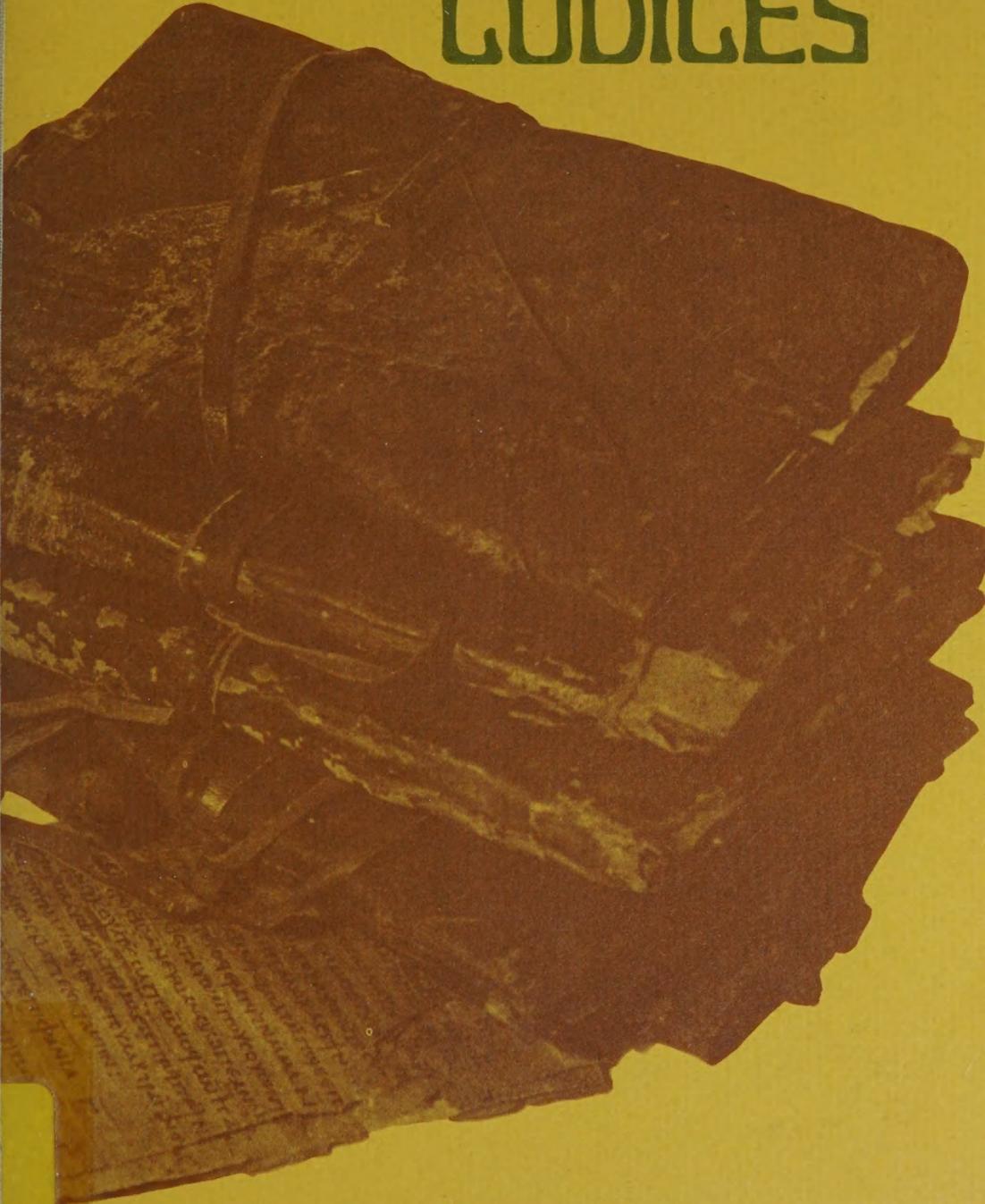




# THE NAG HAMMADI CODICES

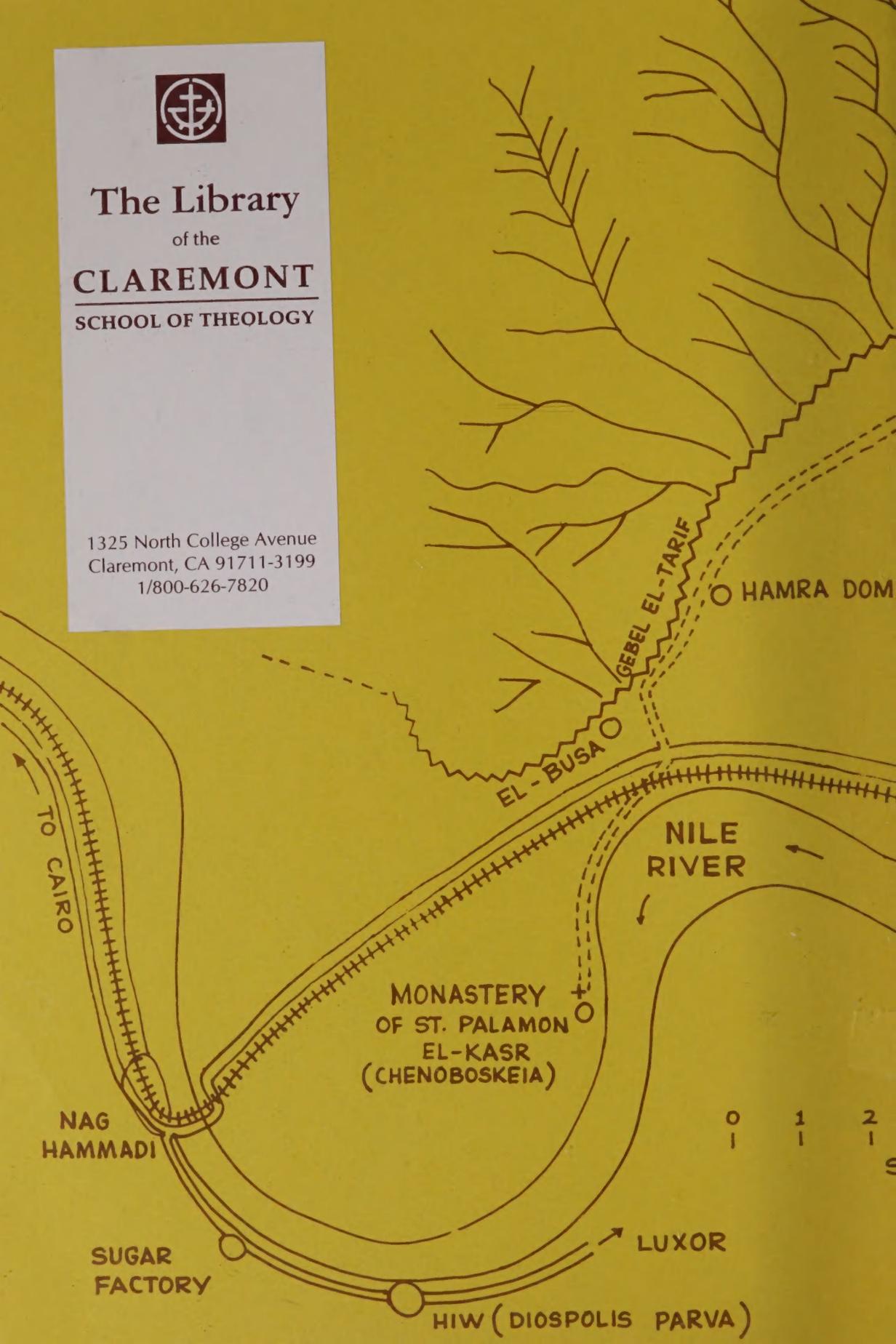


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# THE NAG HAMMADI CODICES

A general introduction to the  
nature and significance of the  
Coptic Gnostic Library from  
Nag Hammadi

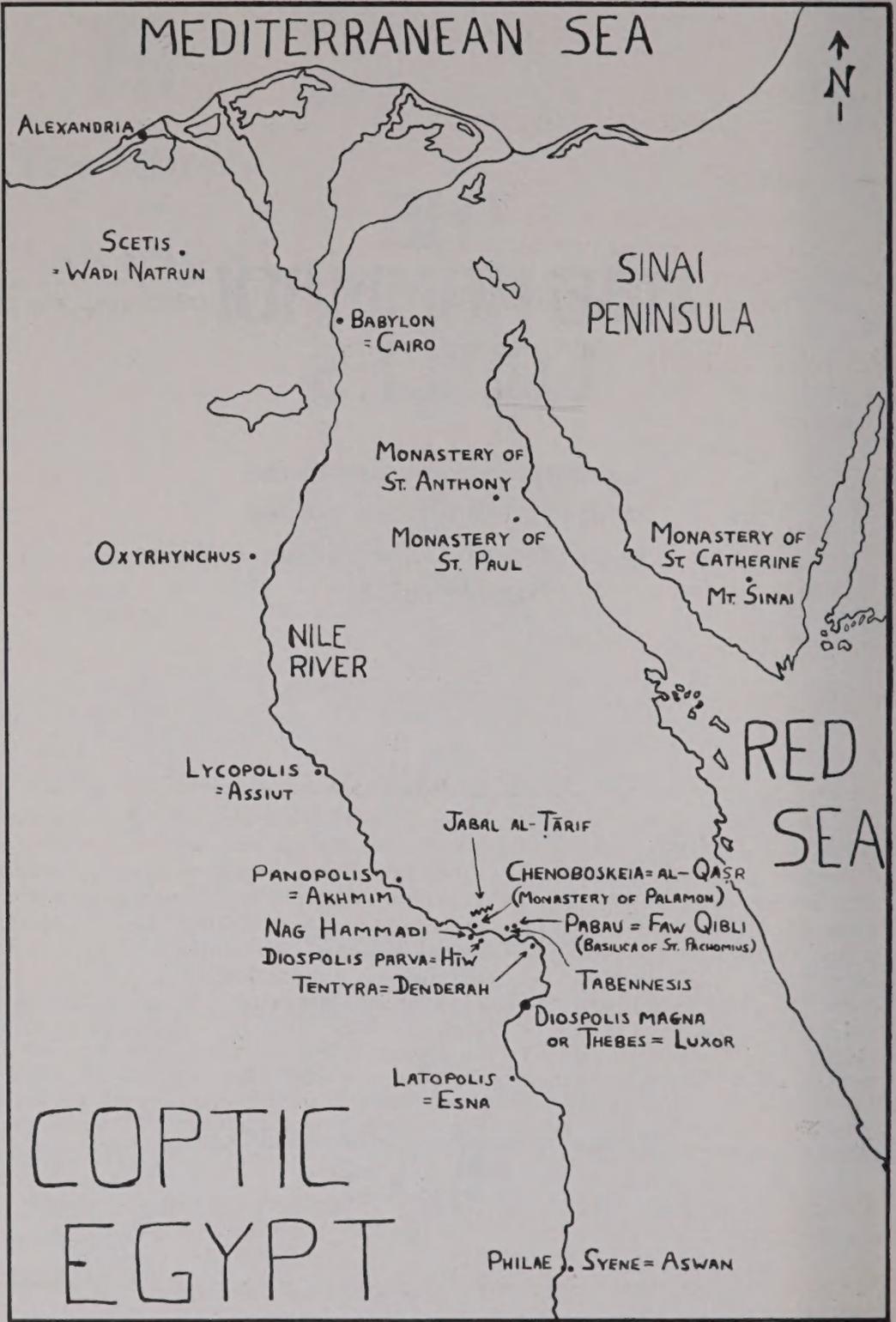
*Second, revised edition*

*by*

JAMES M. ROBINSON

OFFICIAL CATALOGUE  
OF THE  
NAG HAMMADI EXHIBIT

*Institute for Antiquity and Christianity  
Claremont, California  
1977*



COPTIC  
EGYPT

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The photograph on the cover was made by Jean Doresse in the home of Maria Dattari in Garden City, Cairo, late in 1948. It includes the bulk of the library, which was then in the possession of Phocion J. Tano, plus the one codex (Codex III) which by that time had already been purchased by the Coptic Museum. The stack on the right (visible on the front cover) includes, from top to bottom, Codices V, IX, VI, IV and X, and, protruding from beneath the stack, the eight leaves of Codex XIII that had been conserved inside the front cover of Codex VI, with p. 50 on the top, and, protruding beneath it, edges of pp. 48, 46 and 35. The stack on the left (visible on the back cover) includes, from top to bottom, Codices II, VII, VIII, III, and, in front of the stack, Codex XI (with a fragment from p. 7 visible upside-down and backwards through a hole in the cover). At the left edge are leaves from Codices I (p. 50) and XII (p. 28). This photograph thus includes all the library except the cover of Codex I and the 51 leaves (plus over a hundred fragments) of Codex I (later to be known as the Jung Codex), which had been taken out of Egypt by Albert Eid, and the leaves of Codex III, which had already been removed from the cover and conserved at the Coptic Museum. The photographs on the cover and of Codex VII on p. iii are published through the courtesy of Jean Doresse.

The photograph on p. ii is of the Elizabeth Hay Bechtel Psalm Scroll from Cave 11 at Qumran; it is published through her courtesy and that of the Palestine Archeological Museum.

The photograph on p. 9 was made by Douglas Kuylenstierna, photographer of the Nag Hammadi Excavation.

The photographs on p. iv, 10 and 15 are through the courtesy of Basile Psiroukis.

The photographs used in this booklet are largely though not exclusively those used with the artifacts in the Nag Hammadi Exhibit of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity.

## FROM THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS . . . . TO . . . .



The Dead Sea Scrolls have become much more familiar to the American public than the Nag Hammadi codices. Yet these two remarkable manuscript discoveries are similar enough in nature and importance that the one which is well known can help put the other into perspective.

Both manuscript collections are libraries of off-beat monastic groups, one using caves along the Wadi Qumran near the Dead Sea in Palestine, the other probably using caves cut into the face of the Jabal al-Ṭārīf near the Nile in Upper Egypt. One group hid its library in jars in the caves as the Roman Tenth Legion attacked their monastery in 68 A.D. in the war leading to the fall of Jerusalem; the other hid its library in a jar under the edge of a barrel-shaped boulder fallen onto the sloping talus of the Jabal al-Ṭārīf, perhaps when Roman authorities, now in the name of orthodox Christianity, were stamping out Gnosticism in the region of the Pachomian monasteries around 400 A.D.

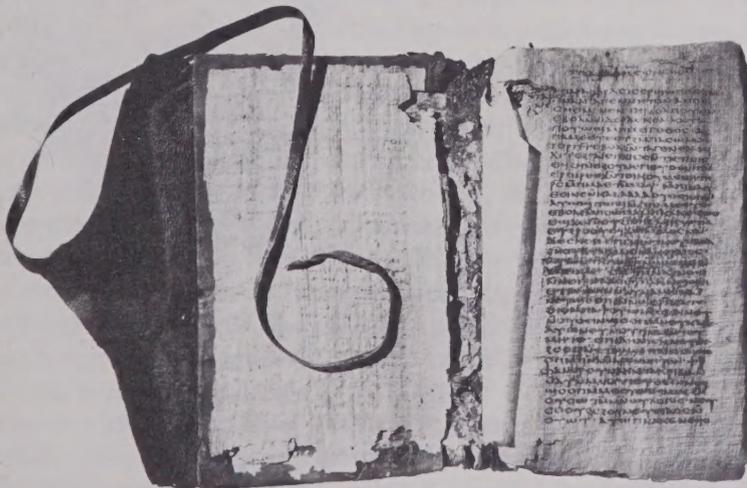
One library was written primarily in Hebrew; the other was originally composed in Greek, but had been translated into the Egyptian language of the day, Coptic. One was written from the Second Century B.C. to the First Century A.D.; the other from the First to the Fourth Century A.D. One was written mainly on parchment scrolls; the other was written in papyrus codices, that is to say, scrolls cut into sheets, then folded into quires and bound in leather covers as books are today.

One library was found by Muḥammad al-Dhīb hunting for a lost goat in a cave late in 1946; the other by two brothers, Muḥammad and Khalīfah 'Alī of the al-Sammān clan, peasants digging for fertilizer in December 1945. One is now primarily conserved in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, Israel; the other in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, Egypt. Large parts of one were published and avidly studied in the '50s and '60s, but publication of the rest tended to stagnate; some parts of the other have become available only in a trickle — but the flood gates have just opened: A complete one-volume English translation has now appeared, with the result that a tidal wave is beginning to sweep over the well-worn ruts of scholarship, as new maps of early Judaism and Christianity begin to emerge. The Coptic Gnostic library is accelerating dramatically the process of reinterpretation already begun by the Dead Sea Scrolls.

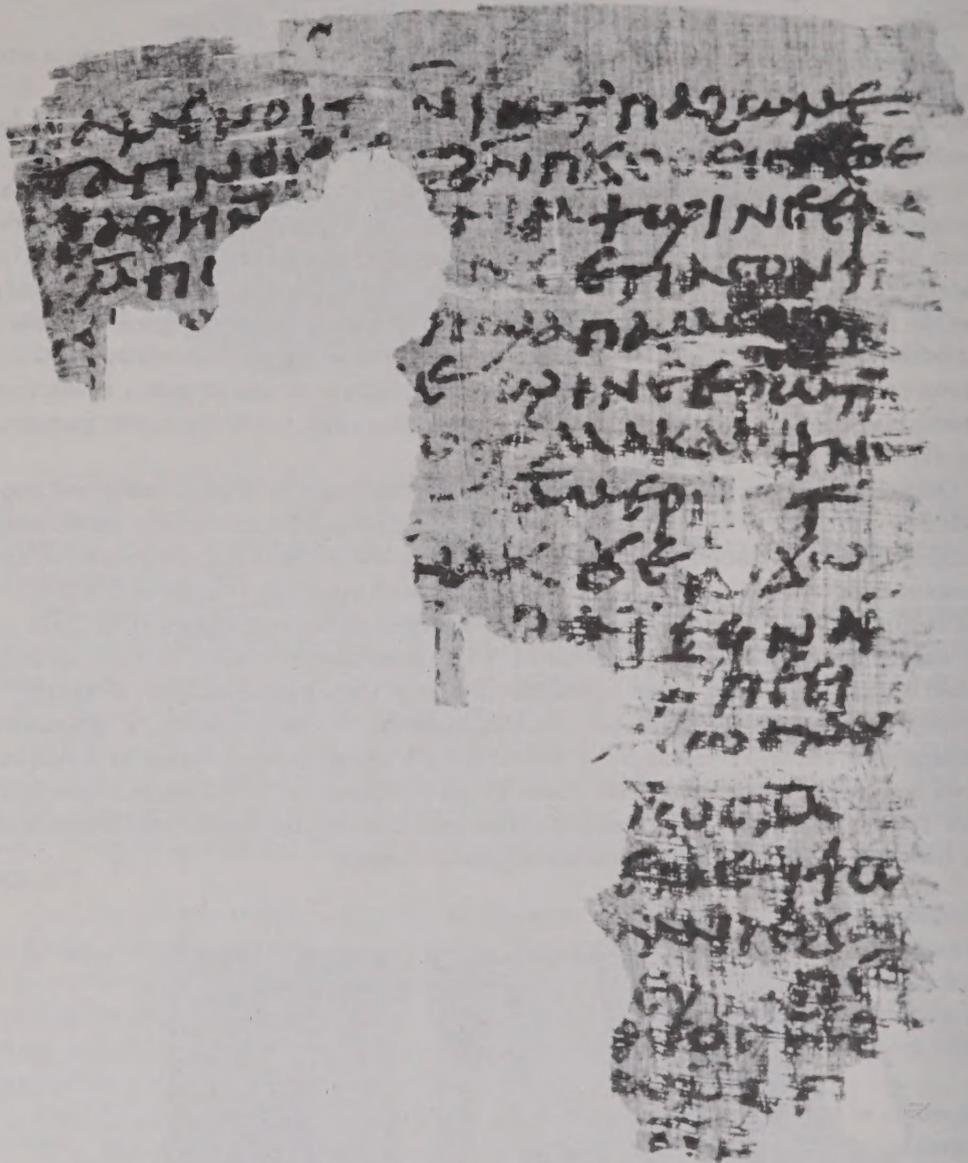
One library contains the texts of heretical Jews expelled from the Jerusalem temple, part of a group called Essenes; the other contains the texts of heretical Christians perhaps expelled from the monasteries founded by Saint Pachomius, part of a group called Gnostics. The Essenes used the Hebrew Scriptures, but interpreted them in terms of dualism; the Gnostics used both Old and New Testaments, but reinterpreted them radically in terms of cosmic dualism and a mythological gnostic redeemer.

Gnosticism was the religion that expressed most clearly the mood of defeatism and despair that swept the ancient world in the early centuries of the Christian era. But already the Essenes had provided a foretaste of this mood in the Dead Sea Scrolls by repudiating this world and longing for its end. The Israelites had originally had a religion affirming the goodness of the world, but the Jewish apocalypticism of the Dead Sea Scrolls shows how a people that had again and again lost its freedom to one world power after another gave up any realistic hope of making a go of it in this world. The Essenes did keep at least one foot on the ground by dreaming of a supernatural victory over the Romans and a magical transformation of this world into a new garden of Eden. But other religious groups in the ancient world, likewise the prey of arbitrary whims of fate, could experience an unmitigated nihilistic despair. It was in such a world that Gnosticism offered the hope of escape through withdrawal, inwardness, and transcendence.

Qumran led in part to Nag Hammadi: Essene dualism condemned this world controlled by the children of darkness and heralded an apocalyptic deliverance for the sons of light; Gnostic mythology often portrayed this world as an evil god's prison for the sparks of the divine, and imparted the knowledge with which they could escape to their lost origin above. This trajectory of other-worldly escapism was nipped in the bud by the anathemas of the orthodox rabbis of Yamnia around 100 A.D., but it was only rooted out of Christianity when in full bloom two or three centuries later. Although it survived as an organized sect only in Mesopotamia, it has continued a suppressed underground existence throughout Western civilization in such forms as medieval mysticism and William Blake, on down to Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*, Lawrence Durrell's *Monsieur*, and the counter-culture dropouts of our own day. Gnosticism is the Zen of the Western world.



.... THE NAG HAMMADI CODICES



Coptic letter from Papnoute  
(Paphnoutius) to Pabome  
(Pachomius) from the cartonnage  
of Codex VII.

## THE MANUSCRIPTS

### The Scribes of the Nag Hammadi Codices

The region where the Nag Hammadi codices were discovered is famous in Christian history for the birth of the Christian monastic movement. Even before the Roman Empire became Christian soon after 300 A.D. individual monks had been living as hermits in the desert to escape persecution and to avoid worldly defilement. An army recruit was so impressed with the Christians bringing food, water and care to the draftees as they were transported against their will down the river that, on being freed from military service, he returned to one such hermit to live in his cave with him. But after this period of initiation he decided to try to make achievement of the holy life easier by bringing together isolated hermits into a community, with ground rules specifying in considerable detail the arduous ascetic life all would observe. This organizer of the first monastic community was named Pachomius. During his lifetime, spanning the first half of the Fourth Century, a chain of Pachomian monasteries was founded up and down the Nile in the Nag Hammadi region.

Since the Nag Hammadi codices seem to have been copied out in the Fourth Century, one has wondered if they might be related in some way to this ascetic monastic movement. Striking confirmation of this idea has turned up hidden in the leather covers of the books themselves! They had been made into hardback books by lining the leather covers with a stiffening of cardboard made by pasting together a number of layers of used papyrus. We were able to dampen this papyrus in the covers sufficiently to remove it layer by layer without damaging the writing on it. To our surprise, we found in it fragments of the book of Genesis along with many unimportant Coptic and Greek letters and business papers. They did have the virtue of containing dates and the names of persons and places, which have helped to locate in time and space the manufacture of the books. Dates in the cover of Codex VII are 333, 341, 346 and 348 A.D., suggesting that this codex was produced after the middle of the Fourth Century. The business papers of a Pachomian monk named Sansnos, who was in charge of the herds, were largely used in this cover. One can imagine that it was his work with the herds that got him involved in the handicrafts of producing leather and binding books. The cover of Codex I (the Jung Codex), today the property of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, is lined with a document mentioning Chenoboskeia, where Pachomius became a monk and where the third monastery he founded was located. This hamlet is only 3.3 miles from the place where the library was discovered. In fact, it is the home town of the brothers who discovered the manuscripts.

It is difficult to imagine just why a Pachomian monastery would manufacture heretical books. Perhaps one of their handicrafts to earn needed funds was making books with blank pages the purchaser would inscribe — unless the Monastery's scribe hired himself out. But it is also possible that the various biographies of Pachomius are reading back later views when they describe the staunch orthodoxy of the monasteries. After all, the first generation of monks in them, around the middle of the Fourth Century, consisted in large part of hermits who came from their lonely caves or desert hideouts to join a monastic community — not exactly the kind of persons who would be used to hierarchical authority emanating from Alexandria or to the jurisdiction of a local bishop. And in fact the unity holding together the vast diversity of myths and religious backgrounds represented in the library seems to lie in the extreme asceticism that pervades both the library and the Pachomian monastic movement.

If there were any Gnostics among the first Pachomian monks, they were gradually weeded out. The *Life of Pachomius* reports a debate with a "philosopher" from Achmim, where there was a Pachomian monastery, who came to test the monks' "understanding of the scriptures," only to be refuted by the monk who later succeeded Pachomius as the head of the chain of monasteries. Archbishop Athanasius in 367 A.D. promulgated an Easter letter that condemned

heretics and their “apocryphal books to which they attribute antiquity and give the name of saints.” His letter was translated into Coptic in order to be read by the monks in the Pachomian monasteries, which suggests that a house-cleaning was required. Another Pachomian source quotes one of the “books that the heretics write” but “give out under the name of saints”: “After Eve was deceived and had eaten the fruit of the tree, it is of the devil that she bore Cain.” This version of the Genesis story is found more than once in the Nag Hammadi library! Early in the Fifth Century A.D. Shenoute, Abbot of the White Monastery nearby at Achmim, attacked a group in an adjacent temple by citing some of their favorite phrases, which turn out to recur frequently in the Nag Hammadi library, and he succeeded in seizing their “books full of abomination” and “of every kind of magic.” His parting threat: “I shall make you acknowledge . . . the Archbishop Cyril, or else the sword will wipe out most of you, and moreover those of you who are spared will go into exile.” The Gnostics may well have been forced to withdraw to the caves at the edge of the desert — where their library was discovered.

### The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices

In the month of December peasants of the Nag Hammadi region fertilize their land by carrying nitrates in the saddle-bags of their camels from the flank or talus of the cliff, the Jabal al-Ṭārif, to their fields. Two brothers, Muḥammad and Khalīfah ‘Alī of the al-Sammān clan, hobbled their camels on the south side of a fallen boulder and came upon a jar as they were digging around its base on the other side. Muḥammad ‘Alī reports that at first he was afraid to break the jar, whose lid may have been sealed with bitumen, for fear that a *jinn* (Arabic for “evil spirit”) might be closed up inside it. But, on reflecting that the jar might contain gold, he recovered his courage and smashed it with his mattock. Out swirled gold-like particles that disappeared into the sky (neither *jinns* nor gold but perhaps papyrus fragments). Inside the jar Muḥammad ‘Alī found to his great disappointment only a collection of old books! He wrapped them in his tunic, slung it over his shoulder, unhobbled his camel, and went home, a hovel in the hamlet of al-Qaṣr, the ancient site of Chenoboskeia where some sixteen centuries earlier Pachomius had begun his life as a Christian.

Half a year earlier, during the night of 7 May 1945, the father of the two brothers, whose name was ‘Alī, had killed a marauder while on his job as night watchman guarding irrigation equipment in the fields. By mid-morning of the next day he had in turn been murdered in blood vengeance. The murder went unsolved. But about a month after the discovery of the books, that is to say, in January 1946, a peasant named Aḥmad fell asleep sitting in the heat of the day on the side of the dirt road near Muḥammad ‘Alī’s house, a jar of sugar-cane molasses for sale beside him. A neighbor pointed him out to Muḥammad ‘Alī as the murderer of his father. He ran home and alerted his brothers and widowed mother, who had told her seven sons to keep their mattocks sharp. Muḥammad ‘Alī describes with relish how the family fell upon their victim, hacked off his limbs bit by bit, ripped out his heart, and devoured it among them as the ultimate act of blood revenge.

Aḥmad had been the son of the sheriff, Īsmā‘īl Husayn, a strong man imposed on al-Qaṣr from outside, who had been brought in since he was from the Hawāra tribe, which is so alienated from the local Arab population that it considers itself non-Arabic though claiming direct descent from the Prophet. The village of the Hawāra, Ḥamrah Dūm, is located right at the foot of the Jabal al-Ṭārif. For this reason Muḥammad ‘Alī has been afraid to return to the site of his discovery lest his act of vengeance be in turn avenged. In fact, Aḥmad’s brother did avenge the death by killing two members of the al-Sammān clan. Even a decade later, when Aḥmad’s teen-age son heard that at dusk in al-Qaṣr there was to be a funeral procession of the family of Muḥammad ‘Alī, he proved his manhood by sneaking into town and killing or wounding a

score of persons in the procession. Muḥammad ‘Alī proudly shows a wound just above his heart, to prove that his enemies tried but failed to gain vengeance. But he stoutly refused to return to the cliff to identify the site of the discovery until a camouflage costume, a governmental escort, and of course a financial consideration combined to persuade him to change his mind.

The village of al-Qaṣr was so glad to be rid of the son of the hated sheriff that no eye-witnesses could be found to testify at the hearing. But during this period the police tended to search Muḥammad ‘Alī’s home every evening for weapons. Having been told that the books were Christian, no doubt simply on the basis of the Coptic script, Muḥammad ‘Alī asked the Coptic priest of al-Qaṣr, Bāsīlīyūs ‘Abd al-Masīḥ (his name means “royal servant of the Messiah”), if he could deposit the books in his house. A priest’s home would probably not be searched. Coptic priests marry, and this priest’s wife had a brother, Rāghib Andrawus, who went from village to village in a circuit teaching English and history in the parochial schools of the Coptic Church. Once a week when he taught in al-Qaṣr he stayed in his sister’s home. When he saw one of the books (Codex III), he recognized its potential value and persuaded the priest to give it to him. He took it to Cairo and showed it to a Coptic physician interested in the Coptic language, George Sobhi, who called in the authorities from the Department of Antiquities. They took control of the book and agreed to pay Rāghib £300. After what seemed to be endless delays, Rāghib finally received £250 once he agreed to make a gift of the balance of £50 to the Coptic Museum, where the book was deposited. The Register of the Museum records the date as 4 October 1946.

Thinking the books were worthless, and perhaps even a source of bad luck, the mother of Muḥammad ‘Alī had burned part of them in the oven (probably Codex XII, of which only a few fragmentary leaves remain). Illiterate Muslim neighbors took the remainder for next to nothing. Nāshid Bisādah had one, and entrusted it to a gold merchant of Nag Hammadi to sell in Cairo, whereupon they divided the profit. A grain merchant is reported to have acquired another and sold it in Cairo at such a high price that he was able to set up his shop there. The villagers of al-Qaṣr identify him as Fikrī Jibrā’īl, today the proprietor of the “Nag Hammadi Store” in Cairo. However, he denies any involvement. Bahīj ‘Alī, a one-eyed outlaw of al-Qaṣr, got his hands on most of the books. Escorted by a well-known antiquities dealer of the region, Dhakī Bastā, he went to Cairo. They first offered the books to Mansoor’s shop at Shepherds Hotel, and then to the shop of Phocion J. Tano, who bought their whole stock and then went to Nag Hammadi to get whatever was left.

Most of Codex I was taken out of Egypt by a Belgian antiquities dealer in Cairo, Albert Eid. It was offered for sale unsuccessfully in New York and Ann Arbor in 1949, and then on 10 May 1952 was acquired in Belgium from Eid’s widow by the Jung Institute of Zürich and named the “Jung Codex.” It has been gradually returned after publication to Cairo, where it is conserved in the Coptic Museum of Old Cairo. Meanwhile, Tano’s collection was taken into custody by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities to prevent it from leaving the country. After Nasser came to power it was declared governmental property. A law suit filed on behalf of the former owner was settled with a token compensation of £4,000. Today the Nag Hammadi library is back together again and is conserved in the Coptic Museum.

### The Extent of the Nag Hammadi Codices

The Nag Hammadi library is actually much more comprehensive than twelve codices plus one loose tractate might suggest. Each codex is in fact a collection of essays.

The Nag Hammadi library contains a total of fifty-two essays or tractates. A more significant fact is the number of previously unknown documents included in that total. First one can subtract six duplicates within the library itself, leaving forty-six different tractates. But six of these are texts of which a complete copy existed elsewhere, so that there are only forty tractates

that exist only in the Nag Hammadi library. Fragments of three of these tractates exist elsewhere, but these fragments were too small to make an identification of their contents possible until the Nag Hammadi discovery provided the full text. Of course some of the Nag Hammadi tractates are themselves sufficiently fragmentary that the train of thought is often broken and an adequate understanding of the documents hindered. About ten tractates are in poor condition, whereas about thirty tractates are in relatively good condition and are for all practical purposes rescued for posterity. This is a remarkably rich harvest of previously unknown texts. One may compare the Dead Sea Scrolls, where small fragments of many more scrolls survive, but the number of previously unknown texts that survive intact is surprisingly small. One may also compare the New Testament, which consists of twenty-seven tractates.

In terms of pages of text, the size of the Nag Hammadi library is also impressive. There were originally at least 1,239 inscribed pages that were buried, of which at least part of 1,156 survive. This means that 93% of the pages in whole or part have survived. Most of the missing pages are from one codex (XII) that is almost entirely lost, but many of these pages contained tractates of which another copy survives intact. Hence the actual loss of text is considerably less. To be sure some of the surviving pages — perhaps about a third — have suffered varying degrees of fragmentation. Yet even here there is some consolation. Old photographs made as early as 1947 document the existence of bits of text that have subsequently broken off and become lost. And when one considers the amount of text that can be filled in with considerable reliability by the painstaking efforts of various scholars who have devoted years to their study, the actual loss is even less. In view of the risks, callous handling, delays and crises the Nag Hammadi codices have undergone since their discovery, this is a remarkable record of preservation.

### The Publication of the Nag Hammadi Codices

The publication of most of the Nag Hammadi codices was delayed a quarter of a century by monopolistic tendencies and national rivalries as well as by the vicissitudes of Near Eastern politics: the fall of King Farouk and the rise of Nasser, the Suez crisis, and the Six Day War. After twenty-five years only about a half of the library had been published, and that mostly in German. But this situation has been changed by the intervention of UNESCO, which together with the Arab Republic of Egypt named an International Committee for the Nag Hammadi Codices in 1970 and entrusted it with publishing photographs of the whole library. Four of its members constituted a Technical Sub-Committee commissioned to prepare the edition. Led by James M. Robinson, Secretary of the Committee, and assisted by members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, this work group convened two or three weeks each year at the Coptic Museum in Cairo from 1970 through 1973 to assemble fragments, determine page sequence, and supervise photography. Funding from the Smithsonian Institution through the sponsorship of the American Research Center in Egypt made it possible for members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project team to work intensively from July 1974 through January 1975, and to keep a staff member at work there through most of 1975-77. *The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices* began to be published in the spring of 1972 by the firm E. J. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, supervised by the ARE/UNESCO Committee. By the end of 1977 all thirteen codices had thus been put in the public domain. Coinciding with this event, the English translations of all thirteen codices have been published in a single volume at the end of 1977, entitled *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. Meanwhile, a complete English edition entitled *The Coptic Gnostic Library* has also begun to appear in 1975 with *The Gospel of the Egyptians* as the first of some eleven volumes. An archaeological expedition has in 1975 begun ongoing excavations at the site of the find and the Pachomian monasteries nearby. Thus the coming generation gives promise of being a period of avid study of the Nag Hammadi codices, just as the past generation has been engrossed with the Dead Sea Scrolls.

# THE GNOSTIC RELIGION

## The Gnostic Outlook on Life

The Nag Hammadi library is a collection of religious texts that vary widely from each other as to when, where, and by whom they were written. Even the points of view diverge to such an extent that the texts are not to be thought of as coming from one group or movement. Yet these diversified materials must have had something in common which caused them to be chosen by those who collected them. The collectors no doubt contributed to this unity by finding in the texts hidden meanings not fully intended by the original authors. After all, one of them, the *Gospel of Thomas*, begins with a word to the wise: "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death." Thus the texts can be read at two levels: what the original author may have intended to communicate and what the texts may subsequently have been taken to communicate.

The focus that brought the collection together is an estrangement from the mass of humanity, an affinity to an ideal order that completely transcends life as we know it, and a life-style radically other than common practice. This life-style involved both giving up all the goods that people usually desire and longing for an ultimate liberation. It is not an aggressive revolution that is intended, but rather a withdrawal from involvement in the contamination that destroys clarity of vision.

As such, the focus of this library has much in common with primitive Christianity, with eastern religions, and with holy men of all times, as well as with the more secular equivalents of today, such as the counter-culture movements coming from the 1960's. Disinterest in the goods of a consumer society, withdrawal into communes of the like-minded away from the bustle and clutter of big-city distraction, non-involvement in the compromises of the political process, sharing an in-group's knowledge both of the disaster-course of the culture and of an ideal, radical alternative not commonly known — all this in modern garb is the real challenge rooted in such materials as the Nag Hammadi library.

These ancient texts then have to do with an understanding of existence, an answer to the human dilemma, an attitude toward society, that is worthy of being taken quite seriously by anyone able and willing to grapple with such ultimate issues. This Gnostic outlook on life has until now been known almost exclusively through the myopic view of heresy-hunters, who often quote only to refute or ridicule. Thus the coming to light of the Nag Hammadi library gives unexpected access to the Gnostic stance as Gnostics themselves presented it. It provides new roots for the uprooted, a new challenge to the Establishment.

### Christian Gnostics

Those who collected this library were Christians, and many of the essays were originally composed by Christian authors. In a sense this should not be surprising, since primitive Christianity was itself a radical movement. Jesus called for a full reversal of values, announcing the end of the world as we have known it and its replacement by a quite new, utopian kind of life in which the ideal would be the real. He took a stand quite independent of the authorities of his day . . . and did not last very long before they eliminated him. Through a remarkable experience of his vindication, his followers reaffirmed his stand — for them he came to personify the ultimate goal. Yet some of his circle, being a bit more practical, followed a more conventional way of life. The circle gradually became an established organization with a quite natural concern to maintain order, continuity, lines of authority, and stability. But this concern could encourage a commitment to the status quo, rivalling, and at times outweighing, the commitment to the ultimate goal far beyond any and every attained achievement. Those who cherished the radical dream, the ultimate hope, would tend to throw it up as an invidious comparison to what was

achieved. Thus they might well seem to be disloyal, and to pose a serious threat to the organization.

As the cultural situation changed with the passage of time and the shift of environments, the language for expressing such radical transcendence itself underwent change. The world of thought from which Jesus and his first followers had come was the popular piety of the Jewish synagogue, focussed in terms of John the Baptist's apocalyptic rite of transition from the old regime to the new ideal world whose dramatic arrival was forthcoming. In this way of thinking, the evil system that prevails is not the way things really are. In principle, though not in practice, the world is good. The evil that pervades history is a blight, ultimately alien to the world as such. But increasingly for some the outlook on life darkened; the very origin of the material world was attributed to a terrible fault, and evil was given status as the basic rule in this world, not just a usurpation of authority. Hence the only hope seemed to reside in escape. But humans, or at least some humans, are at heart not the product of such an absurd system, but by their very nature belong to the ultimate. Their plight is that they have been duped and lured into the trap of trying to be content in the impossible world, alienated from their true home. And for some a mystical inwardness undistracted by external factors came to be the only way to attain the repose, the overview, the merger into the All revealed to them as the destiny of one's spark of the divine.

Christian Gnosticism thus emerged as a reaffirmation, though in somewhat different terms, of the original stance of transcendence central to the very beginnings of Christianity. Such Gnostic Christians surely considered themselves the faithful continuation, under changing circumstances, of that original stance which made Christians Christians. But the "somewhat different terms" and "under changing circumstances" also involved real divergences, and other Christians surely considered Gnosticism a betrayal of the original Christian position. This was the conviction not just of those who had accommodated themselves to the status quo, but no doubt also of some who still sensed the force of the original protest and ultimate hope. But as Christianity became organized and normalized, this divergence between the new radicals and those who retained the more traditional Christian language became intolerable. Gnostics came to be excluded from the Church as heretics.

But the Nag Hammadi library also documents the fact that the rejection was mutual, in that Christians here described as "heretical" seem to be more like what is usually thought of as "orthodox." The *Apocalypse of Peter* has Christ criticize the orthodox as follows:

They will cleave to the name of a dead man, thinking that they will become pure. But they will become greatly defiled and they will fall into a name of error and into the hand of an evil, cunning man and a manifold dogma, and they will be ruled heretically. For some of them will blaspheme the truth and proclaim evil teaching. And they will say evil things against each other . . . . But many others, who oppose the truth and are the messengers of error, will set up their error and their law against these pure thoughts of mine, as looking out from one (perspective), thinking that good and evil are from one (source). They do business in my word . . . . And there shall be others of those who are outside our number who name themselves bishop and also deacons, as if they have received their authority from God. They bend themselves under the judgment of the leaders. These people are dry canals.

With the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity of the more conventional kind, the survival chances of Gnostic Christianity, such as that reflected in the Nag Hammadi library, were sharply reduced. The Bishop of Cyprus, Epiphanius, whose main work was a "Medicine Chest" against all heresies, describes his encounter with Gnosticism in Egypt about the same time the Nag Hammadi library was being collected:



1. *The Jabal al-Ṭārif cliffs seen from Diospolis Parva (Hīw) across the Nile.*



2. *The bend in the Nile at Nag Hammadi seen from the Jabal al-Ṭārif.*



3. *The Jabal al-Tarif from the site of the excavation of the Basilica of St. Pachomius at Faw Qibli.*



4. *The Jabal al-Tarif with the site of the discovery just to the left of the camels.*



5. *The site of the discovery beneath the shaded northern flank of the broken boulder on the talus of the cliff.*

The stone in the foreground is the position from which Jean Dorese made photographs labeled "Site of the Discovery" in the French and English editions of his book.



6. *Muḥammad 'Alī al-Sammān Khalīfah and James M. Robinson on the site of the discovery.*



7. *The Graeco-Roman Polished Red Ware R37 bowl of the Fifth Century A.D. used to seal the jar.*



8. *Munīr al-Qamṣ Basīlīyūs ‘Abd al-Masīḥ and Salīb ‘Abd al-Masīḥ at Chenoboskeia (al-Qaṣr).*  
Salīb received the lid of the jar in which the codices were buried from his uncle Sāmīḥ, in whose home Muḥammad ‘Alī’s brother Khalīfah was a servant. Munīr as a child saw the codices in the home of his father al-Qamṣ Basīlīyūs and led Robinson to Muḥammad ‘Alī, Rāghīb Andrawus and Salīb.



9. *The Monastery between al-Qaṣr and al-Ṣayyād with the Churches of St. Palamon and St. George in front of the Jabal al-Ṭārīf three miles away.*



10. *Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Sammān Khalīfah at Chenoboskeia (al-Qaṣr) in front of the Monastery.*



11. Ḥamrah Dūm at the foot of the Jabal al-Ṭārīf a quarter of a mile away.



12. The widowed mother of Muḥammad 'Alī who burnt some of the library (Codex XII ?) in the oven.



13. Aḥmad Īsm'ā'il Ḥusayn al-Sayyid from near Ḥamrah Dūm. He avenged his father's murder by shooting Muḥammad 'Alī just above the heart.



14. *Rāghib Andrawus al-Qas 'Abd al-Sayyid*.  
He received Codex III from his brother-in-law al-Qamṣ Bāšīlyūs and sold it to the Coptic Museum.



15. *Bahij 'Alī Muḥammad Ādam, one-eyed Bad-Man of Chenoboskeia (al-Qaṣr)*.  
He obtained the bulk of the codices from the family of Muḥammad 'Alī.



16. *Dhaki Bastā, provincial antiquities dealer of Qena*. He took Bahij 'Alī to Cairo to sell the codices.

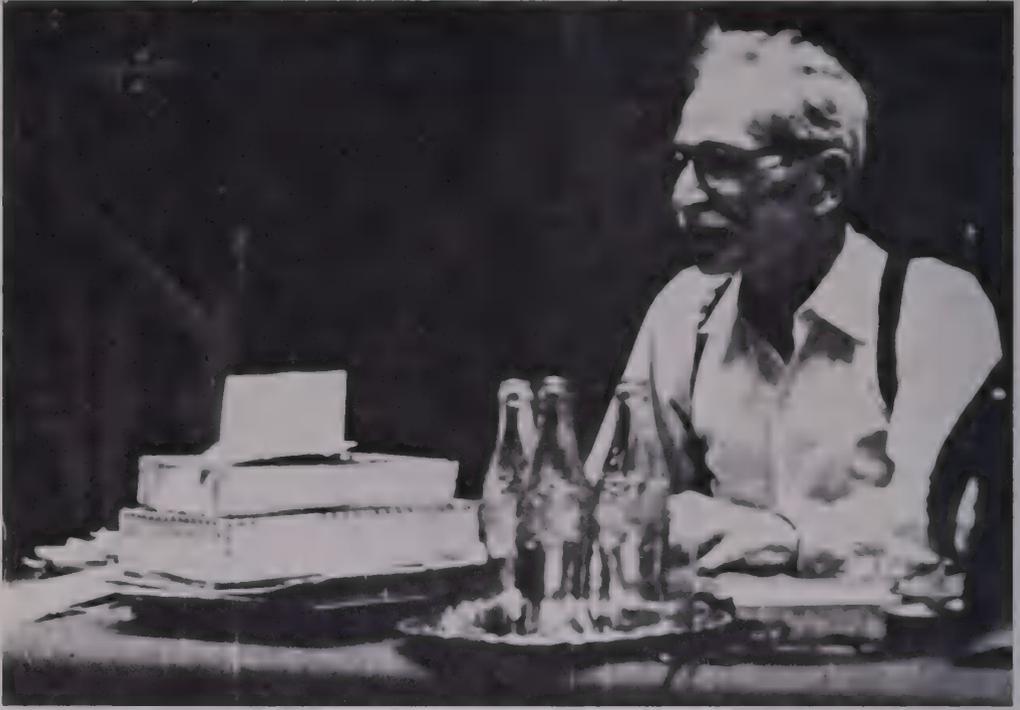


17. *Phocion J. Tano, Cypriote antiquities dealer of Cairo*.  
He used Maria Dattari as a front for his possession of the codices, which were acquired from Bahij 'Alī and Dhaki Bastā, but then nationalized by the Egyptian government.





18. *The inside of the leather cover of Codex I (the Jung Codex).*  
The papyrus reused to stiffen the cover mentions Chenoboskeia (abbreviated . . . see the inset).



19. *Albert Eid, Belgian antiquities dealer of Cairo.*  
He took Codex I (the Jung Codex) from Egypt to New York and then to Belgium.



20. *Simone Eid, widow of Albert Eid.*



21. *Henri-Beat von Fischer-Reichenbach,*  
*Swiss Ambassador to Egypt*

*They negotiated in Cairo the sale of the Jung Codex*



22. Abbot Étienne Drioton, Director of the Department of Antiquities of Egypt, Marianne and Jean Dorese.



23. Togo Mina, Director of the Coptic Museum, and Jean Dorese with Codex III in the Director's office.



24. *Henri-Charles Puech, Gilles Quispel and Michel Malinine.*  
The original editors of the Jung Codex at work at Utrecht.



25. *C.A. Meier, James M. Robinson, George H. Page and Pabor Labib.*

Meier, Director Emeritus of the Jung Institute, and Page, American patron of the Jung Institute who funded the acquisition of the Jung Codex, on the occasion in December 1976 when they were the guests of honor of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization after the return of the Jung Codex to Cairo.



26. *Martin Krause and Pabor Labib.*  
They supervised the first plexiglass conservation of the codices 1959-1961.



27. *Mirrīṭ Bouṭros Ghālī, Alexander Böblig, Murād Kamīl and Johannes Leipoldt.*  
Böblig and Leipoldt lead a delegation from the German Democratic Republic to Cairo in 1959 to work on the codices. Here they are received by the President and Vice-President of the Société d'archéologie copte.



28. *International Committee of Gnosticism 1956.*  
*Henri-Charles Puech, Pabor Labib, Gilles Quispel at the Director's desk of the Coptic Museum.*



29. *International Committee for the Nag Hammadi Codices 1970.*  
*Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, Pabor Labib, Martin Krause, Søren Giversen, Victor Girgis, James M. Robinson, Gilles Quispel, Antoine Guillaumont, Shafik Farid, Henri-Charles Puech, Rodolphe Kasser.*



30. *Work Session in the Library of the Coptic Musium 1973.*

*Victor Girgis, Martin Krause, Pabor Labib, James M. Robinson, Charles W. Hedrick, James Brashler, Frederik Wisse, Douglas M. Parrott, Bentley Layton, John H. Sieber, Hans-Martin Schenke.*



31. *Henry Kissinger's visit to the Coptic Museum in 1974.*



32. *The Coptic Museum in Old Cairo.*



33. *The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity in Claremont.*

I have had a brush with this sect myself, beloved, and got my information about its customs in person, straight from the mouths of its members. Women who believed this nonsense offered it to me, and told me the kind of thing I have been describing. In their brazen impudence, what is more, they tried to seduce me, like that vicious, wicked Egyptian woman who was married to the chief cook — I was young, and this made me attractive to them . . . . For the women who told me about this salacious myth were outwardly very charming, but all the devil's ugliness was in their vile minds. However, the merciful God saved me from their depravity. Then, while I was at it, I read their books, understood what they really intended, and was not entrapped as they had been; their literature left me unmoved. And I promptly reported these people to the local bishops, and found which of them were masquerading as members of the church. And so they were driven out of the city, about eighty of them, and it was cleansed of their rank, thorny growth.

### Non-Christian Gnostics

This same withdrawal to inwardness, or despair of the world, from which the Gnostic outlook on life emerged, swept not only through early Christianity to produce Christian Gnosticism, but also through late antiquity in general, thus producing forms of Gnosticism outside of Christianity. There is a long-standing debate among historians of religion as to whether Gnosticism is to be understood as only an inner-Christian development or as a movement broader than, and hence independent of, perhaps even prior to Christianity. This debate seems to be resolving itself, on the basis of the Nag Hammadi library, in favor of understanding Gnosticism as a much broader phenomenon than early Christian heresy-hunters would lead one to think.

Some of the Gnostic essays do not seem to reflect Christian tradition, but do build upon the Old Testament, which was of course also the Jewish Bible. In this sense one often hears reference to Jewish Gnosticism. Such a concept is often rejected as a contradiction in terms. How could Jews designate their God as the malevolent force whose misguided blunder produced the world, a God who was ignorant of the hidden good God beyond? Since Christians worship the same God as do Jews, this argument could also be made against the very idea of Christian Gnosticism. But since early Christian heresy-hunters clearly identified Gnostics as Christians, though of course heretical Christians, the concept of Christian Gnosticism is firmly established. To use another analogy, Simon Magus, one of the earliest known Gnostics, was from Samaria, although the Samaritans worshipped in their own way the same God as did the Jews and Christians. Hence by analogy the concept of Jewish Gnostics is intelligible, even if, from a given normative point of view, the validity of using the word Jewish, Christian, or Samaritan for such a heretical person or text may be contested.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has already drawn attention to the fact that first century Judaism was quite pluralistic in its theological positions, and contained a number of divergent sects. Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Essenes were treated by scholars much as were the Gnostics prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library; both were movements about which too little was known to be treated with the seriousness they deserved. Now we know that the Essenes were a Jewish sect that had broken with the official Judaism of the Jerusalem temple and had withdrawn to the desert at the Wadi Qumran. They understood their situation in terms of the antithesis of light and darkness, truth and the lie, a dualism that ultimately went back to Persian dualism — and then moved forward toward Gnosticism. The latest of the Dead

Sea Scrolls meet in time and space one of the earliest of the Nag Hammadi texts, the *Apocalypse of Adam*, in which Gnosticism is transmitted to Seth by Adam on his deathbed as his last will and testament. Thus the history of Gnosticism, as documented in the Nag Hammadi library, takes up about where the history of the Essenes, as documented by the Dead Sea Scrolls, breaks off. Later Jewish mystical traditions, traced especially by Gershom Scholem, have shown that, inconsistent though it seems, Gnostic trends have continued to carry on a clandestine existence within the context of normative Judaism.

It may be that there is a vestige of historical truth to the view of Christian heresy-hunters that some Christian heresies go back to Jewish sects. After all, Christianity itself grew up within Judaism, and it would be surprising if it did not reflect various strands of the Judaism of the day. Primitive Christianity itself first became a Jewish sect, until it became largely Gentile and, after the fall of Jerusalem, was excluded. For Judaism was first standardized in response to the threat to Jewish identity posed by the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. In the process a repudiation of heretics was added to the prayers used in the synagogue, to make sure such sectarians would not attend.

It is not inconceivable that such a Christian Gnostic movement as the Sethians may simply be a Christian outgrowth of a Jewish Gnostic group. Or it may be less a matter of one sect evolving from Judaism to Christianity than of Jewish traditions about Seth being variously adapted and applied by a series of relatively independent authors. The *Apocalypse of Adam* is a Sethian text. Although this mythological adaptation of the book of Genesis includes a Gnostic Savior, the presentation does not seem to be based on the tradition of Jesus — indeed the nearest parallel in the New Testament is the very mythological childbirth in Revelation 12, which itself seems less dependent on the story of Mary and Jesus than upon some such previously unknown mythological tradition. Yet this Jewish Gnostic *Apocalypse of Adam* stands in the same tradition as another Nag Hammadi text, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, which clearly is Christian. A Sethian liturgical text in the Nag Hammadi library entitled the *Three Steles of Seth* presents a kind of Neoplatonic Gnosticism, without a clearly Christian overlay on the Jewish point of departure. Yet it gives a prominent place to the feminine deity Barbelo, familiar in Christian Gnosticism.

There are other texts in the Nag Hammadi library that seem more philosophic and Neoplatonic in orientation than Christian or Jewish, although such religious roots and interpolations do appear at times. Plotinus, the leading Neoplatonist of the third century A.D., does in fact refer to Gnostics within his school:

We feel a certain regard for some of our friends who happened upon this way of thinking before they became our friends, and, though I do not know how they manage it, continue in it.

But the school turned against Gnosticism, as Plotinus' polemics indicate. His pupil Porphyry reports in his *Life of Plotinus*:

There were in his time many Christians and others, and sectarians who had abandoned the old philosophy, men . . . who . . . produced revelations by Zoroaster and Zostrianos and Nicotheus and Allogenes and Messos and other people of the kind, deceived themselves and deceiving many, alleging that Plato had not penetrated to the depths of intelligible reality. Plotinus hence often attacked their position in his lectures, and wrote the treatise to which we have given the title "Against the Gnostics"; he left it to us to assess what he passed over. Amelius went to forty volumes in writing against the book of Zostrianos.

The Nag Hammadi library contains treatises entitled *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*, which may well be those refuted by Amelius and other Neoplatonists. And such Nag Hammadi texts as the

*Trimorphic Protennoia* and *Marsanes* are quite similar in philosophic orientation. Plotinus' own attack on Gnostic "magic chants" addressed to the "higher powers" may have in view hymnic texts like the *Three Steles of Seth*. Thus the Nag Hammadi library makes an important contribution not only to the history of religion, but also to the history of philosophy.

The Nag Hammadi library also includes material drawing upon other religious traditions than the Judaeo-Christian heritage. There are, for example, Hermetic texts that build on Egyptian lore. Typically they present dialogues of initiation between the deities Hermes Trismegistus and his son Tat. One such *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* in the Nag Hammadi library is a previously unknown Hermetic text. And, whereas one could debate whether a good number of the texts in the library are actually Gnostic or not, depending on how one defines Gnosticism and interprets the texts, a few, such as the *Sentences of Sextus*, clearly are not Gnostic. But, just as a Gnostic interpretation of the Bible became possible, one may assume that these moralistic maxims could also be fitted into a Gnostic orientation.

Since the Nag Hammadi library seems to have been collected in terms of Christian Gnosticism, it is sometimes difficult to conceive of some of the texts, such as the Hermetic ones, being used by persons who thought of themselves as Christian. One text even claims a Zoroastrian heritage, in that it is ascribed to his grandfather (or uncle) Zostrianos and in a cryptogram even mentions Zoroaster. Yet Gnostics were more ecumenical and syncretistic with regard to religious traditions than were orthodox Christians, so long as they found in them a stance congenial to their own. If they could identify Seth with Jesus, they probably could produce Christianizing interpretations of Hermes and Zoroaster as well. In another instance, it is possible to observe the Christianizing process taking place almost before one's eyes in the Nag Hammadi library itself. The non-Christian philosophic treatise *Eugnostos* is cut up somewhat arbitrarily into separate speeches, which are then put on Jesus' tongue, in answer to questions the disciples address to him during a resurrection appearance — and both forms of the text occur side by side in Codex III. In other cases the text, as it stands in the Nag Hammadi library, has an occasional but unmistakable Christian reference which, however, seems so external to the main thrust of the text that one may be inclined to think it was added by a Christian editor, translator or scribe to what had been originally composed as a non-Christian text. This has been thought to be the case, for example, with the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, and the *Trimorphic Protennoia*. It must be part of this Christianizing trend when "the Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit" is also given by some scribe the title *Gospel of the Egyptians*.

Thus Gnosticism seems not to have been in its essence just an alternate form of Christianity. Rather it was a radical trend of release from the dominion of evil or of inner transcendence that swept through late antiquity and emerged within Christianity, Judaism, Neoplatonism, the mystery religions, and the like. As a new religion it was syncretistic, drawing upon various religious heritages. But it was held together by a very decided outlook on life, which is where the unity amid the wide diversity is to be sought.



*Nag Hammadi seen from the Nile.*

... Μ Ζ Ι Α Τ ...  
 Π Ο Ζ Ε Μ Α Υ Δ Δ Υ Τ Ρ Χ Α Υ Δ Ε  
 Ν Ν Ε Η Ζ Μ Ζ Δ Δ ... Λ Ο Υ Σ Ζ Ζ  
 Τ Α Ζ Η ... Ε Τ Ν Ε Ι Ρ Ι Ν ... Τ Ο  
 Τ Ω Ρ Χ ... Ν Τ Μ Η Τ Ε Ν Ν Ο Υ Ο Ζ  
 Ε Υ Ο Ζ Ε Δ Υ Ζ Ω ... Ε Τ Ο Ο Τ Υ Μ Η  
 Ω Ο Ρ Π Ε Η Χ Ω Μ Μ Ο Σ Χ Ε Ε  
 Ω Δ Η Η Σ Α Υ Π Α Σ Ο Ν Τ Ω Μ Τ  
 Ε Ρ Ο Κ ... Ν Η Χ Ν Ο Υ Κ Ε Η Χ Ω Μ Μ  
 Χ Ε Ε Κ Η Π Ε Ν Ι Μ Δ Υ Ο Ε Κ Η Β  
 Ε Τ Ω Ν Δ Υ Ω Ν Δ Α Ρ Ι Μ Η Ε Ν Δ Ε  
 Κ Τ Μ Ο Υ Ε Ζ Α Τ Ε Κ Ζ Η Ε Κ Ε Χ Ο  
 Ν Δ Υ Χ Ε Ν Δ Τ Ε Κ Ζ Μ Ζ Δ Ι  
 ...  
 ... Ω Ρ Ο Ν Ν Ε Ν Τ ...  
 Π Ν Ν Ο Υ Σ Ε Μ Π Ε Η Χ Ο Β Ι Σ Η  
 Δ Σ Ω Ε Ι Σ Η Η Τ Ε Ζ Ω Ω Η Ο Υ  
 Η Ζ Ν Ε Ω Ν Δ Υ Ζ Ω Ν Ε Τ Ο Ο Τ  
 Μ Τ Ω Ο ... Δ Ν Π Μ Ε Υ Ο Ν  
 Δ Υ Ο Τ Ε ... Ο Ο Μ Τ ...  
 ... Ζ Α Λ ... Ν ...  
 ... Ε Τ Ν ...  
 ... Τ Ω Μ Τ Ε ...  
 ... Ε Τ Ν ... Ο Ο Σ Χ Ε Ν ...

Fragment of a Coptic Codex of  
 Genesis (32:17-21) from the  
 cartonnage of Codex VII.

# THE GNOSTICS AND THE BIBLE

## The Gnostic Reinterpretation of Genesis

The book of Genesis, like Homer's epic poems, made a tremendous impression on the ancient world. After all, it recorded the very beginnings, the antediluvian revelation of God. The Gnostic way of trying to understand the situation in which human beings find themselves in this world was to speculate on how the whole horrid mess came about. Their preferred text-book was obviously Genesis. We have long ago become accustomed to the traditional Christian and Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures. The commentaries among the Dead Sea Scrolls have shown a third variant, interpreting Old Testament prophets as predicting the recent history of the Essenes. But here in the Nag Hammadi codices we find biblical interpretation with a vengeance!

Since this world is hell, its creator must be the devil. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures, who revealed his name to Moses as Yahweh, became for many Gnostics the evil fabricator of this mess, Yaldabaoth. It is out of pure ignorance and vain conceit that he proclaims "I am God and there is no other beside me!" The Gnostics are by definition — since Gnostic means "knower" — those who know better than even the biblical God, since they know all about the hidden good God higher up. It is this hidden God who sent the Gnostic redeemer with this saving knowledge. But Yaldabaoth is not the highest God; his mother Sophia made a catastrophic miscalculation in conceiving him without her mate — an abortive effort on her part to imitate the first creative act of the highest God, a presumption resulting in the blind ignorance of her son.

This blinded ignorant God is so jealous of the humans he has fabricated that he forbids them to eat the fruit on some of the trees in the garden, since it is the food that leads to knowledge and immortality. He is so stupid he cannot even find Adam in the garden, and has to call out and ask "Where are you?" The Spirit imbedded in man ("and not the way Moses said, 'his rib-bone' ") is removed from Adam's side in order to create Eve; the lackeys of the evil Creator then rape her and produce the murderer Cain. But the Spirit had escaped in the nick of time from her into a tree, and then into the Snake, who by a play on words is shown to be the "Instructor," who blurts out the truth to Adam and Eve about the trees in the garden. The Creator is unmasked as an ignorant, jealous despot. And the Snake becomes a type of Christ — as in the Gospel of John! A colossal struggle between the Gnostics and the Creator ensues. He tries to wipe them out with the flood, sparing only the servile Noah, who tells his sons: "Serve him in fear and slavery all the days of your life"! But Noah's wife Norea (Eve's daughter) was on the side of the Gnostics, and had tried to prevent the flood by destroying the first ark that Noah had built. The forces of evil tried to rape her, but she was rescued by an angel. Thus the interpretation of the flood as intended to destroy the Gnostics ends with the rescue of the Gnostics. The Sodomites are also Gnostics, and so the Creator next seeks to destroy them with fire and brimstone. "But the Sodomites, according to the will of the Majesty, will bear witness to the universal testimony." What the Gnostics have done is simply to turn Genesis upside down!

## The Gnostic Life of Christ

There is no biography of Christ in the Nag Hammadi codices. However four tractates are entitled gospels: the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Truth*, and the *Gospel of the Egyptians*. But only the *Gospel of Thomas* has much to do with Jesus: It contains about 114 sayings attributed to him. Some are purely Gnostic fabrications, some are familiar from the Gospels in the New Testament, some are previously unknown sayings that may in fact have been spoken by Jesus. But the *Gospel of Thomas* does not contain a biographical framework.

Nevertheless the Gnostic community that used this library would have been able to piece together allusions from different tractates into a sort of life of Christ. Of course such a mosaic would not have been the concept of any one author, and certainly would have little to do with the historical Jesus; it would only be the secondary construct of users of the library. The orthodox Christian also has a secondary construct when thinking of the life of Christ. The New Testament contains four Gospels, each presenting a somewhat different picture of Jesus. Yet all have so blended in the church's memory that hardly anyone has the presentation of any one Gospel clearly in view. The church's mosaic has replaced both the individual Gospel and the historical Jesus in the average Christian's experience. What picture of Jesus would the average member of the Nag Hammadi community have had?

Jesus was born a twin. His twin brother was named Judas Didymus Thomas (both Didymus and Thomas mean "twin").

Jesus had disciples familiar from the New Testament gospels. But just as the canonical Gospel nearest to Gnosticism, the Gospel of John, seems to favor Thomas and the beloved disciple at the expense of Peter, who had predominated in the main-line Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, so too the Nag Hammadi codices suggest a ranking different from the orthodox order of priority. For example, the familiar scene at Caesarea Philippi, where Peter's confession earns him the title "Rock," becomes in the *Gospel of Thomas* a scene where Peter and Matthew give less than ideal responses; it is Thomas who provides the loftiest confession and receives Jesus' recognition of his preeminence. There are occasional allusions to the twelve apostles, but they are not listed by name; and others not in the orthodox list of twelve are especially prominent. Jesus' brothers James and Jude predominate, with three tractates ascribed to the one and two to the other.

Jesus seemed to the Gnostics to have a particular attachment to women. Salome asks him in the *Gospel of Thomas*: "Who are You, man, that You, as though from the One, have come up on my couch and eaten from my table?" This may be merely a reference to the ancient world's reclining posture at the table. In the *Gospel of Mary* from a Berlin Codex (not in the Nag Hammadi library but so similar to this library that it is usually treated with it) Mary receives special revelation from Jesus, leading Peter to say begrudgingly: "We know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women." Levi came to her defense: "Peter, you have always been hot-tempered . . . If the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us." The *Gospel of Philip* reports: "And the companion of the Savior is Mary Magdalene. But Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth."

What Jesus did during his lifetime, or as they say, while he was in a body, is for the Gnostics hardly worth recording. Presumably this is because a person in a body is weighted down with sleep, fatigue, drunkenness. One escapes into knowledge only in ecstasy, which is the ascent of the soul out of the body, and when one is liberated from the body by death. This is the way the Gnostics understood their own situation, and they seem to have understood Jesus in much the same way. Therefore their primary interest was in the resurrected Christ, with only occasional allusions to the earthly Jesus. They only wanted to maintain that the disembodied heavenly Christ whom they worship is the true and exalted form of the more mundane Jesus of orthodox Christianity. In this way they hoped to discredit orthodox Christianity as limited to its "worldly" picture of Jesus. What the orthodox think of Jesus is an understanding on a lower, bodily level, whereas the Gnostics thought they knew him on the higher, spiritual plane.

According to the Gnostics, it was apparently not Christ who died on the cross:

Yes, they saw me; they punished me. It was another, their father, who drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. It was another upon whom they placed the crown of thorns. But I was rejoicing in the height . . . and I was laughing at their ignorance.

The *Apocryphon of James* reports that Jesus taught in riddles so unintelligible that he had to tarry after the resurrection to provide the Gnostics with the true esoteric interpretation. During his lifetime Jesus had only given coded messages really intended for the Gnostics, to whom the resurrected Christ spelled it all out in great detail and clarity. The teachings of Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* do not save unless one finds the secret meaning — that is to say, unless one reads them with gnostic spectacles. Actually the Gnostics felt they could get along quite well with only the revelations of the resurrected Christ. For this reason the bulk of the stories of Jesus have to do with the resurrected Christ. According to the *Apocryphon of James* Christ takes James and Peter aside after the resurrection and teaches them perfection so that they, like he, may ascend into heaven. According to a tractate entitled the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, after the resurrection Christ instructs the apostles to meet him on the Mount of Olives, where he teaches them Gnostic mythology.

The Nag Hammadi codices present the resurrected Christ as a disembodied, shining light. But the New Testament Gospels present the resurrected Christ as having a body that appears to be like a human body — he is taken for a gardener, or for a traveler to Emmaus; he eats; his wounds can be touched. But the New Testament itself suggests that the earliest narratives of the resurrection may have pictured the resurrected Christ as a bright light much as the Gnostics did. The New Testament Apocalypse of John begins with a resurrection appearance cast in such lurid, mythological language that it is often overlooked; in it Jesus clearly appeared as flaming fire. The first appearance was admittedly to Peter, but the story of that appearance is not narrated; one looks in vain for it where one finds the other resurrection appearances narrated at the end of the Gospels. It has been conjectured that it ultimately came to seem too ghostly, too much like the resurrection appearances claimed by emerging Gnosticism. Hence it was either suppressed or put back into the lifetime of Jesus, where it would not count as a resurrection appearance and also would seem less ghostly: the transfiguration story. Paul insists again and again that, although he was not a disciple during Jesus' lifetime, he did witness a genuine appearance of the resurrected Christ. But his picture of a resurrection "body" is a bright light, a heavenly "body" like a sun, star or planet, not like an earthly body. So the book of Acts, while recounting in detail Paul's encounter with Jesus as a blinding light, presents it as if it were hardly more than a "conversion." For the author places it well outside of the period of resurrection appearances, which he had limited to forty days. The orthodox church shifted attention away from such luminous appearances of Jesus in favor of the more down-to-earth portrayals in human appearance. But the Gnostics continued this luminous tradition and exploited it for their spiritualized otherworldly theology. By recounting such luminous Gnostic resurrection appearances, the Nag Hammadi codices have shown us what was going on in the background of the New Testament itself.

### The Gnostic Environment of the New Testament

It used to be thought that the New Testament was written in a vacuum. The way it presented Jesus' life and the Church's beginnings was simply taken to be the way these events took place; in much the same way Paul's Epistles were taken to be merely excerpts from his abstract theological system. But the four Gospels tell Jesus' life quite differently and Paul in each letter slants his presentation very pointedly. From this one may infer that if any of the Gospels had been writ-

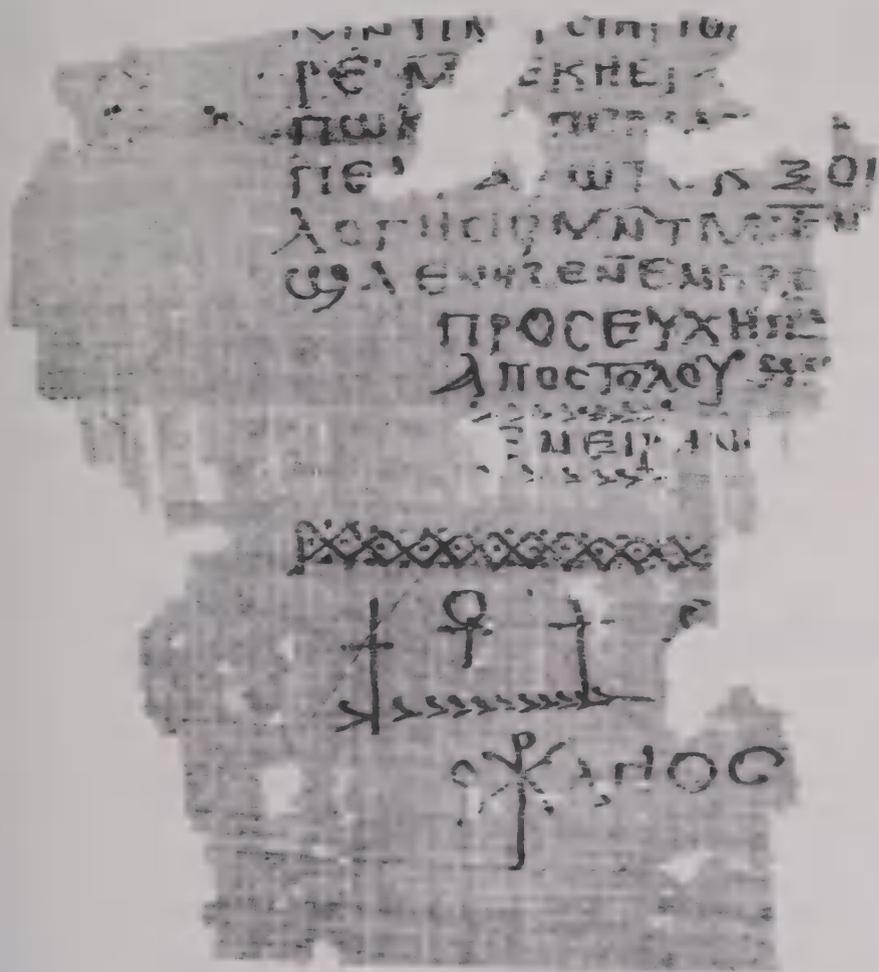
ten by a different person, or in a different decade, or in a different congregation or province, it would have been quite different from what that Gospel actually is; if one of Paul's Epistles had been written at a different time from a different place or to a different Church, it would have been quite different from what that Epistle actually is. The precise situation in which each was written is a major cause for the way it was written, the approach it takes and the position it assumes. Hence scholars have by and large stopped trying to understand the New Testament simply by harmonizing narratives from different Gospels into a unified biography of Christ and harmonizing doctrines from different Epistles into a unified Christian theology. Current research is directed toward historical data that fills in the context of each text, shows its contours, and puts it in profile. Only by sketching the situation to which the Gospel or Epistle spoke, can one discern what it had to say.

In several important instances this context had been sensed to be nascent Gnosticism. But as long as Gnosticism remained a hazy concept, the New Testament would at such points inevitably remain obscure. The Nag Hammadi codices have brought such parts of the New Testament into clear daylight. They make clear the gnosticizing milieu from which New Testament writers such as the author of the Gospel of John or of the Epistle of Colossians drew their thought patterns; or they clarify the front a New Testament writer such as Paul was criticizing, a front that shaped the profile of some New Testament documents.

Paul wrote his first letter to Corinth to squelch a movement in that church that seemed to him potentially dangerous. To understand just what Paul's letter means, one would have to understand what the view was that he was opposing. From allusions he makes in that letter, scholars have reconstructed his opponents. They seem to have been very otherworldly, to have ignored their bodies, to have reveled in having achieved the completion of salvation already, and to have denied the bodily resurrection. One has surmised this position might be similar to a heresy condemned in a later New Testament book, according to which Hymenaeus and Philetus mislead the faithful by declaring our resurrection has taken place already. Such a purely spiritual resurrection would tend to make the day of judgment and the final resurrection superfluous. Actually, the Epistle of Colossians in the New Testament seems to be already under the influence of such an idea when it proclaims that our life is hidden with Christ in God in heaven, so that the future will merely reveal what has already happened spiritually. But only in the Nag Hammadi codices do we have such tractates as *On the Resurrection*, the *Exegesis on the Soul*, and the *Gospel of Philip*, which present in detail the view dimly sensed behind such parts of the New Testament itself.

The Gospel of John, because it presents Jesus in such a different way from the other ("synoptic") Gospels, has often been called the spiritual Gospel. Scholars once thought it reflected Greek influence. Then in the 1920's its more oriental style led them to shift it into the Syrian world. The nearest parallels that could then be found were in the Mandaean literature — the medieval remains of an eastern Gnostic sect in Iraq! It was only a conjecture that if one could find earlier Gnostic texts from the Jordan region they too would document the environment of the Gospel of John. Then when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, they proved to go a long way toward filling in the context of the Gospel of John: the same dualism between light and darkness, truth and lie, life and death! But what had been present in the late Mandaean texts but was absent from the Dead Sea Scrolls was the redeemer figure, who came down from heaven and after his revelation returned to heaven. This pattern dominates the Gospel of John. For orthodox Christians of today that may seem quite as it should be: The Dead Sea Scrolls provide the historical context, and the addition of the redeemer descending from heaven and reascending to heaven is simply due to the fact that Jesus did in fact descend from heaven and reascend to heaven. But the more critical thinker would pose the question in a different way: Why did the Gospel of John, in emphasizing the importance of Jesus, make use of religious

symbolism found only in the later Mandaean texts? Even though this symbolism was not found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, must it not have been alive somewhere in that environment? The Nag Hammadi codices may have produced the missing documentation: The *Apocalypse of Adam*, a non-Christian Jewish Gnostic interpretation of Genesis, presents the redeemer as coming to the world, suffering, and triumphing. It or traditions it used may have been composed in the Syrian-Jordan region during the First Century A.D. — much the same time and place as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel of John! In such ways the hardly-begun interpretation of the Nag Hammadi codices may in time fulfill some of the expectations that were originally held for the Dead Sea Scrolls. The combination of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi codices will put the New Testament more clearly into context so that the sharp contours of its profile emerge.



*End of the Prayer of the Apostle  
Paul on the back of the front  
flyleaf of Codex I (the Jung Codex).*

# ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

## 1. Introduction to Gnosticism

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## 2. Introduction to the Nag Hammadi Codices

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For the period covered, this bibliography is exhaustive and accurate, both for Gnosticism in general and for the Nag Hammadi codices. An annual supplement in the autumn issue of the journal *Novum Testamentum* keeps this bibliography up to date.

## 3. The Photographic Publication of the Nag Hammadi Codices

*The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*. Published under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities of the Arab Republic of Egypt in conjunction with UNESCO. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972ff.

Apart from a technical Preface by James M. Robinson, each volume contains only photographs of the cover and pages of the codices. The following volumes, containing the entire Nag Hammadi library, are in print:

*Codex I*, 1977

*Codex II*, 1974

*Codex III*, 1976

*Codex IV*, 1975

*Codex V*, 1975

*Codex VI*, 1972

*Codex VII*, 1972

*Codex VIII*, 1976

*Codices IX and X*, 1977

*Codices XI, XII and XIII*, 1973

Forthcoming to complete the series are two supplementary volumes, one publishing the *Cartonnage* lining the covers and the other an *Introduction* tracing the history of the discovery and of research, together with photographs of persons and places prominent in that story.

#### 4. English editions of the Nag Hammadi Texts

*The Nag Hammadi Library in English.* By Members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, James M. Robinson, Director. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977; New York, Evanston, and San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977.

This is a complete English translation, with brief introductions to each tractate, of all thirteen codices of the Nag Hammadi library together with the similar codex BG 8502.

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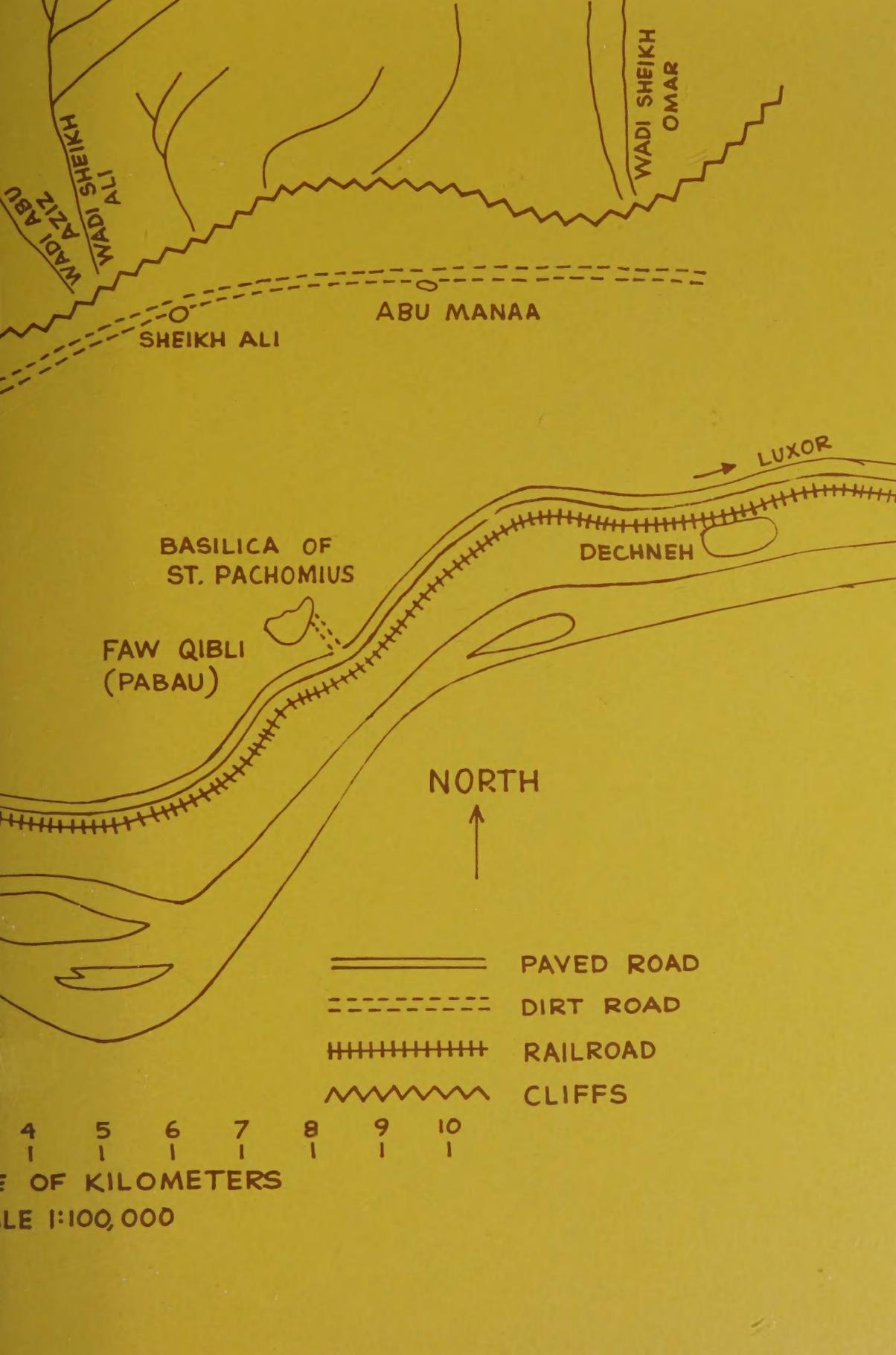
*Cartonnage.* Edited by John W.B. Barns† and Gerald M. Browne.

## TABLE OF TRACTATES IN THE NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY

The following gives the codex numbers (in Roman numerals), the tractate numbers (in Arabic numerals), and the titles of each tractate in the Nag Hammadi Library.

I,1	<i>The Prayer of the Apostle Paul</i>	VI,5	<i>Plato, Republic 588B-589B</i>
I,2	<i>The Apocryphon of James</i>	VI,6	<i>The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth</i>
I,3	<i>The Gospel of Truth</i>	VI,7	<i>The Prayer of Thanksgiving</i>
I,4	<i>The Treatise on Resurrection</i>	VI,8	<i>Asclepius 21-29</i>
I,5	<i>The Tripartite Tractate</i>	VII,1	<i>The Paraphrase of Shem</i>
II,1	<i>The Apocryphon of John</i>	VII,2	<i>The Second Treatise of the Great Seth</i>
II,2	<i>The Gospel of Thomas</i>	VII,3	<i>Apocalypse of Peter</i>
II,3	<i>The Gospel of Philip</i>	VII,4	<i>The Teachings of Silvanus</i>
II,4	<i>The Hypostasis of the Archons</i>	VII,5	<i>The Three Steles of Seth</i>
II,5	<i>On the Origin of the World</i>	VIII,1	<i>Zostrianos</i>
II,6	<i>The Exegesis on the Soul</i>	VIII,2	<i>The Letter of Peter to Philip</i>
II,7	<i>The Book of Thomas the Contender</i>	IX,1	<i>Melchizedek</i>
III,1	<i>The Apocryphon of John</i>	IX,2	<i>The Thought of Norea</i>
III,2	<i>The Gospel of the Egyptians</i>	IX,3	<i>The Testimony of Truth</i>
III,3	<i>Eugnostos the Blessed</i>	X,1	<i>Marsanes</i>
III,4	<i>The Sophia of Jesus Christ</i>	XI,1	<i>The Interpretation of Knowledge</i>
III,5	<i>The Dialogue of the Savior</i>	XI,2	<i>A Valentinian Exposition</i>
IV,1	<i>The Apocryphon of John</i>	XI,2a	<i>On the Anointing</i>
IV,2	<i>The Gospel of the Egyptians</i>	XI,2b	<i>On Baptism A</i>
V,1	<i>Eugnostos the Blessed</i>	XI,2c	<i>On Baptism B</i>
V,2	<i>The Apocalypse of Paul</i>	XI,2d	<i>On the Eucharist A</i>
V,3	<i>The First Apocalypse of James</i>	XI,2e	<i>On the Eucharist B</i>
V,4	<i>The Second Apocalypse of James</i>	XI,3	<i>Allogenes</i>
V,5	<i>The Apocalypse of Adam</i>	XI,4	<i>Hypsiphron</i>
VI,1	<i>The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles</i>	XII,1	<i>The Sentences of Sextus</i>
VI,2	<i>The Thunder, Perfect Mind</i>	XII,2	<i>The Gospel of Truth</i>
VI,3	<i>Authoritative Teaching</i>	XII,3	<i>Fragments</i>
VI,4	<i>The Concept of Our Great Power</i>	XIII,1	<i>Trimorphic Protennoia</i>
		XIII,2	<i>On the Origin of the World</i>

Acknowledgements for the photographs used in the central photographic section are as follows: Jean Dorese photographed numbers 9, 19, 20, 22 and 23, Douglas Kuylenstierna, photographer of the Nag Hammadi Excavation, numbers 1-6, 10-13, and 15, Basile Psiroukis, photographer of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project, numbers 30, 31 and the inset in number 18, Irving Alan Sparks number 18, James M. Robinson numbers 8 and 32, Marvin W. Meyer numbers 7 and 33, and R. McL. Wilson number 29 (hence his absence from this photograph of the International Committee for the Nag Hammadi Codices of which he is a member). Rāghib Andrawus supplied number 14, Dhakī Baṣṭā number 16, Cybele Hadjioannou née Tano number 17, Henri-Beat von Fischer-Reichenbach number 21, Gilles Quispel number 24, Labib Habachi number 25, Pahor Labib numbers 26 and 28, and Alexander Böhlig number 27.



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