

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE NAG HAMMADI CODICES AND THE STUDY OF EARLY EGYPTIAN MONASTICISM *

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My interest in the Pachomian monastic movement is, I think, fairly well known. It had its origins in an interest in the heterodox collection of texts from Nag Hammadi to which I was first introduced as an undergraduate at the University of California in Berkeley in 1971. While I was drawn into the early speculation over a possible relationship between the Pachomians and the codices, I soon realized that we first needed to better understand the Pachomians and the nature of the Pachomian dossier. Hence I left the Nag Hammadi codices behind to work on the Pachomian monastic movement, and my dissertation focused on the *Letter of Ammon*.¹ While my own career has taken me away from both at times, particularly with respect to an interest in the documentary evidence of early Egyptian monasticism and the issue of the desert as a literary landscape, the Nag Hammadi codices and the Pachomians have never been far from my mind. More recently, I have been involved with the latter days of the Pachomian federation in the sixth century; while origins may be more interesting, the end of a movement has its own intrigue and impact. But that is another story. Here I would like to return to the Nag Hammadi codices and offer a few reflections on the debate that has swirled around them and their relationship to early Christian monasticism. I am interested not simply in the history of the debate, but in reflecting on where we now stand and where I think the future lies.

Initial reaction: "they cannot have been monks"

Initially, the overtly so-called "Gnostic" texts preserved in the Nag Hammadi codices identified the entire collection as Gnostic; hence the title of Jean

* These reflections were originally composed to initiate discussion in a seminar on Nag Hammadi and Early Christian Asceticism organized by Samuel Rubenson at Lund University on June 8, 2010. Participants included Samuel and the members of his research group on "Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia." I thank them one and all for a lively, enjoyable discussion.

¹ James E. Goehring, *The Letter of Ammon and Pachomian Monasticism* (PTS 27; Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986).

Doresse's 1958 volume, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*.² At the time, the more traditional understanding of the relationship between orthodoxy and heresy had not yet been tested, and the new discovery was naturally fit into the received tradition. The Gnostic nature of the collection simply precluded any thought of a possible connection with the well-known Pachomian monastic movement headquartered near where the codices were found. Doresse, in fact, broadened the point even further in his introduction to the texts when he asserted matter-of-factly that "already the contents of these Gnostic collections had led us to suppose that, whoever may have possessed them, they cannot have been monks."³ Today such a blanket assertion brings to mind Epiphanius' claims with respect to the Archontic monk Peter, who lived as an anchorite in a cave and whose followers fasted and dressed as monks. Epiphanius dismisses them as "docetic" ascetics, heretical persons parading as monks.⁴ Since true monks are orthodox, the Archontics were not in truth monks at all. Doresse appears to follow similar reasoning, equating "monks" with their portrayal in orthodox sources. As a result, the possible provenance of the Nag Hammadi codices among the Pachomians was a non-starter; owners of heterodox codices, simply put, could not be monks.

Exploring the possibility of a Pachomian connection

The proximity of the discovery site to the federation's central monastery of Pbow, however, coupled with the lack of knowledge of other groups within the social and religious fabric of the immediate area, led fairly quickly to ruminations about a possible connection between the codices and the Pachomian movement. Some imagined that the Pachomians gathered the texts as a heresiological library for use in their struggle against heretics; monks as heresiologists.⁵ Others began to wonder whether the Pachomian dossier itself might offer evidence of "proclivities" that made their use of the codices more imaginable.⁶ Neither effort proved convincing. In the mid-

² Jean Doresse, *Les livres secrets des gnostiques d'Égypte: Introduction aux écrits gnostiques coptes découverts à Khénoboskion* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1958); English translation, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics: An Introduction to the Gnostic Coptic manuscripts discovered at Chenoboskion* (New York: Viking Press, 1960).

³ *Ibid*, *The Secret Books*, 135; *Les livres secrets*, 155.

⁴ *Panarion haer.* 40,1,4; Karl Holl, ed., *Epiphanius II: Panarion haer.* 34–64 (2nd ed.; GCS; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1980), 81; English translation, Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (vol. 1, NHS 35; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), 262.

⁵ Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, "Holy Scriptures or Apologetic Documentations? The 'Sitz im Leben' of the Nag Hammadi Library," in *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi* (ed. Jacques É. Ménard; NHS 7; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 3–14.

⁶ Charles W. Hedrick, "Gnostic Proclivities in the Greek Life of Pachomius and the Sitz im Leben of the Nag Hammadi Library," *NovT* 22 (1980): 78–94.

1970's, monastic documents that included personal names known from Pachomian sources discovered among the cartonnage used to stiffen the codices' covers appeared to offer a smoking gun, connecting the collection to the Pachomians.⁷ The smoking gun, however, went up in smoke when one of the editors of the later critical edition of the cartonnage discounted the possibility. He held that references to private property, secular concerns, and contact with the world (particularly with women) evidenced in the monastic documents precluded their Pachomian origin.⁸ My own interest in the Pachomian movement led me into the debate relatively early, and while I have at times been placed in the camp of those who argue in favor of a Pachomian origin, for the most part my position has been less about what we can claim with confidence about the Pachomians from their literary sources than about what we cannot claim. Namely, I have argued that the anachronistic nature of the Pachomian sources precludes certainty with respect to their claims about the movement at the time when the codices were in circulation. They cannot alone refute the possibility of the codices' existence and use within the Pachomian federation.⁹

Recently the pendulum has swung back more strongly against the Pachomian connection, though from my point of view it sets up the certainty of the connection as a straw dog to knock down. Avoiding discussion of the literary sources, Alexandr Khosroyev sought to analyze and identify the codices' provenance on a more scientific basis; namely, through the use of codicological and linguistic data.¹⁰ He contends that the conflated dialects evident in the texts and the different construction methods used in the codices' fabrication point to their origin at different locations among non-traditional Christians living in various cities throughout Egypt. They belong in his view to an urban world where speculative religious interests flouri-

⁷ J. W. B. Barns, "Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Covers of the Nag Hammadi Texts," in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts* (ed. Martin Krause; NHS 6; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 9–18.

⁸ J. W. B. Barns, G. M. Browne, and J. C. Shelton, eds., *Nag Hammadi Codices: Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Cartonnage of the Covers* (NHS 16; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 1–11.

⁹ James E. Goehring, "New Frontiers in Pachomian Studies," in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (ed. Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring; SAC; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 236–57; reprinted with an addendum in *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (ed. James E. Goehring; SAC; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 162–86; idem, "Monastic Diversity and Ideological Boundaries in Fourth-Century Christian Egypt," *J ECS* 5 (1997): 61–84; reprinted in *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert*, 196–218; and idem, "The Provenance of the Nag Hammadi Codices once more," in *Asectica, Gnostica, Liturgica, Orientalia: Papers Presented at the Thirteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 1999* (eds. M. F. Wiles and E. J. Yarnold; Leuven: Peeters, 2001) = *StPatr* 35 (2001): 234–53.

¹⁰ Alexandr L. Khosroyev, *Die Bibliothek von Nag Hammadi: Einige Probleme des Christentums in Ägypten während der ersten Jahrhunderte* (Arbeiten zum spätantiken und koptischen Ägypten 7; Altenberge: Oros, 1995).

shed, which presumably means not in the more staid and controlled environment of the Pachomian federation. The detailed “scientific” nature of Khosroyev’s analysis appears to have persuaded many and led, on occasion, to rather dismissive comments towards earlier analyses.¹¹

Imagining a more complex world

While I appreciate Khosroyev’s detailed analysis and accept his thesis as a viable alternative for the origin of the Nag Hammadi codices, I remain unconvinced with respect to the certainty of his conclusions. For me, as I have already suggested, it is not so much a question of proving that the Nag Hammadi codices originated with and/or belonged to the Pachomian movement, but rather suggesting that the limits of our knowledge cannot preclude that possibility. While such a stance may seem indecisive, I would suggest that it simply acknowledges the limitation of the evidence and as such opens us up to the true complexity of the world in which the codices were produced and read. Khosroyev’s and Wipszycka’s arguments against a connection, for example, based as they are on the conflated dialects, varied codex construction, and non-monastic nature of many of the documents in the cartonnage, seem to me to ignore possibilities that could explain such evidence within a Pachomian setting in favor of positing an extra-Pachomian origin. Without dismissing the possibility of their conclusions, I would suggest that the very nature of the Pachomian federation could account for at least some of the evidence. I remain confident that the movement was more complex than we imagine. During Pachomius’ lifetime, the federation had expanded to include nine monasteries between Latopolis (Sne) in the south to Panopolis (Šmin) in the north, separated by some 270 plus kilometers by boat along the Nile. While the community founded some of these monasteries, others pre-existed their inclusion in the federation. Theodore, Pachomius’ ultimate successor as head of the federation, added two additional monasteries near Hermopolis Magna (Ashmunein), some 160 kilometers north of Šmin. This means that by the time of Theodore’s death circa 368 C.E., the federation’s individual monasteries were spread some 430 kilometers along the Nile River.¹² Furthermore, it drew monks from even

¹¹ See Ewa Wipszycka, “The Nag Hammadi Library and the Monks: A Papyrologist’s Point of View,” *JJP* 30 (2000): 179–191, esp. 183.

¹² On the monasteries in the federation, see James E. Goehring, “Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt,” *HTR* 89 (1996): 267–85; repr. in *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert*, 89–109; idem, “The Ship of the Pachomian Federation: Metaphor and Meaning in a Late Account of Pachomian Monasticism,” in *Christianity in Egypt: Literary Production and Intellectual Trends* (eds. Paola Buzi and Alberto Camplani; SEAug; Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum), forthcoming.

further afield; according to the *Letter of Ammon*, Ammon was steered to the Pachomians in 351 by his priest in Alexandria,¹³ and we know from the vita tradition that a special house existed for foreign monks.¹⁴ One imagines that the geographic spread and internal diversity of the federation would result in multiple dialects within the monasteries and their occasional conflation. One might likewise explain the varied codex format as a result of the various codices' production in different monasteries before their assemblage together prior to their concealment. It is worth noting in this regard that colophons in many later codices from the White Monastery's library indicate that they came from elsewhere.¹⁵

The contention that the cartonnage either come from a form of monasticism that had more contact with the world than the Pachomians or from a non-monastic commercial source can likewise, in my view, be explained as readily via a Pachomian connection as apart from it. As a village form of monasticism, contact with the surrounding world was inevitable and, I'd suggest, expected. The distancing from the world suggested in the literary sources expresses an ascetic ideal. It is precisely the function of such literature to encourage the ideal within a world that required the ascetic's attention. Life in the world required contact with it. As for the commercial paper, it is not hard to imagine that Pachomian monks, who operated across such a wide expanse of Egypt, worked outside of their monasteries, traveled between them as well as to and from Alexandria, collected scrap paper for use in book production along the way. Wipszycka argues that the waste paper trade explains the diverse contents of the cartonnage, but, as Bagnall points out, she offers no evidence for the existence of such a trade.¹⁶ It seems to me as easy, if not easier, to imagine monks collecting commercial paper when available, thus explaining its presence in the cartonnage, than to imagine how a commercial waste paper trader came into possession of the various monastic texts in the cartonnage.

Even if, in the end, one grants Khosroyev's points and imagines that the Nag Hammadi texts originated in an urban setting where the dialectical con-

¹³ *Epistula Ammonis* 2.

¹⁴ Bohairic *Life of Pachomius* 89–91 = First Greek *Life of Pachomius* 94–95; Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, Vol. 1, *The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples* (Cistercian Studies Series 45; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 117–23 and 361–62. When Ammon joined the movement, he was placed in a house with twenty Greek speaking monks led by the Alexandrian Theodore and his second, Ausonius (*Epistula Ammonis* 7).

¹⁵ Tito Orlandi, "The Library of the Monastery of Saint Shenute at Atripe," in *Perspectives on Panopolis: An Egyptian Town from Alexander the Great to the Arab Conquest. Acts from an International Symposium Held in Leiden on 16, 17, and 18 December 1998* (ed. A. Egberts, B. P. Muhs, and J. van der Vliet; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 211–31.

¹⁶ Wipszycka, "The Nag Hammadi Library and the Monks," 188; Roger Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 58.

flation occurred, why does that preclude their later copying by Pachomian monks, a process that would bring texts with conflated dialects into their possession?¹⁷ So too one could imagine books entering the federation with new members. Petronius, who founded the monastery of Thbew, is said to have donated “sheep, goats, cattle, camels, donkeys, carts, and all that he possessed, including boats.”¹⁸ Why not also books? And if so, could not the origin of those books outside of the monastery explain their existence within it? Finally, I might add that urban production (Khosroyev’s non-traditional Christians in the cities) does not automatically mean non-monastic production. Monks lived in cities too.¹⁹

Again, my point is not to prove that the Nag Hammadi codices belonged to the Pachomian monks, but only that the evidence does not preclude that possibility. A further question, which I will not pursue here, involves the meaning to be given to the existence of such a collection within the Pachomian federation, were it to be proven. Would it make the Pachomians less orthodox? More heretical? Is that what is at stake? I do not see it that way. I see no reason to assume that all Pachomians thought alike, or that they believed everything that they read. I assume that a federation as large as that of the Pachomians resulted in a diverse population of monks within it: Greek and Coptic, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, more intelligent and less intelligent, more philosophical and less philosophical, etc. In such a world, before a boundary is drawn that separates monks (or books) in terms of their “orthodoxy,” they existed side-by-side, whether or not they saw eye-to-eye. The boundary becomes visible only once it is drawn; and once it is drawn, it necessarily defines reality in the literary accounts that serve to fashion future monks.²⁰ I might note in this regard my present work on the last Coptic orthodox archimandrite Abraham of Farshut. The sources that I am editing indicate that his removal as head of the federation resulted when elements within the federation, centered in Lower Egypt, opposed his non-Chalcedonian orientation. They brought charges against him and succeeded

¹⁷ The colophon that follows the Prayer of Thanksgiving in Nag Hammadi Codex VI (65, 8–14) indicates the scribe’s selective choice of the various tractates available to him. Douglas M. Parrott, *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and* (NHS 11; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 389–93.

¹⁸ Bohairic *Life of Pachomius* 56 = First Greek *Life of Pachomius* 80; translation from Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, vol. 1, 77.

¹⁹ Ewa Wipszycka, “Le monachisme égyptien et les villes,” *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994): 1–44; on the power of the desert imagery to shape the understanding of monasticism, see James E. Goehring, “The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert,” in *The Cultural Turn in Later Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (ed. Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller; Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 136–49.

²⁰ Goehring, “Monastic Diversity and Ideological Boundaries,” 61–84; reprinted in *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert*, 196–218.

in forcing his removal. Naturally, many monks left with him. While the sources emphasize the divide, I would note that prior to the immediate crisis the federation had housed monks on opposite sides of the theological debate. They did not all think alike, and somehow they managed to live together.²¹ I would note in this regard as well documentary sources that report Melitian and non-Melitian monks cohabiting peacefully in the sixth century in the monastery of Labla in the district of Arsinoë.²² Such evidence suggests boundaries at odds with those one expects from reading more traditional ecclesiastical texts. It indicates that the world within the monastery, like the world outside of it, was more complex than we imagine.

While it may be difficult for scholars to admit, given the available evidence, the provenance of the Nag Hammadi codices remains unknown. We simply do not have the evidence from which to draw certain conclusions. That does not, however, mean that the effort was or is in vain. I would reaffirm my point made in 1999 that “the years of debate and various theories have taught us to read the sources more carefully and, in the process, revealed a world of religion and politics decidedly more complex than previously thought.”²³ When one leaves the question of the codices’ provenance behind, the mere existence of the texts, the nature of the collection, and the contents of the individual codices open up new and interesting paths of exploration. Their discovery in the vicinity of the Pachomian federation’s central monastery of Pbow, for example, underscores the diversity that existed in the area at the end of the third century, irrespective of who owned them. If the Pachomian dossier had led to a general sense of the movement’s ascetic monopoly in the area, such can no longer be taken for granted. Existing monasteries joined the new federation; we may assume that others did not. The monasteries of Shenoute’s federation offer a case in point, developing independently alongside nearby Pachomian establishments. Archeological exploration suggests monastic occupation of caves in the cliff face of the Jabal al-Tarif, beneath which the codices were found,²⁴ and a pilgrimage site deep in the Wadi Sheikh Ali is indicative of a complex religious and social world that we have only begun to understand.²⁵ The Pachomian dossier itself mentions

²¹ James E. Goehring, “Remembering Abraham of Farshut: History, Hagiography, and the Fate of the Pachomian Tradition,” *J ECS* 14 (2006): 1–26.

²² Goehring, “Monastic Diversity and Ideological Boundaries,” 65–73; reprinted in *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert*, 200–208.

²³ Goehring, “The Provenance of the Nag Hammadi Codices once more,” 253.

²⁴ Bastiaan Van Elderen, “The Nag Hammadi Excavation,” *BA* 42 (1979): 226, with a photograph of the Coptic Psalm inscription in cave T8 on page 228.

²⁵ Marvin W. Meyer, “Archaeological Survey of the Wadi Sheikh Ali December 1980,” *Göttingen Miszellen* 64 (1983): 77–82 and *American Research Center in Egypt Newsletter* 117 (1982): 22–24; idem, “Wadi Shaykh Ali,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (ed. Aziz S. Atiya; 8 vols; New York: Macmillan, 1991), 7.2312–13.

philosophers, Origenist monks, and Melitians; I have noted elsewhere that the closest parallels to the monastic cartonnage from the Nag Hammadi codices are found among Melitian documents.²⁶ While the literary nature of these references must be taken into account, the picture of a diverse environment, albeit one confronted by the Pachomians, makes sense in light of the Nag Hammadi evidence. If the Pachomians did not produce or own these texts, other ascetically minded persons, who may well have lived as monks, did. How little we actually know of the area was underscored for me already as a graduate student when, during the 1977–78 archeological season at Faw Qibli (Pbow), the unrelated excavation of a new irrigation ditch by local authorities some 750 meters north of the site of the Pachomian basilica began to unearth large quantities of early Roman ware and cut through the remains of a sizeable limestone wall.²⁷ We have in fact no idea what it was. One can only imagine what else existed in the area of which we haven't a clue.

When the question of a specific provenance is left behind, new approaches begin to emerge. In his article on "The Successors of Pachomius and the Nag Hammadi Codices," for example, Philip Rousseau, building on Michael Williams' work, suggests that the "habit of analysis that seems to have governed the compilation of each codex" finds parallels in the writings of Pachomius' successors.²⁸ Comparing the various sources, he observes:

The conclusions drawn from a reading of the Bible and from observation of the world of experience were different; but the habit of thinking, of exercising curiosity, was closely connected. The identification of ancient figures of wisdom, leading through a sense of New Testament fulfillment, or at least corroboration, and through a series of exhortatory reflections, and culminating in a vision of the future: that describes very closely the flow, if not the content, of Theodore's and Horsiesios's teaching. Within some of the surviving Nag Hammadi codices, there is a similar curve of logic, carrying an ascetic from the warnings and promises of the prophets into the transformation of his own heart and body.²⁹

He continues, a short time later:

That suggests in turn that people who thought like Theodore and Horsiesios would have found the Nag Hammadi codices useful, once the originally "gnostic" material had been rearranged—"recycled"—according to new patterns. We do not have to

²⁶ Goehring, "The Provenance of the Nag Hammadi Codices once more," 246–50.

²⁷ Van Elderen, "The Nag Hammadi Excavations," 230–31; Goehring, "New Frontiers in Pachomian Studies," 256; reprinted in *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert*, 182.

²⁸ Philip Rousseau, "The Successors of Pachomius and the Nag Hammadi Codices: Exegetical Themes and Literary Structures," in *The World of Early Egyptian Christianity: Language, Literature, and Social Context, Essay in Honor of David W. Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007, 140–57 (quotation, page 141); Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), especially ch. 11 (233–62).

²⁹ Rousseau, "The Successors of Pachomius," 156–57.

believe that Theodore and Horsiesios themselves knew of the codices we now possess (although that remains possible); rather, their comparable habits of exegesis and catechesis make it entirely likely that the Nag Hammadi documents could have taken their surviving form within Christian ascetic society. That could have been the case, *not* because Christian ascetics thought like gnostics, but because they could turn the material to their own use.³⁰

While I would question the general characterization of the Nag Hammadi codices as “gnostic” material, I find the analysis intriguing, an effort to understand similarities rather than accentuate differences.

In fact, those who gathered the texts and fashioned the Nag Hammadi codices had themselves “recycled” material “according to new patterns.” When one draws many of the texts out of the Gnostic “ghetto” into which they have been relegated by virtue of their having been “recycled” into the Nag Hammadi collection and thus associated with the texts representative of “biblical demiurgical” traditions,³¹ they are seen to better align with other worlds of thought. *The Sentences of Sextus* (NHC XII, 1) offers an obvious case in point. While the overall collection certainly underscores its heterodox nature, we should remember that individual texts were read by different people in different ways. One need not always assume that the less heterodox texts were read in light of the more heterodox texts, and not the other way round. Wolf-Peter Funk’s discovery of a passage shared in common between the *Teachings of Silvanus* and the teachings of Antony, for example, indicates a common background that precedes the later more sharply divided camps to which they were eventually relegated. Clearly those who, according to Funk, drew from a common wisdom tradition, had similar habits of thinking and exercising curiosity, and one suspects similar habits of living as well.³²

In bringing this brief series of reflections to an end, I would call your attention to an article entitled “Antony’s Letters and Nag Hammadi Codex I: Sources of Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt,” that appeared recently in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*.³³ Taking Michael Williams’s notion of the coherence of the individual codices in the Nag Hammadi collection seriously, the authors, Lance Jenott and Elaine Pagels, explore ideological themes and emphases common to both the assembled five tractates that form Nag Hammadi Codex I and the collection of seven letters attributed to the famous ascetic Antony. They argue that “a fourth-century

³⁰ Rousseau, “The Successors of Pachomius,” 157.

³¹ Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, 51.

³² Wolf-Peter Funk, “Ein doppelt überliefertes Stück spätägyptischer Weisheit,” *ZÄS* 103 (1976): 8–21.

³³ Lance Jenott and Elaine Pagels, “Antony’s Letters and Nag Hammadi Codex I: Sources of Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt,” *J ECS* 18 (2010): 557–89.

reader of this codex, far from encountering teachings typically regarded as “gnostic” (dualism, docetism, a “worldhating spirit”) would have found a number of themes strikingly compatible with Antony’s letters.” These include an emphasis on self-knowledge, an understanding of the spirit as a guide to adoption, a focus on Jesus’ passion, crucifixion, and spiritual resurrection, and a longing for restoration to the father. While one could of course parse the two collections in terms of their differences as well as their similarities, the noted parallels offer a striking example of how differently different individuals might read and perceive selected collections of texts. Those who gathered together the tractates that form Nag Hammadi Codex I may well have read them neither explicitly nor exclusively as “Gnostic.” My point here is not to argue in depth about the issues raised in Jenott and Pagels’ article, but to take note of the new paths that are opening up in the exploration of the social and religious environment that produced, used, and ultimately concealed the Nag Hammadi codices. The world was more complex than we know and, I suspect, more ideologically interwoven than the surviving sources allow us to imagine.

Conclusions

To me at least it seems clear that certainty with respect to the provenance of the Nag Hammadi codices lies beyond our grasp. Evidence can be marshaled for or against various possibilities, but in the end they all remain at best simply possibilities. While the uncertainty engendered by this conclusion may be less than satisfying, its acceptance has begun to open doors to other possibilities and new avenues of investigation. While the precise provenance of the Nag Hammadi codices lies beyond our grasp, it is fair to say that their impact on the study of the ascetic movement in early Christian Egypt has only just begun. As the origin of the texts themselves have revealed the inherent diversity of early Christianity, their preservation in fourth century Egypt argues for the continuing impact of that diversity. Traditional sources can no longer be read in the same way. Traditional boundaries can no longer be maintained with certainty. While various theories about the codices’ origin can and will be argued, it now seems clear that Doresse’s early claim, namely that “already the contents of these Gnostic collections had led us to suppose that, whoever may have possessed them, they cannot have been monks,”³⁴ has no standing. The world of late antiquity no longer divides so neatly between so-called “Gnostics” and monks.

³⁴ Doresse, *The Secret Books*, 135; *Les livres secrets*, 155.