

RECENT EFFORTS TO RECONSTRUCT EARLY CHRISTIANITY ON THE BASIS OF ITS PAPYROLOGICAL EVIDENCE*

Stanley E. Porter

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent reconstructions of the development of early Christianity have come to recognize two primary sets of papyrological evidence that must be taken into account—the biblical documents (such as P.Ryl. III 457 or, in New Testament parlance, P52) and especially the extra-biblical Christian and related documents (such as P.Egerton 2, the so-called Egerton gospel). Traditional reconstructions of Christianity have often neglected even the biblical manuscripts, but recent efforts have brought both sets of data into consideration. In light of recent discussion, this chapter will shift the scope of investigation by differentiating a third group of manuscripts in the course of assessing both methodological approaches to reconstructing early Christianity from its documentary remains, along with several recent reconstructions and their revisions and implications. Important to this chapter will also be questions related to specifying which documents should be included in such a reconstruction, the question of dating, and what it means to offer a reconstruction on the basis of such evidence.

2. RECENT DISCUSSION REGARDING DATING OF CHRISTIAN MANUSCRIPTS

The twentieth century was foundational for the issue of the dating of early Christian manuscripts. As is commonly known, it was during the twentieth century that the majority of New Testament and related Christian Greek papyri, as well as the majority of non-canonical documents, were

* I wish to thank several people who made constructive comments on an earlier version of this chapter, especially Robert Kraft. An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the 26th International Congress of Papyrology, August 16–21, 2010, at the University of Geneva, Switzerland.

identified and published.¹ Although these documents span several centuries, this chapter will concentrate upon the second century, as this has been the focus of much recent discussion and debate.²

There are three categories of manuscripts that I wish to identify and to take into account. The first is the New Testament manuscripts. Some of the most important New Testament manuscripts in recent discussions include P.Ryl. III 457 (P52), a fragment of John's Gospel, dated originally to the first half of the second century and now usually anywhere from the early to the middle to the late second century; P.Oxy. L 3523 (P90), also a fragment of John's Gospel, originally dated to the second century but possibly late second or early third century; and P.Oxy. LXIV 4404 (P104), a fragment of Matthew's Gospel dated to the late second century. Additionally, three other New Testament manuscripts have also entered into the debate. These are P.Magdalen Greek 18 (P64) and P.Barcelona 1 (P67), which are from the same manuscript of Matthew and variably dated to the late second century or around AD 200, and possibly Bibliotheque Nationale, suppl. Gr. 1120 (P4), a fragment of Luke, sometimes joined to the above, sometimes said to be from the third century if not part of the same manuscript.³ There are also some Old Testament fragments that must enter into the discussion, although it is debatable whether these are Christian or Jewish. These include: Bodleian MS. Gr. Bibl. G.5 (Rahlfs 2082), a fragment of the Psalms dated originally to the late second century, and later to the second/third century; P.Ant. I 7 (Rahlfs 2077), also a fragment of the Psalms dated originally to the middle second century, and later to the second/third century; and P.Bad. IV 56 (Rahlfs 970), a fragment of Exodus and Deuteronomy, originally dated to the second century, and later to the late second century. The third category of manuscripts comprises non-canonical Christian documents. These include: P.Egerton 2 (P.Lond. Christ. 1), originally dated to around AD 150 (with some suggestions of a date before this by Schubart), but later to the last half of the second century or even into the third cen-

¹ See David G. Martinez, "The Papyri and Early Christianity," in Roger S. Bagnall, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 590–622.

² I use information on the various manuscripts, people, and dates, from Roger S. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), esp. 11–13, 27–37, with some modifications; Joseph van Haelst, *Catalogue des Papyrus Littéraires Juifs et Chrétiens* (Université de Paris IV Paris-Sorbonne Série 'Papyrologie' 1; Paris: Sorbonne, 1976); and Brent Nongbri, "The Use and Abuse of P52: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel," *HTR* 98.1 (2005): 23–48.

³ This manuscript has also been dated much earlier by Carsten Thiede, but virtually no scholar follows this dating.

tury; P.Oxy. LX 4009, a fragment of an apocryphal gospel,⁴ dated originally to the second century, although later dated (by Bagnall) to the early or middle second century.

In assessing the evidence regarding the dates, Roger Bagnall makes several observations. The first is that “there is not much disagreement among those who have studied [these documents] about what papyri they may legitimately be compared to. There are comparisons within the group, and there are comparisons to several papyri generally dated to the end of the second or beginning of the third century.”⁵ The second observation is that the major disagreement surrounds the issue of dating. These disagreements depend, so Bagnall contends, on whether one falls into one of two clusters or camps of dating: “One may see one camp, typically consisting, across the generations, of [H. Idris] Bell, [C.H.] Roberts, and [T.C.] Skeat, which prefers an early date for the group, and another, represented in more recent times by [Eric G.] Turner and [J. David] Thomas, but originally by [Bernard P.] Grenfell and [Arthur S.] Hunt, arguing that the entire cluster should be put later.”⁶

Actually, in the history of discussion, the situation is even more complex than Bagnall indicates, in that there are four clusters or camps regarding dating. Besides the two noted by Bagnall, there is a third group that tends to argue for earlier dates than Bell, Roberts, and Skeat. In recent times, this includes Philip Comfort (along with David Barrett), who has examined and published an edition of all of the New Testament Greek papyri and parchments that date to before the time of Constantine (and who propose a date of “closer to AD 100, plus or minus a few years,” for P52).⁷ However, on various previous occasions, early dates have been proposed by such scholars as Adolf Deissmann, Ulrich Wilcken, and Wilhelm Schubart. For example, in discussion of P.Ryl. III 457 (P52), Roberts suggested the first half of the second century, supported by Fredric Kenyon, Bell, and Schubart. However, Deissmann suggested that it be dated to the time of Hadrian (AD 117–138) or possibly Trajan (AD 98–117), Wilcken to AD 117–120, on the

⁴ Some have identified this fragment as part of the *Gospel of Peter* (e.g. Dieter Lührmann, with Egbert Schlarb, *Fragmente apokrypher gewordener Evangelien in Griechischer und Lateinischer Sprache* [Marburg: Elwert, 2000]), but most disagree with this assessment. See Paul Foster, “The *Gospel of Peter*,” in Paul Foster, ed., *The Non-Canonical Gospels* (London: Continuum, 2008), 30–42.

⁵ Bagnall, *Early Christian Books*, 13, 15 (there is a photograph on p. 14).

⁶ Bagnall, *Early Christian Books*, 15.

⁷ Philip W. Comfort and David P. Barrett, *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2001), 367.

basis of comparison with the Apollonius archive (P.Bremer), and Schubart noted features from the first century though he placed the manuscript in the second century.⁸ Whereas Bell and Skeat proposed around AD150 for P.Egerton 2, Schubart thought it dated to before AD150. The fourth group tends to argue for later dates than Turner and Thomas. These tend to be more recent scholars, and include those such as Michael Gronewald and (apparently) Brent Nongbri. Gronewald, who published the P.Köln VI 255 fragment of P.Egerton 2, argued that the presence of the hooked apostrophe dated the entire papyrus to the third century and no earlier than around AD200;⁹ and Nongbri, though he remains somewhat noncommittal, appears to want to date both P.Ryl. III 457 (P52) and P.Egerton 2 to the late second or early third century.¹⁰

This collection may, on first appearance, not seem like much manuscript evidence for such an important task as the reconstruction of early Christianity through its textual evidence. Indeed, the number of manuscripts that are relevant and are relatively well agreed to fall within this time-period is limited. However, in light of the development of early Christianity within the larger Roman empire, they are perhaps even over-represented. Bagnall has analyzed the representation of manuscripts in relation to the number of Christians within the wider empire, and shown that, statistically, the manuscripts of early Christianity are larger than is mathematically probable.¹¹ In any case, this is the number that we currently have with which to work.

3. ASSESSING THE VARIABLES IN RECONSTRUCTING THE HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The evidence above indicates that there are a number of factors that must be taken into account when assessing the early textual evidence used in recon-

⁸ See C.H. Roberts, *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel in the John Rylands Library* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935), 30 n. 7.

⁹ Michael Gronewald, "Unbekanntes Evangelium oder Evangelienharmonie (Fragment aus dem 'Evangelium Egerton')," in Michael Gronewald et al., eds., *Kölner Papyri*, 6 (Papyrologica Coloniensia 7; Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1987), 136–145 (136).

¹⁰ Andreas Schmidt has proposed a date of the early third century for P.Ryl.III 457, which Bagnall says "may be too definitive" (*Early Christian Papyri*, 12). He also claims that Nongbri (he misspells it as Nongbi) "has brought forward a range of palaeographical parallels that undermine confidence in an early date, even if they do not fully establish one in the late second or early third century" (12). I examine some of these claims below.

¹¹ Bagnall, *Early Christian Books*, 16–18.

structing the history of early Christianity. Recently, the major controversy has revolved around the relationship between P.Ryl. III 457 and P.Egerton 2. I will concentrate upon this controversy and dispute over dates as my means of access into the discussion of the pertinent issues.

There are four major issues in the recent discussion, so far as I can determine, especially as it is reflected in the “exhaustive” (to use Bagnall’s term) article by Nongbri. One is the place and evaluation of comparative manuscripts. A second is the perceived “date creep” of P.Ryl. III 457. Another is “date distancing” between P.Ryl. III 457 and P.Egerton 2. A fourth is the implications of the different perspectives. I will treat them in order.

3.1. *Evaluation of Comparative Manuscripts*

I do not need to say anything here about how tentative paleographic dating is. Virtually every book on Greek manuscripts makes this point.¹² All papyrologists recognize the difficulty in selecting appropriate comparative manuscripts, the subjectivity involved in assessing similarities, the difficulty of assigning dates to various paleographical features especially for literary hands (e.g. when there are issues of archaism, etc.), the usefulness of dated manuscripts even if they do not solve all issues, and the like. Nongbri emphasizes these and related points in his treatment—although he gives the impression that there has been a wider diversity and perhaps even cavaliness in treating the various comparative manuscripts than is probably warranted. Bagnall has observed that, for the most part, the same manuscripts are drawn upon for comparison with regard to this set of early manuscripts.¹³ Nongbri in his article wishes to add several manuscripts to the group of comparative data. All of these manuscripts are dated, and all are from the last half of the second century or even the third century. However, none of these additional manuscripts is literary or semi-literary. They are instead petitions, a judgment, an invitation, and a receipt. Whereas the desire to have dated documents is commendable, I wonder whether these new examples add as much as they could, because of their non-literary/documentary hands (which are in several cases quite different from the literary documents being considered). In comparing the group of

¹² For a recent treatment, see Guglielmo Cavallo, “Greek and Latin Writing in the Papyri,” in *Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, 101–148. Cavallo has done as much as anyone to differentiate various writing hands of Greek papyri.

¹³ They are not all late second or third century, however. Some are as early as the late first century, as will be noted below.

manuscripts brought into the discussion from early on, the most convincing are the literary texts, as Nongbri seems to admit,¹⁴ but they are limited in number, and require that we consider the full range of evidence. There is the further issue of criteria by which comparisons are made. As we know, at least four factors need to be considered—the writing of individual letters, spacing and display, manuscript features, and overall manuscript presentation and appearance. It is not always clear how these are to be weighed in relation to each other, that is, how similar letters are countered by dissimilar ones.

3.2. *Date Creep of P.Ryl. III 457 (Ɽ52)*

A number of recent scholars have noted that the date of P.Ryl. III 457 (Ɽ52) has, over recent years at least, gotten more specific and earlier. The result has been that there is more fixity or certainty to the date than was originally proposed and with which some are comfortable. Nongbri blames this creep especially on Kurt Aland.¹⁵ Especially open to criticism is Comfort, who dates P.Ryl. III 457 (Ɽ52) to around AD 100. It is true that this makes the date more specific and puts it at the earliest possible time in relation to Roberts's original date.

Several factors, however, need to be taken into account. One is that Comfort is one of few that I know of who has actually examined and published a major work in which he contends that he has examined the entire range of early New Testament manuscripts. He may be early in his dates, and he may be wrong, but he at least speaks on the basis of what amounts to a comprehensive examination. Another factor is that Comfort is not the first to suggest that kind of early date. Deissmann, as noted above, suggested the possibility of P.Ryl. III 457 (Ɽ52) being dated to the reign of Trajan from AD 98–117, which looks very much like around AD 100, give or take a few years. Deissmann too may have been wrong, but he thought similarly to Comfort over fifty years earlier. A third factor is that specifying dates is not a recent development at all. As noted above, both Deissmann and Wilcken restricted the date, Wilcken restricting it to around AD 117–120. However, it must also be recognized that there have always been those who have been cautious regarding the date of P.Ryl. III 457 (Ɽ52), not just the

¹⁴ Nongbri, "Use," 32.

¹⁵ Nongbri, "Use," 30–31. He also cites Eldon Epp. However, he has also to admit that most early scholars endorsed Roberts's date, including, besides those already mentioned, Ellwood M. Schofield, W.H.P. Hatch, Bruce M. Metzger, and Georg Maldfeld.

German New Testament scholars who have recently raised the issue, but also other New Testament scholars as well.¹⁶ More importantly perhaps is that there have been later papyrologists who have been more cautious, but who have still endorsed Roberts's earlier conclusion, including Eric Turner forty years later¹⁷ (besides Kenyon, Bell, and others noted above). A fourth factor concerns the dates themselves. An examination of the dates proposed by the two clusters or camps suggested by Bagnall, however, does not indicate the kind of radical divergence that one might anticipate on the basis of some of the recent discussion. The variation is hard to estimate, as precise dates are not given, but the difference is usually somewhere around roughly fifty years difference, with seventy-five years at the most. So, whereas some creep may have occurred in New Testament studies, it is not unprecedented and without parallel from papyrologists, who generally endorse the date of Roberts, within fairly narrow variance.

3.3. *Date Distancing between P.Ryl. III 457 (P52) and P.Egerton 2*

From the outset, the dates of writing of P.Ryl. III 457 (P52) and P.Egerton 2 have been linked because Roberts cited P.Egerton 2 as one of his comparable manuscripts when examining the Johannine fragment. He also recognized some differences between the two, which presumably led him and those whom he consulted to settle upon an arguably earlier date than P.Egerton 2—while also recognizing that they had much in common, and even possible overlap in date. The original editors of P.Egerton 2 claimed a date in the middle of the second century, but expressed the opinion that they were being cautious in this date and that there were features that may have been earlier (later clarified as AD 140–160).¹⁸ They used virtually the same

¹⁶ Nongbri cites Georg Strecker, Andreas Schmidt (but dismisses his proposal as ultimately unconvincing because he does not use dated manuscripts for comparison), Walter Schmithals, Titus Nagel, C.K. Barrett, R. Alan Culpepper, Stuart R. Pickering, Bart D. Ehrman, and Larry W. Hurtado ("Use," 26–27 and note 12).

¹⁷ Eric G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 100. A further factor to consider is codicology, which is admittedly very tentative. Turner tended to take a late date for development of the codex, but an early date for P.Ryl. III 457 (P52), which is a fragment of a codex. This has implications both for dating of this early Christian document and for development of the codex. Robert Kraft argues for an early date for development of the codex, at least in Christian circles, on the basis of developments in Jewish scriptural transmission. I wish to thank Robert (personal conversation) for discussion of these points.

¹⁸ H.I. Bell and T.C. Skeat, *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and Other Early Christian Papyri* (London: Trustees of the British Library, 1935), 2; *The New Gospel Fragments* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1951), 17.

manuscripts as did Roberts for comparison and dating.¹⁹ I note that the editors of P.Egerton 2 were Bell and Skeat. Bell approved of Roberts's date for P.Ryl. III 457 (P52) and Roberts later wrote a book on the birth of the codex with Skeat. However, since the time of publication, despite Schubart's statement regarding an earlier date, there has been apparently less discussion of the date of P.Egerton 2 by papyrologists. Arguably, more distance has been created between the dates for these two manuscripts due to Gronewald's redating of P.Egerton 2 on the basis of P.Köln VI 255 (a part of the Egerton papyrus) to no earlier than AD 200 because of the hooked apostrophe, which he claims, following Turner, only really appears in the third century. There is no wonder that it has been noted that P.Ryl. III 457 (P52) appears to be placed at the beginning of the second century, while P.Egerton 2 is placed at the end—even though both were once used as comparable manuscripts for dating purposes.

3.4. *Implications for Reconstruction*

The implications for reconstruction of early Christianity through its manuscripts on the basis of these developments are several. (1) One of the most important is clearly the need to return to the manuscripts themselves, and to examine them and their comparable manuscripts. These include manuscripts from early Christianity alongside non-religious manuscripts that may prove to be suitable for comparison. (2) A second implication is to consider a wider range of comparable manuscripts. Nongbri has brought five new manuscripts into the discussion, but these are, I believe, of somewhat limited value. This is both because they are documentary texts, and because he appears to be overly skeptical about what can be determined on the basis of comparison of undated literary manuscripts. However, there are still a number of documents that have not been taken fully into account in such reconstructions. These include some of those that are noted by Bagnall, such as P.Oxy. L 3523, P.Oxy. LXIV 4404, and P.Oxy. LX 4009, but I would contend that the others to consider are P.Oxy. IV 656, a fragment of Genesis, and P.Vindob. G. 2325, a fragment of an unknown gospel (the so-called Fayyum fragment).²⁰ (3) A third implication is to recognize the limitations of undated literary manuscripts. There is no doubt that literary manuscripts are much more difficult to date on the basis of the lack

¹⁹ The one additional comparative manuscript is P.Lond. I 30.

²⁰ See Stanley E. Porter and Wendy J. Porter, *New Testament Greek Papyri and Parchments: New Editions* (2 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 1: 291.

of explicit date, their conservatizing tendency, and especially the lack of knowledge of comparable texts of this early period. (4) A fourth and final implication of the above discussion is to expand the analytical perspective for using undated manuscripts. Most of the focus of comparison is still (and perhaps rightly) upon the formation of individual letters. This is no doubt important and will continue to be at the center of analysis. However, we know that change is slow and not consistent with individual letters, so that it is difficult to establish firm temporal parameters. There is also the archaizing or conservative tendency within literary or even semi-literary manuscripts. Another is codicological features. These are more difficult to define in some ways because of the lack of evidence and the possibilities of slippage, but still are important features to take into account. A final set of features that are often overlooked, especially with literary hands, is the tendency toward fixity and regularity, whether that is of format, letter and line spacing, or even bilinearity. All of these need to be taken into account.

4. A TENTATIVE WAY FORWARD IN THE DISCUSSION

In this final section, I will offer a tentative proposal of a way forward in this discussion, using the manuscripts and the perspectives noted above. There are three criteria that I propose here as a means of moving forward.

4.1. *Comparative Manuscripts*

The first criterion concerns the manuscripts that are to be used for comparison. Whereas dated manuscripts must enter into consideration and form the overall basis for much dating, I believe that it is also important to distinguish documentary from literary or semi-literary hands and attempt to use literary manuscripts for comparison with literary manuscripts. This is especially true from the fourth century on,²¹ but is also important in the earlier period, as there are characteristics of documentary hands, such as ligature and cursive forms, that distract from comparison. As Turner states, “[c]onfidence will be strongest when like is compared with like: a documentary hand with another documentary hand, skilful writing with skilful, fast

²¹ C.H. Roberts, *Greek Literary Hands 350 BC–AD 400* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), ix; G. Cavallo and H. Maehler, *Greek Bookhands of the Early Byzantine Period AD 300–800* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1987), 3.

writing with fast. Comparison of book hands with dated documentary hands will be less reliable. The intention of the scribe is different in the two cases ...; besides, the book-hand style in question may have had a long life."²²

4.2. *Typology*

A number of scholars have formed various typologies of manuscript features, especially of various key letters. I am not here advocating a return to the use of what Roberts and others call a "test letter," in which "a single letter form provided a useful, if not an infallible, criterion of date."²³ I am instead arguing that representative letters, especially those that well illustrate different hands and can be dated, should be identified so that they can be used for comparison purposes. These typologies can be used in ways similar to Turner's *Typology of the Early Codex*. For example, Edward Maunde Thompson developed a Table of Alphabets of Literary Papyri, in which the forms of the individual letters were displayed based on study of significant manuscripts, and Turner made a similar list of representative letters from the manuscripts in his *Greek Manuscripts*.²⁴ These provide for comparison of a given manuscript with the letters in isolation.

4.3. *Trajectory*

I believe that there are a number of features of manuscripts that develop over time that can form a trajectory against which one can compare a given manuscript. This is discernable for New Testament manuscripts in particular. Trajectory features include a variety of different characteristics, such as the development in Christian manuscripts of the more or less formal literary or book hand, in relation (not necessarily opposition) to the cursive script, into the distinctive Biblical majuscule (second to ninth century) and then the Alexandrian majuscule (fourth century on), complicated by use also of the sloping (second to ninth century) and upright (second and third century) pointed majuscules in the early years. Other features include the

²² E.G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World* (ed. P.J. Parsons; 2nd ed.; London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1987), 19–20. Cf. Bell and Skeat, *Fragments*, 1.

²³ Roberts, *Greek Literary Hands*, xiv. Cf. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, 20.

²⁴ Edward Maunde Thompson, *An Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 144–147, whose manuscripts can of course be expanded; Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, 2. Note his cautions about styles on 20.

tendency toward stylization, archaism, multiple overlapping styles, and fossilization, as well as various additional textual features such as accentuation and punctuation.²⁵

5. APPLICATION TO P.RYL. III 457 (P52) AND P.EGERTON 2

By way of application, I will examine the two major manuscripts mentioned in the discussion above according to these three criteria and see if any clarity can be brought to this discussion.

5.1. Comparisons

As noted above, in recent discussion of some of the manuscripts used in reconstructing early Christianity, a number of new manuscripts have been brought forward as possibly suitable for comparison. New manuscripts for comparison are to be welcomed. However, all of the new ones proposed by Nongbri are documentary texts. Whereas they have value, they are not as valuable as literary documents.²⁶ As he seems to admit, regarding his new comparable manuscripts, P.Mich. inv. 5336 (= SB 22.15782), a petition dated to AD 152, seems to provide the closest comparison for P.Ryl. III 457 (P52).²⁷ Even though P.Egerton 2 has some cursive characteristics, it is not sufficiently close to any of the examples Nongbri cites, which in several cases are more cursive. More pertinent are the literary or semi-literary manuscripts that have been suggested. One of the most important comparative documents brought into the discussion by Bagnall is P.Oxy. LX 4009. This manuscript, as noted above, is dated to the second century, and Bagnall puts it in the early to middle part of the century. This fragment, written in an informal rounded bookhand, has a number of similarities to P.Ryl. III 457 (P52) and P.Egerton 2, such as the mu, epsilon, and types of ligatures. Bagnall also notes P.Oxy. LXIV 4404, dated to the later second century, which the editor of the text, David Thomas, notes is similar to P.Ryl. III 457 (P52).²⁸ I think that it is also worth mentioning P.Fayum 110, a letter firmly dated to AD 94. This dated manuscript was first commented upon by Roberts, and is

²⁵ Cavallo and Maehler, *Greek Bookhands*, 2, 3; Roberts, *Greek Literary Hands*, xv; Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, 8–12.

²⁶ There are, as Nongbri admits (“Use,” 31–32 n. 25), some problems with direct comparison of literary and documentary texts.

²⁷ The similarities include shaping and spacing of letters, as well as overall appearance. See Nongbri, “Use,” 41.

²⁸ Bagnall, *Early Christian Books*, 13.

apparently cited approvingly by Nongbri.²⁹ What is important here is that Roberts, whom Nongbri gently criticizes for being young when he made the original identification of P. Ryl. III 457 (P52),³⁰ re-endorsed P.Fayum 110 as a comparison for both P. Ryl. III 457 (P52) and P. Egerton 2 again in 1955 when he published his *Greek Literary Hands*.³¹ So far as comparative manuscripts are concerned, there is reinforcement of the second-century date of both P. Ryl. III 457 (P52) and P. Egerton 2, and little to suggest a date of the third century. We can perhaps refine this a little by saying that the range of dates is from around AD 100 to around AD 150—the very dates suggested originally by Roberts for P. Ryl. III 457 (P52).

5.2. *Typology*

A typological comparison should not focus simply on a single letter or a single formation of a letter. However, a typological comparison can be used when there is a range of letters that have been established within a time period. Comparison of the individual letters of the two manuscripts, P. Ryl. III 457 (P52) and P. Egerton 2, with the sets of letters in both Maunde Thompson's and Turner's representative alphabets indicates what may appear to be a surprising result in the light of recent discussion. Both manuscripts clearly fit comfortably within the second century. There are, of course, some letters that are similar to those in the third century (as there are some in the first century), but the letters that are given to the most individualism, such as alpha, mu, and even sigma, appear to be second century. I find it hard to believe that the author of P. Ryl. III 457 (P52) or P. Egerton 2 was deliberately archaizing his script so as to make it look older, or simply retaining older features. Nevertheless, there are some differences between the two hands. Roberts had noted early on that the hand of P. Ryl. III 457 (P52) was "a heavy, rounded and rather elaborate hand," which "often uses several strokes to form a single letter ... with a rather clumsy effect." The scribe also adds "a small flourish or hook to the end of his strokes."³² By comparison, P. Egerton 2 is a less heavy hand with more formal rounded characteristics, but also with what the original editors called "cursive affini-

²⁹ Nongbri, "Use," 35–36, but his argument is that the common features are found in later manuscripts.

³⁰ Nongbri, I believe, was a doctoral student when he wrote his article, so I am not sure what this observation shows.

³¹ Roberts, *Greek Literary Hands*, 11. Nongbri acknowledges that Roberts cites this text again favorably ("Use," 35 note 34).

³² Roberts, *Unpublished Fragment*, 13.

ties.”³³ Both manuscripts were apparently written before development of the more formal Biblical majuscule style, which began to develop in the late second and early third centuries. These several characteristics push for a distinction in date, if only a minor one, between the two manuscripts. P.Ryl. III 457 (P52) was at first identified by Roberts as being slightly earlier than P.Egerton 2, on the basis of comparisons and the less formal character of the hand. There is nothing here to dispute this analysis.

5.3. Trajectory

Though firmly placed within the second century, both P.Ryl. III 457 (P52) and P.Egerton 2 have a number of features to note. I will treat the one that has been the center of recent discussion: the issue of separation in date over the hook apostrophe. This provides a good argument for how important it is to use a feature-based trajectory in attempting to arrange manuscripts chronologically. Gronewald, in his analysis of P.Köln VI 255, argued that the hooked apostrophe in recto line 3 (line 21 of the reconstructed manuscript page) indicates a date no earlier than around AD 200. Gronewald argued on the basis of a comment in Turner’s *Greek Manuscripts* that the apostrophe between mute consonants was a feature of the third century AD.³⁴ This was a major factor in pulling the dating of the two manuscripts apart. However, here is what Turner actually says: “In the first decade of iii AD this practice [of using an apostrophe between two consonants, such as double mutes or double liquids] suddenly becomes extremely common and then persists.” Note that Turner does not say that the practice does not exist before the third century AD, but that in the first decade it becomes “extremely common” and then “persists.” He then notes examples. These include one previously known example from AD 101 (ΑΥΧΟΡΙΜΦΙΣ in BGU III 715.5), and two from the end of the second century (P.Petaus 86.11, from AD 184/85; SB XIV 11342.11 from AD 193). After this evidence, Turner includes the intriguing further comment that “P.Oxy. xlii 3013, a dramatic hypothesis in a semi-cursive hand, which might otherwise be assigned to ii AD, has αΥ’ΟΩΝ (ii 30).”³⁵

³³ Bell and Skeat, *Fragments*, 1.

³⁴ Gronewald, “Unbekanntes Evangelium,” 136, citing Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, 11 n. 50 (see also p. 108). I find Gronewald’s date problematic on the basis of the evidence he marshals. According to his logic, I would have expected him to argue for a date no earlier than in the mid third century, to give time for the phenomenon to erupt fully. He also seems to conceive of the centuries as discrete blocks of time.

³⁵ Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, 11 n. 50. Contra Paul Foster, “Bold Claims, Wishful Thinking, and Lessons about Dating Manuscripts from Papyrus Egerton 2,” in Craig A. Evans, ed., *The World of Jesus and the Early Church: Identity and Interpretation in Early Communities of*

Perhaps the solution is found in Turner's further comment on P.Bodmer II (P66), which has an instance of the hooked apostrophe between double nasals (αγ'γελους): this phenomenon "is not normally written in documents till iii AD"³⁶ The example in P.Köln VI 255 is *ανενεγκον*, virtually identical to the one found in BGU III 715.5 from AD 101. I do not dispute that according to simple frequency the hooked apostrophe would indicate the third-century AD date. However, the trajectory of the development of the hooked apostrophe, according to the evidence in Turner, including his own example of a cursive hand that he thinks should be assigned to the second century AD, allows for a second-century date if there is other evidence. I think a case can be made that the other factors point exactly in this direction. The result is to mitigate the single biggest factor for pushing the date of P.Egerton 2 to AD 200, and hence separating it from proximity in date to P.Ryl. III 457 (P52).

6. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study and the result of its investigation is that we are essentially back where we began in 1935 with the first publication of P.Egerton 2 and P.Ryl. III 457 (P52)—two manuscripts that have figured largely in recent discussion of the reconstruction of early Christianity. Roberts concluded that P.Ryl. III 45 (P52) should be dated to the first half of the second century, a conclusion with which Turner was generally in agreement even if expressing caution. Bell and Skeat concluded that P.Egerton 2 should be dated to the mid second century, a cautious date on their part. Even if we recognize the two clusters of dates and evidence that Bagnall has suggested (as opposed to the four noted above), the evidence seems to indicate that we are back at the beginning. And this fact remains the same even if we take into account a larger number of comparable manuscripts, weigh letter typology, and find a suitable trajectory of manuscript features. In other words, the result is to bring the two manuscripts together, somewhere in the middle second century, perhaps tending toward the early part of it, as a workable and serviceable date of transcription.³⁷ With that in place, we can then begin to place other manuscripts and frame the development of early Christianity in the second century.

Faith (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), 193–211, esp. 201–204, who apparently does not take what Turner actually says into account, but is too quick to jump to the later date.

³⁶ Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*, 108.

³⁷ One might well argue that P.Egerton 2 should be dated later than P.Ryl. III 457 (P52), and hence in the second half of the second century, on the basis of the evidence cited above.