

NAG HAMMADI, GNOSTICISM AND NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

WILLIAM W. COMBS

The Gnostic heresy alluded to in the NT and widely repudiated by Christian writers in the second century and after has been increasingly studied in the last forty years. The discovery in upper Egypt of an extensive collection of Gnostic writings on papyri transformed a poorly known movement in early Christianity into a well documented heresy of diverse beliefs and practices.

The relationship of Gnosticism and the NT is an issue that has not been resolved by the new documents. Attempts to explain the theology of the NT as dependent on Gnostic teachings rest on questionable hypotheses. The Gnostic redeemer-myth cannot be documented before the second century: Thus, though the Gnostic writings provide helpful insight into the heresies growing out of Christianity, it cannot be assumed that the NT grew out of Gnostic teachings.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

STUDENTS of the NT have generally been interested in the subject of Gnosticism because of its consistent appearance in discussions of the "Colossian heresy" and the interpretation of John's first epistle. It is felt that Gnosticism supplies the background against which these and other issues should be understood. However, some who use the terms "Gnostic" and "Gnosticism" lack a clear understanding of the movement itself. In fact, our knowledge of Gnosticism has suffered considerably from a lack of primary sources. Now, however, with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi (hereafter, NH) codices, this void is being filled.

The NH codices were discovered in 1945, a year before the Qumran manuscripts, but the documents from NH have received comparatively little attention from conservative scholars. Unfortunately, political problems and personal rivalries have caused numerous

delays in the publication of the NH texts. Thanks mainly to the efforts of Professor James Robinson, English translations of all thirteen codices have at last been published in a single volume.¹ Photographic reproductions of the papyrus pages and leather covers are now also available.² A complete eleven-volume critical edition of the codices entitled *The Coptic Gnostic Library* began to appear in 1975. The amount of literature on NH is already quite large and growing at a rapid pace.³

The manuscripts from NH have importance for a number of scholarly disciplines, including Coptic itself, since the entire library is in that language. Also, because the vast majority of the library is composed of Christian Gnostic writings, it is now possible to study this movement from primary sources, rather than having to rely upon the secondhand accounts given by the early Church Fathers or "Heresiologists." Most important for Biblical studies, of course, is the relationship between NH and the NT.

CONTENTS OF THE LIBRARY

According to the best evidence, the discovery of the NH codices took place in December 1945.⁴ Three brothers, Abu al-Majd, Muhammad, and Khalifah Ali of the al-Samman clan, were digging at the base of a cliff for soil rich in nitrates to use as fertilizer. The cliff, Jabal al Tarif, is about ten kilometers northeast of Nag Hammadi, the largest town in the area. Abu al-Majd actually unearthed the jar; but his older brother, Muhammad, quickly took control of it, broke it open, and discovered the codices. Having wrapped the books in his tunic, he returned to his home in the village of al-Qasr, the site of the ancient city Chenoboskion⁵ where Saint Pachomius was converted to Christianity in the fourth century and where one of his

¹ James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977).

² James M. Robinson, ed., *The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices* (Leiden: Brill, 1972-84). For a complete list, see B. A. Pearson and J. E. Goehring, eds., *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) xiii.

³ David M. Scholer's bibliography runs to nearly 2,500 items (*Nag Hammadi Bibliography 1948-1969* [Leiden: Brill, 1971]). It is supplemented each year in *Novum Testamentum* (1971-). Over 3,000 additional items have been listed by Scholer since 1971.

⁴ The most up-to-date and thorough account of the discovery is by James M. Robinson, "The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices," BA 42 (1979) 206-24. This should be supplemented by his "The Discovering and Marketing of Coptic Manuscripts: The Nag Hammadi Codices and the Bodmer Papyri," in *Egyptian Christianity*, 2-25.

⁵ Robinson believes the name should be spelled Chenoboskia.

monasteries was located. Muhammad Ali dumped the codices on top of some straw that was lying by the oven to be burned. His mother thought they were worthless and burned some of the pages in the oven (probably Codex XII of which only a few fragmentary leaves remain⁶).

The books were eventually sold for a few piasters or given away until their value was later realized. Most of them went through the hands of a series of middlemen and were sold on the black market through antiquities dealers. Having arrived by various means in Cairo, the majority of the library was either purchased by the Coptic Museum or confiscated by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities when attempts were made to smuggle some codices out of the country. Most of Codex I was taken out of Egypt by a Belgian antiquities dealer. It was unsuccessfully offered for sale in New York and Ann Arbor in 1949. Finally, in May 1952 it was purchased by the Jung Institute of Zurich and named the Jung Codex. The rest of Codex I had found its way to the Coptic Museum. In exchange for the rights to publish the entire codex (six volumes from 1956 to 1975), the Zurich authorities agreed to return the Jung Codex folios to the Coptic Museum.⁷ Today the entire NH library is in the Museum.

The first scholar to examine the codices was a young Frenchman, Jean Doresse, who had come to Egypt in 1947 to study Coptic monasteries.⁸ Because his wife had been a student in Paris with Togo Mina, the Director of the Coptic Museum, Doresse was allowed to see the codices and in January of 1948 announced their discovery to the world. The death of Mina and subsequent political upheavals in Egypt put a halt to plans to publish the library. Doresse attached the ancient place name of Chenoboskion to the discovery, but it never caught on. Later scholars have called the discovery NH, probably because this location has served as a base camp for all who have come to investigate the origin of the library.⁹

In 1956 the new Director of the Coptic Museum, Pahor Labib, made plans for a facsimile edition of the library, but only one volume appeared. An English translation of The Gospel of Thomas was published in 1959. Because Labib allowed relatively few scholars to have access to the library, only a few parts of it were published until 1972. In 1961 under the auspices of UNESCO, an agreement was

⁶ Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 23.

⁷ For details about the intrigues of the Jung Codex, see J. M. Robinson, "The Jung Codex: The Rise and Fall of a Monopoly," *RelSRev* 3 (1977) 17-30; Egyptian Christianity, 2-25.

⁸ Doresse has written an account of his experiences in *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, trans. P. Mairet (New York: Viking, 1960) 116-36.

⁹ James M. Robinson, "Introduction," *BA* 42 (1979) 201.

worked out with the Egyptian government to publish a facsimile edition of the entire library. The project was delayed until 1970 when an International Committee for the NH Codices was formed under the leadership of James Robinson. By 1977 the entire library was in the public domain.

Description

A list of the tractates in the NH library can be found in Table 1. Listings of the library refer to thirteen codices; however, the eight leaves of Codex XIII form a separate essay or tractate that was tucked inside the cover of Codex VI in antiquity.¹⁰ Much of Codex XII is missing, probably lost or destroyed since the discovery of the library. The library contains a total of fifty-two tractates of which six are duplicates. Of the forty-six remaining tractates, six are texts of which a complete copy existed elsewhere, so there are forty tractates that are extant only in the NH library. Fragments of three of these were already extant, but these fragments were too small to identify their contents until NH provided the full text.¹¹ About ten of the tractates are in poor enough condition so as often to obscure the train of thought. In terms of pages of text, Robinson estimates that out of 1,239 inscribed pages that were buried, 1,156 have survived at least in part.¹²

Each codex was originally bound in leather; the covers of Codices I-XI have survived. These were lined with papyrus pasted into thick cardboards (called cartonnage) in order to produce a hardback effect. Study of this used papyrus, which consists mostly of letters and business documents, has produced names of persons and places as well as dates that help to date the collection of the library to the middle of the fourth century. Of course, this does not determine the date of the origin of the individual tractates except in respect to the *terminus ad quem*. Some are known to have been written as early as the second century.¹³

The language of the codices is Coptic, which simply means "Egyptian" (the consonants CPT in "Coptic" are a variant of those in

¹⁰ James M. Robinson, "Inside the Cover of Codex VI," in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Alexander Bohling*, ed. Martin Krause (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 74-87.

¹¹ James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Codices* (2nd ed.; Claremont, Calif.: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, 1977) 3-4. Greek papyri fragments discovered at Oxyrhynchus in 1897 and 1904, called the "Logia" by B.P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, turn out to be the Greek text of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas. See J. A. Fitzmyer, *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Missoula: Scholars, 1974) 355-433.

¹² Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Codices*, 4.

¹³ Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 101-2.

TABLE 1

Tractates in the NH Library		
Codex	Tractate	Title
I	1	The Prayer of the Apostle Paul (+ colophon)
I	2	The Apocryphon of James
I	3	The Gospel of Truth
I	4	The Treatise on Resurrection
I	5	The Tripartite Tractate
II	1	The Apocryphon of John
II	2	The Gospel of Thomas
II	3	The Gospel of Philip
II	4	The Hypostasis of the Archons
II	5	On the Origin of the World
II	6	The Exegesis of the Soul
II	7	The Book of Thomas the Contender (+ colophon)
III	1	The Apocryphon of John
III	2	The Gospel of the Egyptians
III	3	Eugnostos the Blessed
III	4	The Sophia of Jesus Christ
III	5	The Dialogue of the Savior
IV	1	The Apocryphon of John
IV	2	The Gospel of the Egyptians
V	1	Eugnostos the Blessed
V	2	The Apocalypse of Paul
V	3	The First Apocalypse of James
V	4	The Second Apocalypse of James
V	5	The Apocalypse of Adam
VI	1	The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles
VI	2	The Thunder. Perfect Mind
VI	3	Authoritative Teaching
VI	4	The Concept of Our Great Power
VI	5	Plato, Republic 588B-589B
VI	6	The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth
VI	7	The Prayer of Thanksgiving (+ scribal note)
VI	8	Asclepius 21-29
VII	1	The Paraphrase of Shem
VII	2	The Second Treatise of the Great Seth
VII	3	Apocalypse of Peter
VII	4	The Teaching of Silvanus (+ colophon)
VII	5	The Three Steles of Seth (+ colophon)
VIII	1	Zostrinos
VIII	2	The Letter of Peter to Philip
IX	1	Melchizedek
IX	2	The Thought of Norea
IX	3	The Testimony of Truth
X	1	Marsanes
XI	1	The Interpretation of Knowledge
XI	2	A Valentinian Exposition
XI	2a	On the Anointing
XI	2b	On Baptism A
XI	2c	On Baptism B
XI	2d	On the Eucharist A

TABLE I (continued)

Codex	Tractate	Title
XI	2e	On the Eucharist B
XI	3	Allogenes
XI	4	Hypsiphron
XII	1	The Sentences of Sextus
XII	2	The Gospel of Truth
XII	3	Fragments
XIII	1	Trimorphic Protennoia
XIII	2	On the Origin of the World

"Egyptian," GPT). However, two dialects are used, Sahidic for most of the library and Subachmimic for Codices I, X, and part of XI.¹⁴ Although written in Coptic, it is almost the universal opinion of scholars that the library is a translation of Greek originals. Almost nothing is known about those who translated the tractates into Coptic, those who produced the extant copies, or those who buried them. Robinson has attempted to connect the library with the Pachomian monastery that was located at Chenoboskion, but this link is now questioned.¹⁵

In listings of the codices the Berlin Codex 8502, which dates from the fifth century, is sometimes included. Its four tractates are similar to those found at NH; in fact, two are duplicates. Although discovered in 1896, it was not published until 1955.¹⁶

Subject Matter

The tractates represent a diverse background that includes non-Gnostic, non-Christian Gnostic(?), and Christian Gnostic works. The question of which, if any, of the tractates fall into the non-Christian Gnostic category is widely debated (see below).

¹⁴ *IDBSup*, S.v. "Nag Hammadi," by George W. MacRae, 613.

¹⁵ *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 13-21; *The Nag Hammadi Codices*, 1-2. Robinson's view that the NH library came from a Pachomian monastery was based on the preliminary study of the cartonnage by the late John W. B. Barnes, "Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Covers of the Nag Hammadi Codices," in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. M. Krause (Leiden: Brill, 1975) 9-18. Further study has cast serious doubts about whether the monks mentioned in the cartonnage are Pachomian. See J. C. Shelton, "Introduction," in *Nag Hammadi Codices: Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Cartonnage of the Covers*, ed. J. W. Barnes, G. M. Browne, and J. C. Shelton (Leiden: Brill, 1981) 11. Though the Pachomian origin of the NH library has also been supported by F. C. Wisse, C. Hedrick, and J. E. Goehring, authorities on Pachomius question it. See A. Veilleux, "Monasticism and Gnosis in Egypt," in *Egyptian Christianity*, 278-83 and P. Rosseau, *Pachomius* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985) 27.

¹⁶ "Nag Hammadi," by George W. MacRae, 615.

Since it is not feasible to discuss the contents of each tractate, it may be helpful to present at least a preliminary classification of the library according to the various genres represented therein.

Literary Genres

The library contains a wide variety of literary genres. Some of these are typical of Gnostic literature, while others are imitative of the genres in Christian and other literature. Some of the tractates are representative of more than one genre. The following classifications are taken from MacRae.¹⁷

Gospels. Of the four tractates that bear the title "gospel," The Gospel of Truth, The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Philip, and The Gospel of the Egyptians, none actually correspond to the gospel genre of the NT. The most important of these, The Gospel of Thomas, is a collection of 114 logia or sayings attributed to Jesus. The Greek original was probably composed in Edessa in Syria ca. A.D. 140.¹⁸

Apocalypses. A number of tractates are titled "apocalypses": The Apocalypse of Paul, The First Apocalypse of James, The Second Apocalypse of James, The Apocalypse of Adam, and Apocalypse of Peter. Also in this category would be Asclepius 21-29, The Hypostasis of the Archons, and The Paraphrase of Shem. In one of the most important of these, The Apocalypse of Adam, the future course of Gnostic history is received by Adam in a revelation and transmitted to his son Seth. This tractate is claimed to display a non-Christian Gnosticism.¹⁹

Acts. One tractate in the Nag Hammadi library uses the name "acts" in its title, The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles. Actually, another work, The Letter of Peter to Philip has closer parallels to the NT book of Acts.

Letters. Some of the tractates, such as The Treatise on Resurrection and Eugnostos the Blessed, have occasionally been referred to as epistles because they are addressed to pupils from their teacher. However, they fall more into the category of treatises. None of the tractates are imitative of the Pauline letter form.

Dialogues. MacRae notes that "one of the most characteristic genres of Gnostic literature is the dialogue between the risen Jesus

¹⁷ "Nag Hammadi," by George W. MacRae, 616-17.

¹⁸ *ISBE*, 1979 ed., s. v. "Apocryphal Gospels," by Edwin M. Yamauchi, 186.

¹⁹ *IDBSup*, S.v. "Adam, Apocalypse of," by George W. MacRae, 9-10.

and his disciples in which Gnostic teaching is revealed.”²⁰ The *Sophia of Jesus Christ and The Dialogue of the Savior* are excellent examples of this genre in the NH library. Parts of several other tractates also fall within this category.

Secret Books. The word "apocryphon" is used in the titles of two works, *The Apocryphon of James* and *The Apocryphon of John*. Strictly speaking, this category is not a separate genre since these two works fall into the apocalyptic and revelational discourse classifications. Speculative treatises. The most important of these is *On the Origin of the World*. In addition, *Eugnostos the Blessed* and a few other tractates have affinities with this genre.

Wisdom Literature. The two examples of this genre in the NH library, *The Teachings of Silvanus* and *The Sentences of Sextus*, are both non-Gnostic writings. The latter tractate is a Coptic translation of a well-known ancient work which is extant in Greek, Latin, and several other languages.²¹

Revelational discourses. A number of works come under this heading in which a revealer speaks in the first person. Sometimes, as

in the case of *The Thunder*, *Perfect Mind*, and *Trimorphic Protennoia*, the revealer is a female.

Prayers. There are examples of Christian and non-Christian prayers in the library. Three of these are *The Prayer of the Apostle Paul*, *The Prayer of Thanksgiving*, and *The Three Steles of Seth*.

Types of Gnosticism

The NH library has made available a wealth of primary Gnostic material; however, it has probably generated more questions than it has answered. Doresse's preliminary investigations led him to conclude that the library was primarily a Sethian Gnostic collection.²² A study by Wisse has now demonstrated that Doresse was premature in his assessment of the library and, in fact, virtually none of the tractates corroborates in detail the accounts of Sethian Gnosticism given by the Church Fathers.²³ Some scholars now question the reliability of patristic testimony regarding Gnosticism. Evans has I

²⁰ "Nag Hammadi," by George W. MacRae, 616. On the genre of dialogues, see PHEME PERKINS, *The Gnostic Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1980).

²¹ Frederick Wisse, "Introduction to *The Sentences of Sextus*," in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, 454.

²² Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, 249-51. I

²³ Frederick Wisse, "The Sethians and the Nag Hammadi Library," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1972 Proceedings*, vol. 2, ed. Lane C. McGaughey (n.p.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972), 60 1-7.

observed that "liberal scholars treat the Fathers with reserve while conservative scholars tend to see the new source material providing some confirmation of the Fathers."²⁴

However, the inability to correlate every facet of Gnosticism found in the library with the patristic testimony should not be viewed as unusual. There was great variety in Gnostic systems. For example, Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 180) noted that the Valentinians "differ among themselves in their treatment of the same points, and in regard to the things they describe and the names they employ, are at variance with one another."²⁵ Also, it appears that the Heresiologists, rather than intentionally distorting Gnostic thought, seemed to have sometimes misunderstood it.

Although it is true that some of the NH materials cannot be identified with the well-known Gnostic systems of the second and third centuries, a number of the tractates do show clear correspondences.²⁶ MacRae would classify all of Codex I, *The Gospel of Philip*, and *The Apocalypse of James* as representative of the Valentinian sect.²⁷ *The Apocryphon of John* is in general agreement with the teachings of the Barbelo-Gnostics as reported by Irenaeus.²⁸ Other tractates have been identified with the Sethians and other Gnostic sects, but most of these suggestions are only tentative at this early stage in the study of the library.

Non-Gnostic Material

One of the greatest surprises in the library was the presence of non-Gnostic tractates such as Plato's *Republic* and *The Sentences of Sextus*, a series of ethical maxims attributed to the philosopher Sextus. Three tractates from Codex VI, *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, *The Prayer of Thanksgiving*, and *Asclepius 21-29*, are clear-cut examples of Hermetic literature.²⁹ The Hermetica are traditions from Egypt that were purported to be the revelations of Hermes Trismegistos, the Egyptian god of wisdom.

Since most of the library is composed of Christian Gnostic works, the question arises as to why non-Christian and even non-Gnostic documents, such as a portion of Plato's *Republic*, would be included in the library.

²⁴ C. A. Evans, "Current Issues in Coptic Gnosticism for New Testament Study," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 9 (1979) 97.

²⁵ *Against Heresies*, I.II.I.

²⁶ For information on the various Gnostic systems, see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1958).

²⁷ "Nag Hammadi," by George W. MacRae, 617.

²⁸ Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts, vol. 1: Patristic Evidence*, ed. R. McL. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 100-120.

²⁹ *IDBSup*, s.v, "Hermetic Literature," by Edwin M. Yamauchi, 408.

The answer is found in understanding the gnostic approach to interpretation. For them, truth lies at two levels. At the literal and obvious level truth is accessible to all, but at the deeper level one finds truth which only the Gnostic can discern. Such an approach is assumed by the Gospel of Thomas (II, 2): "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death." Therefore, documents which represent a variety of traditions (Plato, Hermetica, Sextus, Silvanus) may be interpreted at a deeper (i.e., gnostic) level.³⁰

ISSUES IN NT INTERPRETATION

The NH library was discovered forty years ago, but because most of the tractates have only been published in recent years, the interpretation of the library is just beginning. Already, however, some major issues of interpretation in relation to the NT have arisen.

Pre-Christian Gnosticism

Probably most of the discussion about the contents of the library has centered around its contribution to the question of pre-Christian Gnosticism. Until the twentieth century, the prevailing view of Gnosticism was that of the Church Fathers, who held that it was a heresy that developed out of Christianity. Early in this century this view was challenged by the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* or History of Religions School.³¹ This approach

represents the most thorough-going application of a naturalistic historicism to the study of the Bible. It assumes that biblical religion, in both the Old and New Testaments, passed through stages of growth and evolution like all ancient religions, and in this evolution was heavily influenced through interaction with its religious environment. This method involves the consistent application of the principle of analogy to biblical religion: the history and development of biblical religion must be analogous to the history and development of other ancient religions.³²

The leading spokesmen of the History of Religions School, Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920) and Richard Reitzenstein (1861-1931), argued upon the basis of Hermetic, Iranian, and Mandaean documents, all of which postdated the NT, that Gnosticism existed prior

³⁰ Evans, "Current Issues in Coptic Gnosticism," 97.

³¹ For an excellent discussion of the History of Religions School, see George E. Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 195-214.

³² Ladd, *New Testament and Criticism*, 196.

³³ Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Some Alleged Evidences for Pre-Christian Gnosticism," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 47.

to Christianity.³³ Rudolf Bultmann adopted the idea of pre-Christian Gnosticism and sought to explain NT Christianity as the result of a syncretistic process that included Gnostic ideas.³⁴ Most German NT scholars, because of the influence of Bultmann, have assumed a pre-Christian Gnosticism as a basis for their interpretation of the NT. For example, one of Bultmann's students, Walter Schmithals seems to be able to find Gnosticism in almost every Pauline letter.³⁵ A number of scholars who agree with Bultmann are attempting to use the NH library in order to verify his view of NT Christianity. MacRae has accounted in a recent article: "It is my contention here that such evidence as we have now in the Nag Hammadi library tends to vindicate the position of Bultmann."³⁶

Problem of Definition

A vital consideration with regard to the question of pre-Christian Gnosticism is the need for defining Gnosticism itself. Evans has noted that "if Gnosticism is defined broadly then its origins are found to be much earlier and its roots quite diverse. However, if it is defined narrowly, Gnosticism may be viewed as an early Christian heresy and thus subsequent to the origin of Christianity."³⁷ Wilson has suggested that one solution to the problem of definition would be to distinguish between Gnosticism and Gnosis: "By Gnosticism we mean the specifically Christian heresy of the second century A.D., by Gnosis, in a broader sense, the whole complex of ideas belonging to the Gnostic movement and related trends of thought."³⁸ Unfortunately, some scholars feel that such distinctions are too confining. MacRae refuses to abide by Wilson's guidelines, suggesting that "it is not the terminology that matters most."³⁹ Bultmann uses the term *die Gnosis*, but

³⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols., trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner's, 1951-55) 1.164.

³⁵ See his *Gnosticism in Corinth*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) and *Paul and the Gnostics*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972).

³⁶ George W. MacRae, "Nag Hammadi and the New Testament," in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, ed. Barbara Aland (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978) 146.

³⁷ Evans, "Current Issues in Coptic Gnosticism for New Testament Study," 98. On the issue of defining Gnosticism broadly, see K. Rudolph, "'Gnosis' and 'Gnosticism' - the Problems of their Definition and their Relation to the Writings of the New Testament," in *The New Testament and Gnosis*, ed. A. J. M. Wedderburn and A. H. B. Logan (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983) 21-37; see also K. Rudolph, *Gnosis* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).

³⁸ R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 9. See also his presidential address to the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas in Rome in 1981, "Nag Hammadi and the New Testament," *NTS* 28 (1982) 292.

³⁹ MacRae, "Nag Hammadi and the New Testament," 146.

his translators render it into English by the term "Gnosticism." German scholars prefer to use the term *die Gnosis* in the widest possible sense.

For the sake of clarity it is essential to follow the distinctions between Gnosis and Gnosticism suggested by Wilson. However, even if the term "Gnosticism" is restricted to the second and third century sects, it is still difficult to come up with a definition that will incorporate the variety of developed Gnostic systems. Yamauchi believes that the essential "element of any developed Gnosticism would be a radical dualism between the divine and the created, inasmuch as a fundamental Gnostic tenet is the view that the creation of the world resulted from ignorance and error."⁴⁰ Wilson has suggested a four-point summary of the second century movement:

(1) A distinction between the unknown and transcendent true God on the one hand and the Demiurge or creator of this world on the other, the latter being commonly identified with the God of the Old Testament; (2) the belief that man in his true nature is essentially akin to the divine, a spark of the heavenly light imprisoned in a material body and subjected in this world to the dominance of the Demiurge and his powers; (3) a myth narrating some kind of pre-mundane fall, to account for man's present state and his yearning for deliverance; and (4) the means, the saving gnosis, by which that deliverance is effected and man awakened to the consciousness of his own true nature and heavenly origin. . . This deliverance, and the eventual return of the imprisoned sparks of light to their heavenly abode, means in time the return of this world to its primordial chaos, and is strenuously opposed at all points by the hostile powers.⁴¹

Wilson's four basic points are probably as precise as one can be in formulating a definition of Gnosticism that will include all the second century sects. The question then is whether the NH library provides any support for pre-Christian Gnosticism.

Nag Hammadi Evidence

The basic argument for pre-Christian Gnosticism that has been deduced from the NH library is the presence of supposedly non-Christian Gnostic tractates. Of the most commonly suggested examples of non-Christian Gnostic works, three are particularly noteworthy.

A number of scholars believe that *Eugnostos the Blessed* is a non-Christian Gnostic tractate from which was created the Christian Gnostic work, *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*. *The Nag Hammadi Library*

⁴⁰ Yamauchi, "Some Alleged Evidences for Pre-Christian Gnosticism," 47.

⁴¹ Wilson. *Gnosis and the New Testament*, 4.

in English prints the texts side by side for comparison. Although there was initially some debate about the priority of Eugnostos, the work of Krause has convinced most scholars that Sophia is a re-working of Eugnostos.⁴² However, it is not clear that Eugnostos is wholly free from Christian influence. Wilson has compiled a list of possible NT and Christian allusions in Eugnostos.⁴³ Included among them is Son of Man, Saviour, and the Church. Also, the name Eugnostos appears in only one other tractate, The Gospel of the Egyptians, where Eugnostos is a Christian. Yamauchi believes that the Christian Eugnostos is the same person referred to in Eugnostos the Blessed.⁴⁴

The Apocalypse of Adam has also been hailed by some scholars as a clear example of a non-Christian Gnostic work. This tractate purports to be a revelation of Adam to Seth that recounts the salvation of Noah from the Flood and the salvation of Seth's seed from destruction by fire. The story ends with the coming of the mighty "Illuminator." It seems clear, however, that this Illuminator—who is punished in his flesh, does signs and marvels, is opposed by powers, and has the Holy Spirit descend upon him—is none other than Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

Another supposedly non-Christian Gnostic document is The Paraphrase of Shem in which a figure named Derdekeas gives a revelation to Shem. However, a number of scholars have pointed to parallels between Derdekeas and Christ.⁴⁶ Also, the presence of a bitter polemic against water baptism (37, 14-25) is a problem for those who maintain the non-Christian character of the tractate.⁴⁷ Even if it could be proven that any of the previously discussed works or, for that matter, any of the NH tractates are non-Christian Gnostic documents, that would not in itself be evidence for pre-Christian Gnosticism. Non-Christian is not necessarily pre-Christian. MacRae's admission is worth noting:

The NH library does nothing to resolve the classic chronological challenge to Gnostic sources. That is to say that those who demand a chronologically pre-Christian Gnostic document in order to accept the

⁴² Martin Krause, "Das literarische Verhältnis des Eugnostosbriefes zur Sophia Jesu Christi," in *Mullus: Festschrift für Theodor Klauser*, ed. A. Stüber and A. Hermann (Munster, 1964) 215-23.

⁴³ Wilson *Gnosis and the New Testament*, 114-15.

⁴⁴ Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?" *CH* 48 (1979) 138.

⁴⁵ Yamauchi, "Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?" 132, and. *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 107-15, 217-19.

⁴⁶ Yamauchi, "Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?" 136.

⁴⁷ John Dart, *The Laughing Savior* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) 100. See also Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 221.

argument that Gnosticism is older than the second century A.D. will not be shaken by the publication of a mid-fourth-century collection of Coptic translations. And even if we are on solid ground in some cases in arguing the original works represented in the library are much older than extant copies, we are still unable to postulate plausibly any pre-Christian dates.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, MacRae, Robinson, and a number of others either discount or ignore the fact that their arguments for pre-Christian Gnosticism are based upon late sources.

The Descending-Ascending Redeemer Myth

Bultmann and his followers have argued that the Christian conception of Jesus as a descending-ascending saviour figure was derived from the Gnostic redeemer myth. The classic description of the myth was set forth by Bultmann in a 1925 article.⁴⁹ He outlined twenty-eight characteristics that he considered to have constituted the original myth. Yamauchi has conveniently summarized those characteristics:

1. In the cosmic drama a heavenly 'Urmensch' or Primal Man of Light falls and is torn to pieces by demonic powers. These particles are encapsulated as the sparks of light in the 'pneumatics' of mankind.
2. The demons try to stupefy the 'pneumatics' by sleep and forgetfulness so they will forget their divine origin.
3. The transcendent Deity sends another Being of Light, the 'Redeemer,' who descends the demonic spheres, assuming the deceptive garments of a bodily exterior to escape the notice of the demons.
4. The Redeemer is sent to awaken the 'pneumatics' to the truth of their heavenly origins and gives them the necessary 'gnosis' or 'knowledge' to serve as passwords for their heavenly re-ascent.
5. The Redeemer himself re-ascends, defeating the demonic powers, and thereby makes a way for the spirits that will follow him.
6. Cosmic redemption is achieved when the souls of men are collected and gathered upward. In this process the Redeemer is himself redeemed, i.e., the Primal Man who fell in the beginning is reconstituted.⁵⁰

Bultmann believed that the writer of the Fourth Gospel was a Christian convert from a Gnostic baptist group, who Christianized the descending-ascending redeemer myth in applying it to the historical Jesus. This myth also became the source of the redemptive idea in Paul's theology.

⁴⁸ MacRae, "Nag Hammadi and the New Testament," 146-47.

⁴⁹ "Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandaischen und manichaischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums," ZNW24 (1925) 100-146.

⁵⁰ Yamauchi, Pre-Christian Gnosticism, 29-30.

Bultmann's proof for the pre-Christian nature of the Gnostic redeemer myth was based on texts that considerably postdated the NT, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by a number of scholars.⁵¹ However, some of Bultmann's followers have suggested that the NH library provides new evidence which demonstrates that he was essentially correct. Robinson has stated:

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!⁵²

While it is true that *The Apocalypse of Adam* and several other NH texts present a descending-ascending redeemer figure, it has not been clearly demonstrated that any of these tractates are free from Christian influences, as was previously discussed. Even if it could be shown that *The Apocalypse of Adam* was not influenced by the NT, there is absolutely no historical evidence that it was composed in the first century, and thus influenced John's Gospel. Yamauchi has demonstrated that *The Apocalypse of Adam* could not have been written before the second century.⁵³

The Gospel of Thomas

When it was published in 1959, this document prompted curiosity about a "fifth gospel." Actually, it is a random series of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus. About half of these correspond to sayings of Jesus in the canonical Gospels, but scarcely any are completely identical. Some sayings are similar to those known previously from patristic literature while about forty are new sayings.⁵⁴ It is possible that genuine *agrapha* (sayings of Jesus not found in the canonical Gospels) may be found in Thomas since the canonical Gospels do not claim to be exhaustive (John 20:30). Because some of the sayings are parallel to those in the Oxyrhynchus papyri, which can be dated to

⁵¹ The most devastating criticisms have come from Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1961). Also, see Henry A. Green, "Gnosis and Gnosticism: A Study in Methodology," *Numen* 24 (1977) 95-134.

⁵² Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Codices*, 15.

⁵³ Yamauchi, "Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?" 132-35 and "The Apocalypse of Adam, Mithraism, and Pre-Christian Gnosticism," in *Etudes Mithriaques, Textes et Memoires*, ed. Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (Teheran-Liege: Bibliotheque Pahlavi, 1978) 4.537-63.

⁵⁴ Andrew K. Helmbold, *The Nag Hammadi Gnostic Texts and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967) 57-58.

about A.D. 150, most scholars believe that the Greek original of Thomas was written about A.D. 140.⁵⁵

Robinson believes that The Gospel of Thomas provides evidence for the literary genre of the so-called Q (from the German *Quelle*, meaning "source") material, a hypothetical written document that was the source of the material common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark.⁵⁶ Both Robinson and Helmut Koester believe that Thomas is independent of the canonical Gospels and may even represent an earlier form of Jesus' sayings.⁵⁷ However, the independence of Thomas seems to be a minority opinion. Even Koester admits that the number of scholars who oppose his view is impressive.⁵⁸ Gundry's study of the problem led him to conclude that "the much later date of The Gospel of Thomas and the undeniable wholesale interpolation of Gnostic ideas and sayings tip the scales in favor of Gnostic editing of mostly canonical sources."⁵⁹ Thus, if Thomas is dependent upon the canonical Gospels, its literary genre is much later than Q. There is also an important difference between Q and Thomas: Q would have included narrative material, whereas Thomas has none.⁶⁰

Prologue of the Fourth Gospel

The problem of determining the historical background of the prologue of John's Gospel has long preoccupied a number of NT scholars. In the past, scholars have been divided into two camps.⁶¹ One camp, represented by C. H. Dodd, held that the backdrop for the prologue was to be found in Rabbinic and Philonic materials, together with the Hermetica. Dodd argued "that in the Prologue a basic Jewish (OT) theme has been interpreted in the light of the conceptuality of Hellenistic Jewish thought."⁶² The other camp,

⁵⁵ *ISBE*, 1979 ed., s.v. "Agrapha," by Edwin M. Yamauchi, 1.69.

⁵⁶ James M. Robinson, "LOGOI SOPHON: On the *Gattung* of Q," in *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, with Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 71-113.

⁵⁷ Helmut Koester, "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," in *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, 186.

⁵⁸ Helmut Koester, "GNOMAI DIAPHOROI: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity," in *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, 130.

⁵⁹ Robert H. Gundry, "Recent Investigations into the Literary Genre 'Gospel,'" in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, 106.

⁶⁰ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (3rd ed.; Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity, 1970) 152. See also the important new study by G. Quispel, "The Gospel of Thomas Revisited," in *Colloque international sur les textes de Nag Hammadi*, ed. B. Barc (Quebec: Laval University, 1981) 218-66.

⁶¹ Robert Kysar, "The Background of the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel: A Critique of Historical Methods," *CJT* 16 (1970) 250-55.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 252.

represented by Bultmann, pointed to Gnostic sources behind the prologue. While Dodd relied heavily on the *Hermetica*, Bultmann drew parallels from the *Odes of Solomon*, neither of which can be dated earlier than the second century A.D. Kysar has aptly observed:

Both Dodd and Bultmann follow the practice of using later literature as evidence of a thought-form which, in its earlier expressions, presumably influenced those responsible for the Prologue. It would seem that such a principle, if allowed at all, opens innumerable possibilities for claiming an influence on the New Testament for ideas found only in post-first-century literature.⁶³

Robinson has again come to the rescue of Bultmann by suggesting that a NH tractate, the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, demonstrates that the prologue did indeed have a Gnostic background.⁶⁴ Robinson attempts to draw thirteen parallels between *Protennoia* and John's prologue, but they are not convincing. Furthermore, Turner dates the *Protennoia* to around A.D. 200.⁶⁵ Thus, if there are any parallels between the two texts, it seems more likely that the prologue of John's Gospel was the source for *Protennoia* and not vice versa.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

The thirteen NH codices have significantly impacted the study of early Christianity. Gnosticism is no longer known only from the outside, from what opponents of the movement recorded. Now the Gnostic teachings can be read firsthand in the forty tractates unique to the NH library. And thus, the growth of Christianity and attendant heresies are better documented and more clearly understood.

The NH library also provides helpful background to the NT. Heresies are already being confronted in the NT, and though evidence is lacking to identify those heresies clearly with the Gnosticism of the second century, similarities in some of the false teachings are unmistakable. However, students of the NT should be careful not to interpret NT references to concepts such as dualism and docetism, which later became elements in the doctrine of the second century Gnostic sects, as evidence of Gnosticism in the first century. It is true

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁶⁴ James M. Robinson, "Gnosticism and the New Testament," in *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas*, ed. Barbara Aland (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1978) 128-31.

⁶⁵ John D. Turner, "Introduction to the *Trimorphic Protennoia*," in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 461.

⁶⁶ Edwin Yamauchi, "Jewish Gnosticism? The Prologue of John, Mandaean Parallels, and the *Trimorphic Protennoia*," in *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, ed. R. van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren (Leiden: Brill, 1981) 467-97.

that the roots of Gnosticism can be found in the Judaism, Christianity, and paganism of the first century, but classical Gnosticism has not yet been documented before the second century.

In this article it has only been possible to touch on several of the specific areas of NT interpretation where the NH library is now being appealed to as a source of new light. Since the interpretation of the library is still in its infancy, students of the NT will undoubtedly be hearing more about NH in the future. However, an important issue for NT studies will continue to be the question of pre-Christian Gnosticism. Now that all the tractates have been published, we can be assured, as Yamauchi has put it, "that there are no unexploded bombshells."⁶⁷ Although it is possible that a strong case may yet be made for non-Christian Gnosticism in some of the texts, non-Christian is not necessarily pre-Christian. Furthermore, NH has not produced any Gnostic documents that are prior to or even contemporary with the birth of Christianity.

Although Bultmann's hypothesis-that the source of Pauline and Johannine theology can be found in Gnostic literature-has been adopted in some reference works, such as the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, the evidence is unconvincing. In response to Bultmann, Guthrie's statement that Gnostic studies have "little value" for students of NT theology is apropos.⁶⁸ The distinction, then, is between background and source. The NH library is useful to the NT scholar as a background for the growing problem in the church with heresy, but Gnosticism was not the source for the teachings of the NT.

⁶⁷ Yamauchi, "Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?" 130. Yamauchi has not changed his mind since that statement was made in 1979. See his "Pre-Christian Gnosticism, the New Testament and Nag Hammadi in Recent Debate," *Themelios* 10 (1984) 22-27.

⁶⁸ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity, 1981) 68.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Grace Theological Seminary

200 Seminary Dr.

Winona Lake, IN 46590

www.grace.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu