On the 28th of December 1956 The Times printed a photograph of the first thirteen lines of St. John’s Gospel from this MS which was acquired recently by the Bodmer Library of Geneva. Its date is thought to be about 200 A.D., i.e. at least 100 years earlier than Codex Vaticanus and its only rival Sinaiticus, which was purchased from the Russians for the British Museum in 1933 for £100,000. There is extant a precious scrap of papyrus (in John Rylands Library) which contains a few words of St. John’s Gospel, dated about 130 A.D., but this Bodmer papyrus is an even greater treasure, for it is a witness to the text of almost the whole of the Gospel, copied at a date which can hardly be more than 100 years removed from the original dictation. According to the famous “Anti-Marcionite” preface, which is preserved only in a few ancient MSS of the Vulgate, but was derived from a Greek document of the middle of the 2nd Century A.D., and ultimately from statements of Papias, this Gospel was written down from John’s dictation by the hand of Marcion. This brilliant son of the Bishop of Sinope was soon afterwards excommunicated—as the preface tells us—by John; and also by his own father. Half a century later he had become the most famous of heretics. In c. 154 A.D., when, in Rome, he met Polycarp, the faithful disciple of John and martyr Bishop of Smyrna, he had the impudence to remind him of their former acquaintance; for they had both been pupils of the aged Apostle. “Do you not recognise me, Polycarp?” “Yes”, he replied, “I recognise you as the first-born of Satan.” This expression is found also in the Epistle of Polycarp, in close connection with a quotation from the 1st Epistle of St John, which was also directed against the heretical, docetic, opinions of Marcion, who “denied Jesus Christ to have come in the flesh and did not acknowledge the witness of the Cross.”
It is to the versatile, learned but speculative, scholar, Robert Eisler, showing the way to the restoration of the true punctuation of the apparently disjointed Vulgate Preface, that the recovery of this startling testimony concerning the origin of the Johannine Gospel is due. The evidence is given in Eisler's Enigma of the Fourth Gospel. From the main thesis of his book I differ completely, but it is a lively stimulus to thought.

We will now turn to the first lines of the Bodmer Papyrus. In these there are only two clear differences from the generally accepted text, and these both come in the place where it would most naturally be expected; that is at the critical point of junction between verses 3 and 4. It should be observed that though there are some punctuation marks in the MS, here, where most needed, none appears.

The Authorised Version rather awkwardly renders verse 3 “All things were made by him: and without him was not anything made that was made. (4) In him was life... etc.” In Greek there is no choice, such as we have to make, between Him or It as the pronoun for the Word, the Logos. A perfectly literal translation of the text underlying A.V. is “All things became through it, and apart from it became nothing”. In place of “nothing” almost all the best MSS and modern Editors read “not even one.” Only the first hand in Codex Sinaiticus, and Codex Bezae wrote “nothing”. Now the Bodmer Papyrus decidedly supports the original witness of those two MSS, which are the pride of the British Museum and of the Cambridge University Library. The second and more surprising variant of the Papyrus is the omission of the two letters EN after γεγονοῦν, instead of “what has become. In it was life”, this scribe wrote “what has become. To it was life”. It is curious and perhaps significant that these two letters EN are identical in form with ΕΝ = one, read “not even one” immediately before it in most MSS.

Before discussing the meaning of this Bodmer text, I invite attention to three important considerations. (1) The word χωρείζει “without” occurs twice again in this Gospel: In xx 7, “The napkin which was about his head, not with the linen clothes lying, but separate, wrapped up into one place.” So also in xv 5 the idea of separation is stressed: As the branch separated from the vine, so (literally) “Apart from me ye are not able to do nothing.” This leads to my second point. (2) In Greek a double negative does not