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[Gospel Papyrus Donated to Vatican](#)**Gospel Papyrus Donated to Vatican**

"It Has Not Yet Revealed All Its Secrets"

VATICAN CITY, FEB. 3, 2007 (Zenit.org).- Here is a translation of an article published last week in the semi-official Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, entitled "18 Centuries of History: The Bodmer Papyrus 14-15 (P75) Arrives in the Vatican Apostolic Library."

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April 30, 1451: With a papal brief Pope Nicholas V establishes a library "pro communi doctorum virorum commodo" (to facilitate the research of scholars). Thus was born the present Vatican Apostolic Library.

November 22, 2006: the Bodmer Papyrus 14-15, donated to His Holiness Benedict XVI by the generosity of the Sally and Frank Hanna Family Foundation and the Solidarity Association (U.S.A.), as well as the Mater Verbi/Hanna Papyrus Trust, was given to the Vatican Apostolic Library.

During the five and a half centuries that separate these two dates, albeit through different vicissitudes, such as the losses caused by the lansquenets on the occasion of the sack of Rome (1527) or the transfer of the manuscripts to Paris in the Napoleonic age, the Vatican Apostolic Library remained faithful to the mandate it received to enrich, guard and preserve with all care the cultural treasures entrusted to it and to put them at the disposition of qualified scholars.

In the meantime, the initial thousand manuscripts by this time numbered 150,000; beside these were placed 300,000 coins and medals, as well as 100,000 stamps and an important collection of antique prints.

Among the famous monuments of culture deposited at present in the Vatican Library, mention can be made, in the classic line, of the palimpsest of Cicero's De Republica (Vat. lat. 5757), of the Virgilio Vaticano (Vat. lat. 3225), of the Virgilio Romano (Vat. lat. 3867), of the Terenzio Vaticano (Vat. lat. 3868), of important manuscripts of Plato (Vat. gr. 1), of Pindar (Vat. gr. 1312) and of the Tavole Facili of Ptolemy (Vat. gr. 1291), not to mention Menander's most precious palimpsest discovered a few years ago in Vat. sir. 623.

Numbered among the biblical manuscripts is the most ancient testimony known of the two letters of St. Peter (Papyrus Bodmer 8), the so-called "B codex," one of the two surviving Bibles of the 4th century (Vat. gr. 1209) and the "codex Claromontanus" (Vat. lat. 7223) or even one of the most ancient known paleo-Slavic manuscripts (Vat. gr. 2502).

Identified among the inferior writings of Vat. gr. 2061A and of Vat. gr. 2306 are fragments of an ancient manuscript of the Gospels of the fifth century, of a Strabone of the fourth century and of the most ancient Greek juridical collection (sixth - seventh century).

Famous for their miniatures are "Basil's Menologium" (Vat. gr. 1613), the "Urbinate Bible" (Urb. lat. 1-2), "Belbello's Bible" (Barb. lat. 613), two Dantesque manuscripts, the "Dante Urbinate" (Urb. lat. 1-2), portions of the Divine Comedy illustrated by Boticelli (Reg.lat. 1896), and the Homilies of Giacomo Monaco (Vatic. gr. 1162), not forgetting, however, the most ancient Greek liturgical manuscript, the so-called "Barberini Eucologium" (Barb. gr. 336), the only surviving testimony of the Roman "parish" liturgy, the Gelasian Sacramentary (Reg. lat. 316), one of the most ancient paper manuscripts (the Doctrina Patrum of the Vat. gr. 2200), or the mysterious Rotolo di Giosue (Pal. gr. 431), alongside which are placed, for example, the Vat. Lat. 5704, from the Cassiodorus' scriptorium (sixth century) or one of the few surviving fragments of the Skeireins, namely, the Gothic translation of a Greek commentary on John (Vat. lat. 5750).

To this list, which should end with a very long etcetera (1), was added recently a most precious treasure, the Bodmer Papyrus 14-15, containing Luke's and John's Gospels, protagonist of a fascinating event.

Antecedent facts

To appreciate the exceptional nature of the papyrus, it would be useful to refer to the historical context in which it was produced.

Shortly after the middle of the first century, as the first disciples of Christ were leaving this world, the need began to be felt in the Christian community to "compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses" (Luke 1:1-2). Thus were born, in the last years of the first century, the Gospels (the four canonical Gospels, of course, but also other similar texts, of which only fragments exist).

Ancient tradition and modern criticism are unanimous on one point: the four canonical Gospels were written in different places and circumstances and were brought together in one corpus at some point in the second century.

The first signs of what would later become the New Testament are very ancient: In the years between 95 and 98, the Church of Rome sent a letter to the Church of Corinth, considered the First Letter of Clement, in which reference is made to the letters of St. Paul to the Corinthians, in a way that confirms their normative and public value, thus implying that they were read in the liturgical assemblies.

Subsequently, toward the middle of the second century, St. Justin Martyr specified that "the recollections of the apostles and the writing of the prophets were read "during the Eucharistic celebration" (I Apologia 67,3). The term "recollections," at first sight enigmatic, is clarified on analyzing the works of St. Justin, who uses it in general to introduce passages addressed by the Gospels or of evangelical traditions. Because in a writing such as the Apologia, addressed to a pagan public, the word "Gospel," that is to say "Good News," would have been simply incomprehensible, St. Justin preferred to turn to a designation well attested in the classic tradition.

A few years after, before the end of the second century, St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon and martyr, stated in a famous passage that "Because the world has four regions, and there are four main winds ... the Word creator of everything ... revealing himself to men, gave us a quadruple Gospel, unified however by one Spirit ... that according to John ... that according to Luke ... that according to Matthew ... and that according to Mark. ... The Gospel is quadruple and so is the Lord's action. For this reason four general covenants were given to the human race" (Against the Heresies III 11,8). In short, for the Bishop of Lyon four canonical Gospels exist; there can be no more or less.

The "corpus" of the Gospels

The passage from St. Irenaeus is silent about the concrete form under which this canon of the four Gospels was presented. On this point, the testimony of the Bodmer Papyrus 14-15, written in the first years of the third century, is fundamental: it is the most ancient manuscript that contains two Gospels and this fact implies, as will be seen, that by this time the four Gospels were circulating together.

This last affirmation becomes comprehensible only if one leaps back to the classic world. In the Greco-Roman environments, formal texts were transmitted exclusively on papyrus scrolls, while informal ones (accounts, notes, receipts ...) were transcribed on other kinds of supports, like wax tablets or ceramic fragments (ostraca). During the first century A.D. "notebooks" became common, made up of superimposed sheets, folded and held together by sewing or string.

These manufactures, of pagan origin, were very soon adopted by Christians, as one learns from a famous Deutero-Pauline passage, in which Timothy is asked not to forget "the books," that is, the notes (2 Timothy 4:13). This new format, in only one notebook, had enormous advantages as opposed to the traditional scroll: greater capacity combined with less encumbrance and lower costs and, at the same time, it made the consultation and reading of a specific passage easier, all important factors for public reading during the liturgical celebrations.

The Bodmer Papyrus 14-15, made up originally of 36 superimposed double sheets for a total of 144 pages, is the most ancient find which contains the texts of the two Gospels together -- that of Luke and of John.

But why, one might ask, did it not contain all four? The reason lies in the limits of the new technique that, though having practically double capacity in respect of the classic papyrus scroll, was still a fragile structure which tended inevitably to tear along the fold, especially if the number of double pages used was more than fifty. A codex of this kind could contain little more than two Gospels. But, because all the lists of Gospels begin with Matthew's, one might suspect that alongside the surviving papyrus another volume was also made, now altogether lost, that referred to the other two missing Gospels, that of Matthew and Mark.

A liturgical manuscript

Why was the Bodmer Papyrus 14-15 copied? The modest execution of the code, evidenced by the concern not to waste space, demonstrated by the very restricted margins and the lack of decorations, is well reconciled with a practical use. The manufacture was almost certainly destined for a small community, a Greek-speaking Egyptian "parish" that, as usual in all Christian liturgies, read the Gospel during the Eucharistic celebration.

But, very soon, this frequent use ended up by damaging the fragile structure of the papyrus, which began, perhaps at the end of a century, to lose pages, to the point that at present it contains about half the text of the two Gospels. What could be done then with a manuscript which had become altogether unusable, but which contained the Gospels, the sacred text par excellence?

Probably aware of the antiquity of the codex, someone made an extreme decision: to give it a modest binding, which was reinforced making a hard binding with the rest of the first and last surviving pages. In these conditions, unusable as a book, but, as similar examples demonstrate, probably venerated as a relic, the papyrus was conserved, perhaps beginning in the fifth century, in the library of the Pachomian monastery of Middle Egypt.

Later, in face of an unspecified danger, probably the Arab invasion of Egypt, it was hidden around the year 700 in a mound that kept it sheltered from the floods of the Nile and there it waited patiently, alongside some forty other Greek and Coptic volumes, containing sacred and profane works and documentary papyri, until it was discovered around 1952 by the inhabitants of a neighboring village.

The trip to Geneva

Through a labyrinthine itinerary, of which it has been possible to reconstruct the main stages, the manuscripts were exported from Egypt in the years 1955-56. They were acquired in the West by a certain number of public and private collections, of which the lion's share went to the collection of Swiss Martin Bodmer, whose library was located in Cologny, on the outskirts of Geneva, and of Irishman Sir Alfred Chester Beatty, founder of the library of the same name in Dublin. Other volumes are scattered at present in several public and private collections.

The announcement of the discovery, which took place in the last years of the 50s, caused a certain sensation in specialist circles, a sensation mitigated by the fact that in the previous decades, Egyptian soil had restored two other

groups consisting of manuscripts linked to ancient Christianity. In 1930 some Coptic codexes produced by the Manicheans were discovered in Medinet Habu and in 1948 the Gnostic library of Nag Hammadi was rediscovered, a group of Coptic manuscripts, which contained, among other things, the Gospel of Thomas, a work described hastily as "the fifth Gospel" by the media of the time.

A turn in history

Behind the initiative of the Bodmer Foundation, the transcription of the text of the Bodmer Papyrus 14-15 was published along with a facsimile in 1961. According to a practice consolidated then by a century, the papyrus received an official abbreviation in the list of Greek testimonies of the New Testament and today is noted in specialized circles as P75.

The dispassionate analysis of the P75 text did no more than confirm its fundamental importance for the history of the text of the Gospels. And here it is necessary to make another leap backwards. Before the discovery of the New Testament papyruses, which in 2006 now numbered 118, the critical editions of the Gospels were based in large measure on two Greek manuscripts written in capital letters in the 4th century: the "codex B," kept in the Vatican Library (Vat. gr. 1209), and the Sinai codex (British Library, Addit. 43725, "codex"), from St. Catherine's Monastery, but kept almost entirely in the British Library in London.

For a long time it was thought that the text of these two related manuscripts, produced in the same desk of Caesarea of Palestine, was the result of a "revision" made at the beginning of the fourth century. But P75 has refuted this theory, demonstrating that the same kind of text had by this time arrived in Egypt at the beginning of the third century.

The confirmation of the reliability of the great manuscripts of the fourth century is reflected in that of the modern critical editions. This implies that the text of the New Testament has come down to our days in extremely acceptable conditions, incomparably better than those of any other non-biblical text of antiquity.

An Egyptian testimony

But is it really certain that P75 was produced in Egypt? The answer is certainly affirmative. Although the text of the great Palestinian manuscripts of the fourth century is confirmed in general, P75 also presents some small variations that relate it undoubtedly to the Egyptian tradition, represented by the Coptic translations.

For example, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) it is the only Greek testimony that indicates that the rich man was called N(in)ive. In John 10:7, instead of, "I am the door of the sheep," the papyrus uses the variant "I am the shepherd." In both, the lessons are almost exclusively of the Coptic tradition.

This fact allows one to specify some particulars of the production of P75 and, at the same time, to perceive some of the stages that separate it from the originals of the two Gospels.

Usually, the papyrus is dated back to the first quarter of the third century; this dating is entrusted to debates, as often happens in similar cases. It is only a conjecture, which awaits confirmation by the discovery of similar finds, because the already mentioned codifying technique of the single notebook in Egypt was used for poor manuscripts at least until the end of the fourth century, which is the most probable date of some of the manuscripts of Nag Hammadi.

But what impedes proposing an earlier date and placing the papyrus squarely in the second century, as has sometimes been proposed? The history itself of the text of the two Gospels probably represents an insurmountable obstacle. As already mentioned, the papyrus presents variants that indicate that it was transcribed from an Egyptian model. This second codex, in turn, must have been copied from a more ancient manuscript of the two Gospels that did not yet have those characteristic variants.

But, in turn, this third codex, probably executed outside of Egypt, depended not on the lost originals of the two

Gospels, but on a collection of four canonical Gospels, that must have been formed not earlier than the mid second century (quite likely it was the same model on which, through another procedure, the already mentioned manuscripts of the fourth century depended).

Even admitting that they were subsequent copies very close in time (and the information available on the spread of Christianity in Egypt would not contradict this circumstance), it is difficult to theorize that less than 50 years were necessary for the Greek text of the Gospels to reach a quite peripheral location, as that in which P75 was used by an unknown Christian community.

The mystery of the new fragments

Research on an ancient manuscript can never be said to be complete. New facts emerge continually which confirm or refute scholars' theories. But in the case of P75 an event occurred which it is no exaggeration to describe as amazing. The volume produced in 1961 under the auspices of the Bodmer Foundation leads one to understand that all the fragments of the papyrus were published in the facsimile and transcribed.

When, however, the manuscript was consigned to the Vatican Library, it emerged immediately from a summary review, that the present situation of the papyrus is not identical to that described by the facsimile: Some fragments of the external pages were recovered by a partial restoration of the "hard binding" effected after the publication in 1961 and some thirty worn out fragments awaited identification, while some new fragments, of which not a few, turned out not to be documented.

Subsequent research demonstrated that at least one fragment not reproduced in the facsimile was already noted around 1974.

Certainly P75 -- which now rests in the Reserve of the Deposit of Manuscripts of the Vatican Library, alongside one of its companions of vicissitudes, the Bodmer Papyrus 8 (P72), namely, the most ancient testimony of the Letters of St. Peter, and the most ancient testimony of the Coptic translation of the minor Prophets, another find which probably was rediscovered in the same circumstances, (Pap. Vat. Copto 9) -- has not yet revealed all its secrets.

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1) Truth be told, the Vatican Library also has a discreet fame for manuscripts it does not possess or that never existed. Among the requests for information are questions on the decrees of the Roman Senate relative to the prosecution of Jesus -- in reality they are Medieval reconstructions deduced from an ancient apocrypha, the Acta Pilati or on Necronomicon, a sort of "book of the life to come" that U.S. writer H.P. Lovecraft indicated as the alleged source of his Gothic novels. Actually the author of a modern apocrypha maintains he transcribed it from a Nestorian manuscript the library never possessed.

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