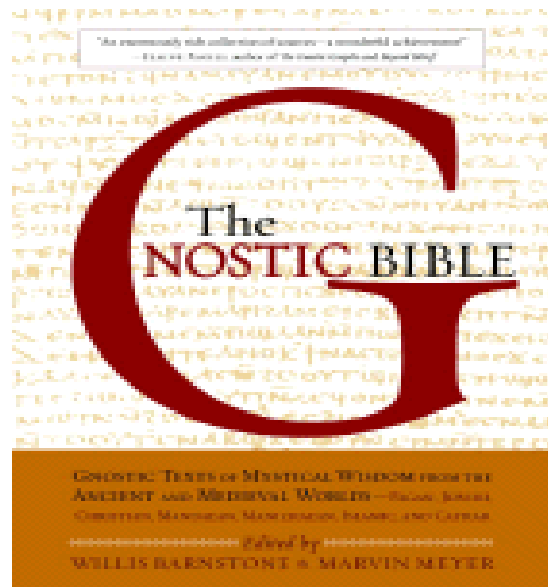
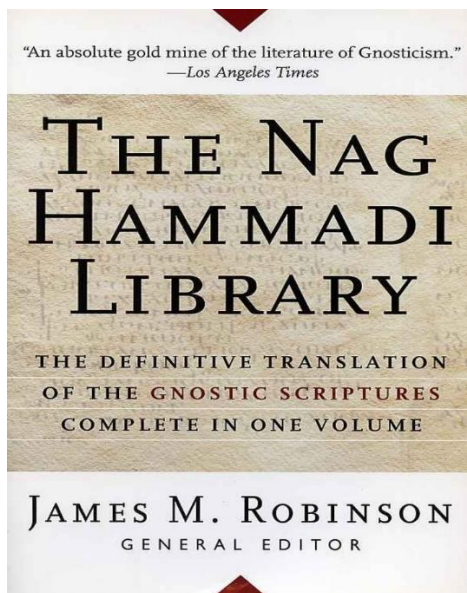


The Nag Hammadi Manuscripts A Fresh Look at Their Origins

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Gnostic literature holds a great interest for members of the Masonic Rosicrucian Society. The reason for this seems rather obvious. As an organization devoted to the study of esotericism and the esoteric tradition in Freemasonry, Gnostic literature fits rather neatly with the overall purpose of the society. So it is important for our members to understand the source of this literature, and the accuracy of its translation from the original into English. This paper will explore the supposed origin the most famous of the Gnostic manuscripts, that of the *Nag Hammadi* corpus which came to light in 1945, and which is now widely available in English translations, both in a printed book format, and electronically online.

I have two of these printed books in my library. The first The Nag Hammadi Library: The Definitive Translation of the Gnostic Scriptures Complete in One Volume, whose General Editor is James M. Robinson. The second is The Gnostic Bible: Gnostic Texts of Mystical Wisdom from the Ancient and Medieval Worlds, Now Revised and Expanded to Include the Gospel of Judas, edited by Willis Barnstone & Marvin Meyer.

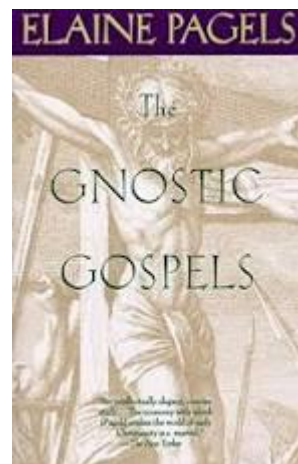


James M. Robinson (1924-2016) was a prominent scholar of New Testament studies and of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, and a professor emeritus at Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California. Willis Barnstone (b. 1927) is an American religious scholar, with a Ph.D. from Yale University. Marvin Meyer (1948 – 2012) was a scholar of religion and a faculty member at Chapman University in Orange, California. Among other things he was the Director of the

Coptic Magical Texts Project at the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity at Claremont, California. These academic citations are mentioned because it is important when using source materials to have confidence in the validity of the translation of the literature under consideration.

Access to this literature online can be found in more than one location, but this one is a good place to begin: <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl.html>. In using the online translations on this site one needs to be cautious about accepting other publications available on the site as they are sectarian in nature. But the Gnostic documents available at the site are reliable sources to be used by non-members of the Gnostic Society for academic purposes. Having them online also makes it possible to do an electronic word search, an advantage for any researcher.

Before attempting the study of this body of literature it is helpful to understand it in context, and a good general introduction to Gnostic literature in general, and to the *Nag Hammadi* corpus in particular, is the 1979 book by Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.



Elaine Pagels (b. 1943)

In the Introduction to her book, Dr. Pagels tells the story of the finding of the *Nag Hammadi* corpus in 1945 near the town of *Naj Hammadi* in Upper Egypt. The story is a fascinating one, and will not be repeated here. It should be noted in passing that “Nag Hammadi” is the usual transliteration of the Arabic name of the village that is more properly called *Naj Hammadi*, according to Pagels.¹

In this same Introduction, Pagels sets forth the theory of the origin of the *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts which has become the standard explanation in most works about them. This is what she said:

¹ Pagels, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Kindle Edition, Location 113.

“But in Upper Egypt, someone, possibly a monk from a nearby monastery of St. Pachomius, took the banned books and hid them from destruction—in the jar where they remained buried for almost 1,600 years.”²

Some questions to ask yourself at this point:

- Why were these books banned?
- Who banned them?
- Why were banned books in a Christian monastery?
- Who was St. Pachomius?

The last question is the easiest one. Pachomius – often called Pachomius the Great, was the founder of a monastic community near Thebes, in Upper Egypt, somewhere between 318 and 323. A contemporary of St. Anthony, he was one of the “Desert Fathers” who founded a particular type of monasticism called “cenobitic monasticism.” Before his time Christians who wished to withdraw from society for prayer and contemplation were hermits – solitaries who lived alone as far from urban centers as possible. The Desert Fathers created communities of these hermits who came together each day to take their meals in common, and sometimes to pray together in common and study in common. The term “cenobitic” means “common life,” and this kind of monasticism spread elsewhere throughout the Roman Empire and eventually became the kind of monasticism with which most of us are familiar. Many books describe the “Desert Fathers,” and the origins of monasticism. A particularly good paper on this is by Mark Sheridan, O.S.B., “Early Egyptian Monasticism: Ideals and Reality, or, the Shaping of the Monastic Ideal.”³

The next question has to do with the nature of “banned books” and the assumption that these monastic communities were reading them. The paradigm from which this idea emerges runs along these lines:

- Orthodox Christians, led by bishops of the emerging organized Christian Church, did not want Christians reading literature which was at odds with their official teaching.
- These bishops attacked non-conforming Christian groups as heretics, and insisted that their writings were dangerous.
- Many of these non-conforming Christian groups were Gnostics, and thus their writings were deemed heretical and whenever their writings were found they were suppressed or destroyed by the orthodox bishops.
- In Egypt monastic communities were reading these forbidden books, and when ordered to destroy them, they hid them instead, with the hope that

² Pagels, op.cit, Location 185.

³ Sheridan, Mark, “Early Egyptian Monasticism: Ideals and Reality, or, the Shaping of the Monastic Ideal,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies*, Vol. 7 (2017) – Published May, 2017.

someday a more enlightened bishop would once more allow them to read these works.

- The trove of codices which we know as the *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts were such books – originally owned by monks who hid them in order to protect them from destruction – and never recovered until they were found in 1945.

But is any of this true? Is any of it likely? Is there any evidence, other than speculation, that this was how the books ended up hidden in jars in a desert cave? Or is this story more akin to the novels of Dan Brown, *The DaVinci Code* (2003) or *The Lost Symbol* (2009)? Is there any scholarly support for this idea, which has become a common one, and which was used by Elaine Pagels in the Introduction to her 1979 book, *The Gnostic Gospels*?

In 2014 Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justine Ariel Blount published a paper in *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, a respected academic journal that has been in publication since 1881 by the Society of Biblical Literature. The title of the paper is “Rethinking the Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” and it was published in JBL [Vol.] 133 , no. 2, (2014): 399-419.

Dr. Lewis holds the Margo L. Goldsmith Chair in Women’s Studies in Religion at Claremont Graduate University. Before coming to CGU in 2017 she taught at Skidmore College and Bowdoin College, and was a visiting faculty member at Brown University and Harvard University. No information could be found about the co-author, Justine Ariel Blount, but she was probably a graduate student who studied under Dr. Lewis – a common situation.

The paper’s abstract sets forth the arguments that will be made for the origin of the *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts:

The famous find-story behind the Nag Hammadi codices, discovered in Egypt in 1945, has been one of the most cherished narratives in our field. Yet a close examination of its details reveals inconsistencies, ambiguities, implicitly colonialist attitudes, and assumptions that call for a thorough reevaluation. This article explores the problematic moments in the find-story narrative and challenges the suggestions of James M. Robinson and others that the Nag Hammadi codices were intentionally buried for posterity, perhaps by Pachomian monks, in the wake of Athanasius’s thirty-ninth Festal Letter. We consider, rather, that the Nag Hammadi codices may have derived from private Greco-Egyptian citizens in late antiquity who commissioned the texts for personal use, depositing them as grave goods following a practice well attested in Egypt.

The arguments set forth in the paper are outlined thus:

- The codices were not the possession of monks who hid them from the orthodox Patriarch of Egypt, Athanasius.

- The codices were a private collection of Greco-Egyptian citizens who had commissioned their translation from Greek into Coptic for private study.
- They were then deposited in a grave (or graves) as “grave goods” rather than being hidden by monks for a future time when the church authorities no longer banned them.

What is the evidence adduced for this argument in the paper by Lewis and Blount? It may be summarized as follows:

- “Rather than parts of a Pachomian library that had been intentionally hidden by monks to avoid persecution by the emerging Alexandrian orthodoxy, we suggest that the Nag Hammadi codices could just as plausibly have been private productions commissioned by late ancient Egyptian Christians with antiquarian interests.”
- “The books were later deposited in graves, following a late antique modification of a custom known in Egypt for hundreds of years. Furthermore, we contend that their eventual placement in graves may not have been coincidental; the arrangement of certain volumes reflects eschatological as well as antiquarian interests, meaning that at least some volumes may have been intentionally crafted as funerary deposits, Christian “Books of the Dead” that only made sense in the context of late antique Egypt.”
- “Egypt has a rich history of books and corpses found together, and indeed all our other so-called Gnostic manuscripts—the Berlin Codex, the Askew Codex, and the Codex Tchacos —came from, or most probably came from, burial sites. Yet, for the Nag Hammadi codices, it is asserted that they were hidden for posterity by Pachomian monks, the result of Athanasius’s Festal Letter of 367. This story is repeated again and again, as if it were not scholarly conjecture but rather a ‘believed’ fact of early Christian history: as if it were hand in hand with the Donatist controversy, for instance, with letters, trials, and creeds to go alongside it. There are no letters or trials for our ‘controversy,’ and so we must rely on what we can safely piece together from Pachomian monastic resources. The role of these monks and the presumed monastic *Sitz im Leben* for these texts deserve more attention.”
- Other scholarly papers argue “persuasively that Pachomians had no reason to house the Nag Hammadi documents based on what we know about Pachomian attitudes toward heresy; therefore, if in fact Pachomians kept them, they must have been kept out of circulation and thus “to study them in order to be able to refute them” In other words, the monks are *not interested in heresy, but were strongly supportive of orthodoxy as taught by the official “orthodox” church!*
- “Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the connections between the Nag Hammadi codices and Pachomian monasticism are still virtually assumed by a wide range of scholars, no doubt because of the surety with which an early generation of Nag Hammadi scholars asserted them in the first place.”

- “The theory that the Nag Hammadi codices found their way out of their Pachomian setting in the wake of Athanasius’s thirty-ninth Festal Letter (367 c.e.) has also recently been revealed to be unfounded. As David Brakke has convincingly argued, the heretical writings with which Athanasius was concerned were not “Gnostic” but Arian and Meletian. The idea that the letter in any way effected the removal of the Nag Hammadi codices from a Pachomian library is merely scholarly conjecture too often taken as fact. If we admit that the Pachomian, or even generally monastic, context for the codices is entirely absent, then Athanasius’s letter becomes irrelevant.”

There is much more detail in the original paper by Lewis and Blount, but the above summarized the main contention that they are making about the “Pachomian Theory of Origin” of the manuscripts.

The story of Athanasius and Melitius is recounted in another academic paper by Heather Barkman.⁴ She has a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from the University of Ottawa (Ontario, Canada), and teaches at that university. This is an abstract of her paper:

Although Christianity became a *religio licita* under Constantine in 313, this did not lead to the establishment of a single version of Christianity. Indeed, the end of the imperial persecutions saw increasing tensions between diverse Christian groups and their beliefs and practices. In both Egypt and North Africa, these disagreements hardened into schisms with the emergence of the rigorist Melitians in Egypt and Donatists in North Africa. While mainstream opponents named these groups by their leaders, the groups identified themselves as the “Church of the martyrs.” The Melitians remained a minority group while the Donatists grew to become the majority Church in North Africa for much of the fourth and early fifth centuries. This article will compare the main issues involved in each schism in order to provide insight into some of the complex issues facing Christians in Egypt and North Africa in the fourth century. It also addresses the question why the Donatists were able to exert influence within their province [rather] than the Melitians.

The subject of her paper is interesting in its own right, but for our purposes here I am more interested in the quarrel between Athanasius, Patriarch (and bishop) of Alexandria in Egypt, and Bishop Melitius of Lycopolis (in Egypt). The story begins with the last great persecution of Christians by the Emperor Diocletian (303 C.E. – 311 C.E.). As a result of this persecution, many Christians “gave in” and agreed to perform the ritual act of loyalty to the Emperor rather than stubbornly sticking to their Christian commitment not to do so. After the persecution ended, and the Edict of Toleration promulgated in 313 by the Emperor Constantine, the question of

⁴ Barkman, Heather, “The Church of the Martyrs in Egypt and North Africa: A Comparison of the Melitian and Donatist Schisms, pp. 41-58.

what to do with those who had “lapsed” during the persecution remained a vexing question. Some Christians – soon to be called “rigorists” – were not inclined to give them any slack. They were excommunicated from the Church, and required to do extensive penance for their “sins.” Other Christians thought that this was not fair to those who had not had the physical or mental “courage” to face death during the persecution, and should be welcomed back into the fold with little or no penalty.

This quarrel tore apart the church, and was one of the reasons why Constantine called the Council of Nicaea together in 325 C.E. The rivals soon created their own “churches,” together with their own bishops, and thus the term “schism” as applied to the Donatist and Melitian movements. It should be noted that this schism was not about theology, but rather about what to do with Christians who had “lapsed,” or given up their faith, during the persecution.

Barkman goes on to say:

The backing of monastic communities was also an important factor and from an early period on the Melitians could rely on a well-organized network of monastic communities. This assisted in the spread of the Melitian Church, as these communities enjoyed a great deal of support among lay followers throughout Egypt. Furthermore, the central Melitian monastic figures had been confessors during the persecutions, thus reinforcing the Melitians’ identity as “the Church of the martyrs.” Despite their growing popularity throughout monastic circles in Egypt, however, the ideology of the Melitians did not spread throughout the empire and remained a relatively marginal Egyptian phenomenon.

The pertinent point of this discussion by Heather Barker is that the monastic communities were highly unlikely to have been interested in reading Gnostic works, and to have subsequently hidden them from the orthodox church authorities. The Melitians were even more “orthodox” than the mainstream church itself in Egypt, and thus would hardly be likely to be interested in “heretical” ideas of Gnosticism.

I have written this paper to point out that it is easy to accept hypotheses from “standard sources,” and even more so when those sources are respected scholars such as Elaine Pagels or James Robinson. As members of the Masonic Rosicrucian Society we are naturally interested in Gnostic works, and even more so in the *Nag Hammadi* manuscripts. That interest, however, does not excuse us from doing rigorist scholarly work in connection with this interest. So always be willing to question what you read, and from time to time search for academic papers on the subject about which you are writing, remembering what we learned as Entered Apprentice Masons that “Truth is a divine attribute, and the foundation of every virtue.”

*Lincoln, California
July 23, 2020*

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