THE OLDEST MANUSCRIPT OF 
THE FOUR GOSPELS?¹

Since the summer of 1994 I have been studying the Gospel fragments known as $P^4$, $P^{64}$ and $P^{67}$, in order to determine whether they are all the work of the same scribe, and if so the nature of the manuscript of which they formed part. The fragments have been published as follows:

$P^4$: the definitive edition is by Jean Merell in $RB$ 47 (1938) 5–22 and Planches I–VII.


It might be useful at the outset to state what these three groups of fragments contain. $P^4$ consists of portions of four leaves from the early part of Luke. The original contents of each can be seen in the table on p. 173. All are so fragmentary that it is not practicable to list precisely the surviving portions of text. $P^{64}$ comprises three very small fragments of a leaf containing verses from Matt 26. Their exact contents can be seen in the reconstructions on pp. 169–71, in which brackets denote the portions of text preserved. $P^{67}$ consists of two fragments, Folio A and Folio B. The former, which is very small,

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¹ The answer to the query at the end of the title will be given in Section 10, ‘The Date of the Fragments’, below.

² For earlier editions, before it was realised that the fragments were from the same codex as $P^{64}$, cf. van Haelst, *Catalogue*, no. 336 (I).
contains a few letters from Matt 3:9 on one side and from Matt 3:25 on the other. Folio B, one side of which is reproduced in the Plate on p. 168, contains part of Matt 5:20–2 on one side and 5:25–8 on the other.

My investigation was prompted by the remark of C. H. Roberts in the publication of his Schweich lectures, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (Oxford, 1979) 13: ‘There can in my opinion be no doubt that all these fragments come from the same codex which was re-used as packing for the binding of the late third-century codex of Philo (= H. 695)’ (where H. stands for the catalogue of van Haelst). There is a further reference to the subject on pp. 22–3: ‘It was remarked above that among the second-century Christian texts were a few whose style of writing did not tally with that of the majority . . . One, no. 14 in the list, certainly comes from the later part of the century and on palaeographical grounds the other two, nos. 8 and 10, may be ascribed to the same period. These are incontrovertibly literary in style. In the first, no. 8 [viz. P\textsuperscript{6} + P\textsuperscript{67} + P\textsuperscript{67}] the text is divided into sections on a system also found in the Bodmer codex of Luke and John that recurs in some of the great fourth-century codices and was clearly not personal to this scribe. Once again we find in a manuscript of this early period a characteristic that appears to be not specifically Egyptian but of wider application. In its handsome script as well as in its organization—there are three different positions for punctuation as well as omission and quotation signs—it is a thoroughgoing literary production.’

My original, perhaps over-ambitious, plan was to produce a complete new edition of all the fragments, with original-size facsimiles and full palaeographical details. This, however, would obviously be a lengthy undertaking, and in view of the recent surge of interest in the fragments, which was quite unexpected when I began my researches, it seems preferable to publish a provisional account of my observations and conclusions.

1. The Script of the Fragments

Although the editions of these fragments have been available for many years, so far as I am aware no study in depth of their script has been undertaken. The script is in fact a very early stage of that known as ‘Biblical Uncial’ because it is most familiar to us through