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## What Do We Talk About When We Talk About the Nag Hammadi Library?

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Two recent articles on the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library—"Rethinking the Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices" by Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justine Ariel Blount, and "How Reliable is the Story of the Nag Hammadi Discovery?" by Mark Goodacre—cast a considerable amount of doubt on the well-known and sensational story of the find as told by Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman. As the three scholars effectively demonstrate, Muhammad 'Ali's story has changed in the telling over the years, giving rise to a number of questions—such as, how many people were with Muhammad 'Ali at the time of the discovery (one, six, seven)? Were the texts buried alone in the ground or were they found next to a skeleton?<sup>1</sup> did Muhammad 'Ali unearth the jar or was it his brother Abu?

So great is the uncertainty in the various accounts that there is sufficient reason for scholars to reconsider the provenance of the find. Goodacre's article focuses on the inconsistencies in the stories and how awareness of these phenomena impact various aspects of the study of early Christian literature (principally the need to be skeptical about tales of discovery, to resist slavish retelling of the story without due investigation and consideration of other viewpoints, and to think about how these other viewpoints affect our understanding of who buried the texts).

Denzey Lewis and Blount similarly question Muhammad 'Ali's story but develop the argument further than Goodacre to propose another explanation of how Muhammad 'Ali came into possession of the codices: simply put, he's a grave robber. This theory calls for a re-evaluation of James Robinson's assertion that the codices were buried by a Pachomian monk trying to safeguard the texts during a crackdown on apocrypha; instead they were commissioned by a "private individual with eclectic and esoteric interests" and "buried with him at the time of his death" (Denzey Lewis and Blount 2014, 413). There is much to recommend this theory, not least the story told to Jean Doresse in 1950 by villagers that the texts were found in the ancient cemetery at Qasr es-Sayyad, and that a number of other manuscripts also have

been found in Egyptian tombs—Denzey Lewis and Blount mention the gnostic Berlin and Tchacos codices, along with Codex Panopolitanus (featuring the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Gospel of Peter*, and other texts). Some readers of the two articles may have experienced, as I did, a eureka moment: suddenly, a number of facets of the Nag Hammadi library that have long puzzled scholars finally make sense without Muhammad 'Ali's story. But more than that, if we think further about the arguments of the rethinkers we discover something even more astounding: there is no Nag Hammadi library; indeed, there never was.

### Erasing the Nag Hammadi Library

In 2011, Mark Goodacre, Nicola Denzey Lewis, and I participated in a conference at the University of Toronto on what organizer John Marshall termed "Erasure History."<sup>2</sup> Presenters were asked to imagine what our knowledge of antiquity would be like if certain data—such as the Gospel of Mark or Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*—had not survived. The methodology had eye-opening results about how Western scholarship works to reconstruct the past. I suggest we do something similar with the Nag Hammadi library. What happens if we completely set aside Muhammad 'Ali's finding-story? What does the evidence from the material remains alone tell us about this collection of texts? It is not such a radical exercise. We regularly set aside church tradition about the authorship of the New Testament gospels and focus on internal evidence alone in our efforts to understand their origins. And in the field of Gnostic studies we question, sometimes to the point of neglect, the descriptions of Gnostic groups by the heresiologists and let the Gnostic texts that we have recovered speak for themselves. Now let us do the same for the Nag Hammadi library.

The year is 1950 and Jean Doresse and H. Ch. Puech have just revealed to scholars the existence of nine complete Coptic codices and portions of two others, brought to Cairo from upper Egypt by unidentified

middlemen (see Doresse 1950; Puech 1950). It is an exciting discovery, hot on the heels of announcements about two other codices: one purchased in 1946 (NHC III) and another, later called the Jung Codex (NHC I), in 1947. Nothing else is known about their provenance. Along with the nineteenth-century publication of the codices Askew and Bruce, and another codex, Berolinensis 8502, announced in 1896 but at this time still unpublished (Schmidt 1896), the primary evidence of early Gnostic Christianity had grown significantly in a short amount of time.

Paleographical analysis shows some relationships between the materials (summarized in Williams 1996, 241–47): Cod. I, VII, and XI are a collaboration of three scribes; Cod. II and XIII of two other scribes; and two subgroups of codices (IV and VIII; V, VI, and IX; each the product of different scribes) have a similar paleographic style, with the latter subgroup also bearing similarities in the construction of the books. The three remaining codices, III, XII, and X, are not related to each other nor to the other codices. While the cartonnage of the covers contains some geographical references and names, it is just as likely that the materials come from a local dump as the binder's personal waste (Denzey Lewis and Blount 2014, 407 citing Barnes et al. 1981). The first group of codices contains Christian materials (e.g., the *Prayer of Paul*, the *Apocryphon of James*), Sethian Christian texts (e.g., the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Three Steles of Seth*), Valentinian tractates (the *Gospel of Truth*, a *Valentinian Exposition*, the *Tripartite Tractate*), and a Sethian/Neoplatonic text (*Allogenes*). The second contains Christian texts (e.g., the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Gospel of Thomas*) and two cosmogonies with minor Christian features (*Trimorphic Protennoia*, *On the Origin of the World*). The two related subgroups feature another copy of the *Apocryphon of John*, along with the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the *Letter of Peter to Philip*, and the Sethian/Neoplatonic *Zostrianos* (in one group) and several apocalypses (of Paul, James, Adam), Hermetic texts, a letter from *Eugnostos the Blessed*, a portion of Plato's *Republic*, and others (in the second). The remaining codices contain additional copies of the *Gospel of Truth*, *Eugnostos the Blessed*, the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, and other texts, including the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. According to the 1896 report, the Berlin Codex also contains copies of the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, along with the *Gospel of Mary*, and the *Act of Peter*. What is noteworthy about the mate-

rials is that none of the groupings contain duplicate copies of the same text and that scribal hands do not cross over between books of different codicological types (Williams 1996, 242).<sup>3</sup>

The groupings indicate that some of the codices shared common origins; it is not possible to determine, however, how they were grouped, if they were grouped at all, when they were buried. Given the great expense of books, it is unlikely that one person would own codices with overlapping texts. The natural assumption is that the codices derive ultimately from burial tombs, and evidence from Akhmim (Codex Panopolitanus), for example, suggests that single books are common, but two or three would not be a surprise.<sup>4</sup> There is no reason to believe that they all derive from a single "library"; rather, it would seem they were books cherished by a number of disparate individuals, likely all Christians, and later stolen by grave robbers who sold them on the antiquities market.

Now what happens when we bring the find-stories back into our pool of evidence for the codices? Jean Doresse learned from local villagers in 1950 that the codices were found buried in a jar in an ancient cemetery at Qasr es-Sayyad (the account is reproduced in Goodacre 2013, 315–16; Denzey Lewis and Blount 2014, 402). It is not clear from the account that the jar contained all thirteen of the Nag Hammadi codices (to be clear: there are twelve complete codices and eight pages from a thirteenth). Robinson's interviews with Muhammad 'Ali came twenty-five years later in the 1970s, and by this time the location of the find is given as the foot of the Gebel al-Tarif, an unlikely place for burial (see Denzey Lewis and Blount 2014, 402), and further accretions enter into the account over the years, such as a grisly revenge killing and cannibalism. It is notable that 'Ali only gave the number of codices as thirteen after some prompting from Robinson; also, he had to be given financial incentive to show Robinson where he found the codices, and even Robinson has stated that he doubted some parts of 'Ali's story (Goodacre 2013, 313–14). Goodacre rightly questions also "how it is that Robinson is able to discover so much detail in the 1970s when Jean Doresse had failed to find the same kind of detail in the 1940s" (2014, 315). In the face of such uncertainty in the accounts, it seems prudent to heed Kasser's and Krause's caution that nothing about the find is assured other than "the core of the story (the general location and approxi-

mate date of the discovery), the rest not having for them more than the value of stories and fables" (reproduced in Goodacre 2013, 309).

### Library? What Library? I Don't See a Library.

This brings us to Denzey Lewis and Blount's theory, indebted to some degree to Stephen Emmel, Martin Kraus, and others. In their conclusion they state their "intuition" that the codices belonged to "private (i.e., non-monastic) individuals who commissioned them for their own purposes" (2014, 416; also 400), but on occasion these "individuals" become an "individual" (413; 419; "deposited in a grave or graves," 414; "a grave," 418). Their equivocation over the number of graves is unfortunate; there appears to be little reason to believe that all thirteen codices were found together. Only the find-story provides that information, and there are plenty of reasons to question the account. But few others have, even though scholars hesitate little in declaring the find-story of the Berlin codex doubtful—the dealer stated he found the book in a recessed wall covered with feathers, but Schmidt believed it was taken from a tomb and his opinion is often repeated in subsequent scholarship (see King 1995, 7-12). To their credit, scholars have long recognized the differences between the Nag Hammadi codices and have even declared that these differences indicate at least that the library is a collection of smaller libraries (e.g., Williams 1996, 41).<sup>5</sup> But if the various Nag Hammadi codices became associated with one another only after their discovery, not before, then we do not have a library at all, but a number of single or small groupings of codices valued by an uncertain number of individuals, deposited in graves not at one time, but over decades, if not centuries.

The implications of this determination are several. First, we could no longer date the codices as an entirety. Dated cartonnage (to 341, 346, and 348) is found only in codex VII (Robinson 1990, 16; and in more detail in Barnes et al. 1981); since this codex is related to I and XI, the date of these three codices is fairly secure, but the same cannot be said of the others. Second, the romantic notion of the codices forming an ancient "library" would no longer contribute to the marginalization of Gnostic texts that lie outside the corpus. This is particularly the case for the Bruce and Askew codices which are relatively neglected in studies of early Christian Gnosticism; the Berlin and

Tchachos codices fare better—their texts are included, at least, in the widely-used editions of the Nag Hammadi library (e.g., Robinson 1990; Meyer 2007), though as appendices. Without the restrictive notion of a self-contained "library," the full range of Gnostic texts can be given due consideration. Third, the conception of the codices as a library would no longer impose inclusive limits. Reconciling the disparate contents of the corpus—orthodox Christian, Valentinian, Sethian, Greco-Roman, Jewish, Hermetic, and Neoplatonic works—has long been a challenge; texts within these categories still exist in smaller groupings of codices, even within one codex, but the difficulties of understanding their relationship to one another, of why they were gathered together, are less daunting when considered without the force of the thirteen-codex collection. And fourth, abandoning the notion of a "library" of codices would exorcise the field of misleading, if not anachronistic, terminology. "Library" carries with it a sense of organization, of cohesion, of purpose, and place—none of which applies to the evidence. Furthermore, no other body of literature from Christian antiquity is referred to as a "library," not even the Dishna papers. Why are these texts singled out this way? Is it because their esoteric contents lend them a sense of intellectualism appropriate for a library? Or is it because of the influence of James Robinson's theory of origin in a Pachomian monastery?—a theory that Denzey Lewis and Blount go to great lengths to discount (2014, 407-10).

Finally, the two articles encourage those of us who teach Gnosticism to re-evaluate how we introduce the evidence to our students, particularly in how material is presented in textbooks. The two principal options have been either to cast the net wide and present everything known about Gnosticism, from the church fathers, through the nineteenth-century discoveries, the Nag Hammadi codices, and beyond (see, e.g., Pearson 2007), or to focus exclusively on the Nag Hammadi library, and thus avoid strict categorization of the texts as Christian, Gnostic, Hermetic, etc. (see, e.g., Denzey Lewis 2013; though a brief, final chapter looks "Beyond Nag Hammadi" at the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Judas*). The latter option again allows the limits of the Nag Hammadi library to impose itself on the material, forcing readers to reconcile the contents and proclivities of disparate texts, and to neglect texts outside the corpus.

It is commonplace in the field of Gnostic studies to question received tradition—indeed, many of the



texts do the same, with their reimagining of Judeo-Christian creation myths and deities. The rediscovery of Gnostic texts led us to re-evaluate the descriptions of Gnostics by the heresiologists. And in 1996 Michael Allen Williams started us on the path of “rethinking” the category of Gnosticism (Williams 1996; see also more recent work by King 2003; and Brakke 2010). It should not be difficult for us to re-examine and reconsider the story of the Nag Hammadi discovery. What is surprising is that it has taken us so long.

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## Notes

1. Denzey Lewis and Blount call this the “smoking gun” of the grave-looting theory (2014, 403–04), though they note that Barnes et al. (1981, 2) dismiss the skeleton as “modern” (2014, 403n17). Goodacre mentions the skeleton also, but surprisingly this point appears only in a note (2013: 307n13).
2. Unfortunately, the papers from the conference have not been published. Information about the event can be found online at <http://individual.utoronto.ca/jwm/erasure/>.
3. Note also that the scribe of Codex VI included a note indicating a concern not to duplicate texts that may already be in the possession of the commissioner of the work (reproduced in Meyer et al. 2007, 423).
4. The Bruce, Berlin, and Askew codices each appear to be single-codex discoveries. Little still is known about the origins of the Askew Codex but the discovery of the Bruce Codex has been re-examined recently by Eric Crégheur (Crégheur 2014) and firmly established as coming directly from the excavations of Thebes. Three Coptic codices (containing Isaiah, the *Martyrdom of Peter*, the *Canons of Pseudo-Basil*, and the *Enkomion of St. Pisenithius*) were found in the ninth/tenth-century grave of a Christian monk at Sheikh el-Gurna in 2005 (see Kordowska 2008; Górecki 2013). Codex Tchachos was one of four codices discovered in a tomb near El-Minya. The only find that is larger is the Dishna papers, which comprises thirty-two rolls and codices. The story of their discovery, however, should be regarded with the same suspicion as the Nag Hammadi library, particularly since it also involves a jar discovered by peasants looking for fertilizer

and the burning of some of the parchments. As it happens the same middleman, Phokion J. Tano, was involved in both finds. For the various paths in the discussion of the Dishna Papers' provenience see Robinson 2011, 15–35; for an interview with one of the discoverers, Hasan Muhammad al-Samman, see Robinson 2011, 108–29. As Denzey Lewis and Blount say, “the story of the provenance of the Dishna papers seems to us to be as potentially suspicious

as that of the Nag Hammadi codices” (2014, 407n34).

5. As early as 1978, Frederik Wisse recognized the theological and sectarian variety in the codices and argued as a result that they were brought into the Pachomian monastery by different individuals and later buried en masse (Wisse 1978).

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## The 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices: A Few Remarks on Recent Publications

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The 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices in December 1945 has been duly celebrated in diverse ways. Two international colloquia have been held, the first one at the Université Laval, on May 29–31, 2015 (“Nag Hammadi à 70 ans. Qu’avons-nous appris?/Nag Hammadi at 70: What Have We Learned?”), and the second one at the Humboldt Universität, Berlin, on October 7–10, 2015 (“Die Nag-Hammadi-Schriften in der Literatur- und Theologiegeschichte des frühen Christentums”). Two major publications have appeared: James Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Story* (2014), and Eric Crépeur, Michel Tardieu, and James M. Robinson, *Histoire des manuscrits gnostiques coptes. La correspondance Doresse-Puech 1947-1970* (2015). Two important and provocative articles have also been published: Mark S. Goodacre, “How Reliable is the Story of the Nag Hammadi Discovery?” (2013) and Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justine Ariel Blount, “Rethinking the Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices” (2014). To these articles, we could add Maia Kotrosits, “Romance and Danger at Nag Hammadi” (2012), which however adds nothing new from a factual point of view. In their paper, Denzey Lewis and Blount offer an alternative explanation for the origins and burying of the Nag Hammadi collection. Revisiting a proposition initially made by Martin Krause (1978), they think that “the Nag Hammadi codices could just as plausibly have been private productions commissioned by late ancient Egyptian Christians with antiquarian interests” (2014, 400), and that they “were intentionally deposited in a grave or graves rather

than buried for ‘posterity’” (2014, 414), the codices being therefore “new Christian Books of the Dead” (2014, 418). I agree that the hypothesis of a monastic origin for the Nag Hammadi codices is highly speculative, to say the least, but we could as well, and more convincingly in my view, hypothesize that the “private” owners of the manuscripts were “Gnostic” Christians or Christians with “Gnostic” proclivities.

The publication in 2014 by James Robinson of an extensive—if not exhaustive—history of the discovery and the publication of the codices is a major event in the field of the Nag Hammadi studies. As Prof. Robinson wrote in the preface of the first volume, he saw the publication of this story as the implementation of one of the agreements made in December 1970, “that a history of the Nag Hammadi discovery and of subsequent research should be made” (2014, xiii). Even if these two volumes are more a history—or a story—of the discovery and not of the “subsequent research”—to quote Robinson: “not a history of research in the usual sense of a *Forschungsbericht*”—it is nevertheless an achievement. For a fair evaluation of his venture, a distinction has to be made between the first chapter, “The Discovery and Trafficking of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” and the subsequent chapters. Those chapters, from 2 to 12, are based on the archives and the documentation that James Robinson has patiently and methodically collected over the years, chiefly in his capacity as secretary of the International Committee for the Nag Hammadi Codices. Whether or not this documentation is complete is a question on which I will offer some comments further on.