in which he presented a rationale for the acquisition policy and the arrangement of his library. Although his own focus was more on German literature than on papyrology, and though at the time his library contained “only” 70,000 volumes,⁴ the list of manuscripts⁵ already included seventeen papyri from 1000 BCE to the eighth century CE. And yet none of these are what have come to be known as the “Bodmer Papyri.” Rather, this term refers somewhat imprecisely to a series of publications—beginning in 1954, continuing in rapid succession until 1969, and resumed in 1984—titled *Bodmer Papyrus I, et cetera*. Although no details had been given prior to 1984 about the provenience or acquisition of these Bodmer papyri in the narrower sense, most were assumed to have come from a shared provenience. Hence the term by extension has come to refer to a manuscript discovery made presumably not too much earlier than the commencement of their publication in

1. Bodmer, *Eine Bibliothek der Weltliteratur*, 8–9.

2. Described by Albert Bettex in a brochure published in April 1971 by the Swiss fraternity Pro Helvetia.

3. Bodmer, *Bibliothek der Weltliteratur*.

4. *Ibid.*, 33.

5. *Ibid.*, 139–41

1954. In this way the term “Bodmer Papyri” comes to have a modified delimitation, excluding the earlier acquisitions of papyri and even one item in the series *Papyrus Bodmer* but not to be attributed to that discovery, and including in addition whatever papyri, though not published in that series, may be attributed to the same provenience. In this way the term “Bodmer Papyri” as used here has come to have both a narrower and a broader meaning.

To get some impression of what the Bodmer Papyri must have meant to Bodmer at the time when he was busy acquiring and publishing them, one may cite his second major book published at just that time:

But by far the most dangerous enemy of ancient literary works was the fragility and flimsiness of the material! The fact that the papyrus roll maintained itself relatively well in Egypt, its land of origin, is the exception to the rule and an incredible stroke of luck, since otherwise we would possess for all practical purposes nothing! But the texts that mattered were the most endangered. So we must accept it as our fate that the primary sources of humanity, that which make life worth living and humans humane, survive only in tatters. These are doubly remarkable in view of the fact that it is upon them that the best of our being builds.⁶

Specifically with regard to the Gospels: “Everywhere the same text comes to meet us, and yet nowhere more upsetting than in the sparse papyrus rags that reach back near to the days ‘when still, unknown and very small, our Lord walked on earth.’ The same text, and yet again and again basically different!”⁷ These are the words of a bibliophile who only the year before had acquired, and then the same year published, the oldest extant copy of the Gospel of John (P. Bodmer II = P⁶⁶ of the early third century). Indeed, earlier the very same year, on the return trip from a Red Cross mission in Indonesia, he had stopped off in Cairo long enough to acquire a previously lost play by Menander (P. Bodmer IV, *The Misanthrope*) as well as the oldest extant copy of the Gospel of Luke, along with another copy of the Gospel of John (P. Bodmer XIV–XV = P⁷⁵, from the middle of the third century). For *this* is the priceless treasure that echoes in the minds of biblical scholarship at the very idea of “Bodmer Papyri”! Indeed this and much more.

6. Bodmer, *Variationen*, 67.

7. *Ibid.*, 65.

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It is not necessarily the case that once a book has entered the Bibliothèque Bodmer one can assume it is still there. When Pope Paul VI visited Geneva in 1969, Bodmer gave him a copy of the two letters of his most famous predecessor, P. Bodmer VIII (the [pseudonymous] First and Second Epistles of Peter from the New Testament). They are now in the Vatican Library. Indeed much more recently, on January 22, 2007, the Vatican Library was given P. Bodmer XIV-XV = P⁷⁵. Bodmer was also generous in providing fragments from codices from the same discovery that had been acquired by other libraries to those libraries, such as an exchange of such fragments with Barcelona and the gift of fragments belonging to the Savery Codex (then the Crosby Codex of the University of Mississippi). But the major loss to the holdings of the Bibliothèque Bodmer took place in order to produce the capital needed to endow the foundation that now administers the Bibliothèque Bodmer. For the German rare book dealer of New York, H. P. Kraus, who had been buying from and selling to Bodmer for years, was invited to come and choose several million dollars' worth of books:

I sold great books to Bodmer and bought equally great ones from him. My association with him began inauspiciously. As a young dealer in Vienna in 1935 I received a postal card from Bodmer ordering several books from one of my catalogues . . . One of the more exotic sales I made to Bodmer was a papyrus Book of the Dead of late dynastic Egypt (715–525 B.C.) . . . In 1960 I bought this fine example from Dr. Otto Fischer of Detroit, who passed away shortly thereafter . . . Later I came into possession of a large, valuable collection of Greek and Coptic papyri assembled by a well-known collector. Along with it came a remarkable object, a silver dedicatory plate or plaque from the foundation of the Serapeum . . . Though he chose not to install the plaque in the cornerstone of his new library building, Bodmer recognized that such an item belonged in his collection . . . I saw him usually once a year . . . The greatness of books sold to Bodmer over the years can be equalled only by the greatness of books bought from him. The volumes I succeeded in purchasing from Bodmer were, to put it mildly, of fabulous beauty and importance . . . An offer of sixty million dollars was made in a letter from me to Bodmer [for the whole Bibliothèque Bodmer], received in time for his 70th birthday celebration. At the party that evening in Rome he took out the letter with a flourish and read it aloud to the members of his family. Flattered and impressed, he nevertheless answered no

. . . He had decided to leave his library as a public foundation. A man of grand design, he had doubtless had this in mind for years. Two to three million dollars would have to be raised, he explained, to establish an endowment. I had been repeatedly trying to buy from Bodmer over the years and he had repeatedly declined, except in the few instances mentioned earlier. So, selling a number of his books to me was, he felt, not only an act of business but of friendship, giving me the long-denied chance to make a selection from his shelves . . . On June 20 [1970] I returned to Geneva and began going through the library . . . My purchases from Bodmer are certainly among the most notable transactions ever to take place in the book trade. They far outclassed the famous Holford purchase, both in the sums of money involved (\$500,000 for the Holford books, several millions for the Bodmer deal), and in the intrinsic importance of the materials. The Bodmer purchases covered a great range in time—from the Adler papyri of the 2nd century B.C., to the Moliere *Oeuvres* of 1682 . . . The vast range of the collection is a reflection of Dr. Bodmer's all-encompassing interests; the books he sold me came from every corner of his library . . . But the crowning glory of the Bodmer purchase was the group of manuscripts.⁸

This report by Kraus suggests that the transaction took place just before Bodmer's death (on March 22, 1971). But Dr. Braun, currently the director of the Bibliothèque Bodmer, reports that it was just after Bodmer's death that the family had Kraus come. This is also suggested in the published catalogue of Latin manuscripts, which lists twenty that were "sold after the death of Martin Bodmer," though an introductory statement reports that they "have been sold, before the existence of the Foundation, by the good offices of the book dealer H. P. Kraus of New York."⁹ This suggests the transaction was actually consummated between the death of Bodmer and the assumption of authority by the Foundation, at a time when presumably the heirs of Bodmer were in control. In the preface to Kraus's book, he reported that "during a period of several years in the early 1970s I bought many great treasures from the library of the late Dr. Martin Bodmer of Geneva."¹⁰

8. Kraus, *Rare Book Saga*, 273, 275–76, 278, 281–83, 286.

9. Pellegrin, *Manuscripts Latins*, 457–62, where one finds the list titled "Latin manuscripts from the collection sold after the death of Martin Bodmer."

10. *Ibid.*, xv.

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It is unknown if any “Bodmer Papyri” were involved in this massive transaction, since there is no published catalogue of papyri comparable to that of the Latin manuscripts. Nor are there any allusions identifiable as “Bodmer Papyri” in Kraus’s report. But his informed comments about the actuality of Bodmer’s dealings in the rare book market may serve to correct any naive assumption one might have, to the effect that he bought whatever manuscript discoveries came his way and, once acquired, retained all he had purchased.

If the manuscripts here listed that are not in the Bibliothèque Bodmer are to be associated with those that are, in that they may be of the same provenience, conversely some of the Bodmer Papyri may not be of this same provenience, and hence should perhaps be excluded from consideration here, where the focus is on a single manuscript discovery. Although the present volume seeks to provide whatever clarity can be achieved in each instance, by the very nature of the case absolute certainty is hardly attainable and degrees of probability are all that can be reasonably achieved.