

## CHAPTER 3

# *Gnosticism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field*

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Lively, sometimes heated, discussion is part of what makes gnostic studies so engrossing. These discussions and debates occur especially whenever gnostic texts are discovered and published, such as the huge discovery of the thirteen Nag Hammadi codices (i.e., ancient books), published in 1977, and the far smaller, but also incredible, discovery of the Codex Tchacos with its copy of the lost Gospel of Judas, published in 2006. The debates happen at academic conferences and on the printed pages of scholarship as well as on webpages such as blogs and online news sources. Understanding the debates is key to understanding the scholarship and situating the work of one expert with respect to that of another, as some specialists may reframe perennial research questions and even seek to replace them with different questions they consider more pressing. Major debates include the issue of how gnosticism is to be defined, and the question of where it came from. They also include the issue of whether its ancient opponents are reliable, and the question of who produced, collected, and owned the Nag Hammadi codices and other gnostic texts surviving in Coptic, the final form of the ancient Egyptian language. Another debate concerns what should be done when the next manuscript is found.

### HOW IS GNOSTICISM TO BE DEFINED?

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One of the ancient Greek verbs meaning “to know” is *gignōskein*. The corresponding noun is *gnōsis*. The adjective *gnōstikos* (grammatically masculine), *-ē* (feminine), *-on* (neuter) appears to have been invented in the fourth century BCE by the philosopher Plato (*Statesman* 258b–260a) in a discussion about the kind of expertise that the political ruler should have. He should have intellectual (*gnōstikē*) rather than manual or practical expertise, an expertise of the soul instead of the body. Later the adjective was used to describe people directly, people who claimed or were supposed to have a superior knowledge, particularly of the divine. In ancient Greek literature beginning in the second century CE, there are references to gnostic men and women by pagan philosophers (Celsus, Porphyry, Iamblichus) as well as Christians (e.g. Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Epiphanius). Unlike the words *gnosis* and *gnostic*, however, *gnosticism* is a modern word, first attested in seventeenth-century English. Since then it has been defined variously even in scholarship.

### NARROWLY ... BROADLY

In full detail, there are as many definitions of gnosticism as there are researchers in the field of gnostic studies. But in general, and for the purposes of introducing new students to this issue, experts and their definitions can be placed in one of the following cumulative categories, from the narrow to the broad. At its narrowest, scholars define gnosticism in terms of a single though complex religious movement of the Sethians or classic gnostics, as experts call them (Layton 1995; Logan 2006; Brakke 2010). They were named for Seth, the son of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis. The Sethians may have started out as a Jewish movement, while ending up more philosophically Greek and religiously Christian. Opponents of the Sethians also called some of them Ophites, in reference to the wise serpent (*ophis* in Greek, *nahash* in Hebrew) from the creation stories in the opening chapters of the Bible.

On a broader definition, gnosticism encompasses not only the Sethians but also numerous other Christian movements from the Roman Empire, chiefly the Valentinians (Wilson 1968). The Valentinians were named for Valentinus, an influential Christian thinker who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, and then in Rome in the middle of the second century CE. The Valentinians were also complex, existing in two main schools with different opinions about whether Jesus became Christ at his birth or his baptism, among other things.

Defined even more broadly, gnosticism and gnosis further circumscribe non-Christian religious movements from the ancient Mediterranean (Rudolph [1983] 1987; Pearson 2007). These include the Hermetics or Hermetists, named for Hermes Trismegistus, a legendary figure and Greco-Egyptian god, and the Manichaeans, named for Mani, a third-century Syro-Mesopotamian visionary and prophet. They also include the Mandaeans, a baptismal group that still lives in Iraq, Iran, and assorted communities elsewhere, but that originally spoke a dialect of Aramaic (the word *manda* being the equivalent of gnosis) and that came from ancient Palestine.

At its broadest, scholars define gnosticism and gnosis in terms of a sort of spirituality or worldview that can be found in religious and philosophical writings from antiquity to the present (Culianu 1992; DeConick 2016). These may be the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John as well as gnostic literature from the defunct Sethians to the living Mandaeans. They may be the writings of merkabah (Hebrew: “chariot”) mystics and *bekhalot* (Hebrew: “palaces”) mystics before Jewish kabbalah developed in the twelfth century CE (see Deutsch 1995). They may be the writings of the Christian Cathars of medieval Europe. They may be the writings of the poet and painter William Blake (1757–1827), the theosophist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), and the novelist Philip K. Dick (1928–1982). Here the word *gnosticism* often overlaps and at times may even be interchangeable with the words *mysticism* and *esotericism*. It overlaps as well with the word *dualism*, which can be defined by a cosmic separation between the Creator and a transcendent God above, and in turn between the human body and the spirit or soul.

### CHALLENGES TO DEFINITION

New students of gnosticism are liable to encounter any and all of these definitions—whether the words *gnosis*, *gnostic*, and *gnosticism* are capitalized or not—alongside critiques and counter-critiques (Williams 1996; King 2003; Marjanen 2005; Logan 2006, 1–12; Brakke 2010, 1–51; Broek 2013, 1–12; DeConick 2016). Some of the challenges to definition are

specific to gnosticism and its study, whereas others apply to definitions and categorizations, no matter what the field.

Perhaps the first challenge to be addressed is that the word *gnosticism* is modern. No ancient Sethians, Valentinians, Hermetics, Manichaeans, or Mandaeans would have said that they were part of a religious movement called gnosticism. Modern scholars are the ones calling these religious movements that. Similarly, many of them may not have called themselves gnostics, although there is some good secondhand evidence that they did. Nevertheless, none of the authors of the Sethian, Valentinian, or Hermetic texts within the Nag Hammadi codices refer to themselves as gnostics. The same holds for the other Coptic gnostic codices, as they are labeled in scholarship: the Askew, Bruce, and Berlin codices that were discovered before the Nag Hammadi codices, and the Codex Tchacos that was discovered after.

This challenge is both more and less formidable than it might appear. As outsiders, scholars in many fields of study in the humanities and social sciences employ definitions and categories that the subjects of that study, the insiders, never used. For instance, an academic definition of Christianity and categorization of Christian literature could demand occurrence of the word Christianity (*christianismos* in Greek) or its equivalent. But such a definition and categorization would have to exclude the entire New Testament to begin with, because the word is not used there. The word Christian (*christianos*, *-ē*, *-on* in Greek) is only used three times (Acts 11:26, 26:28, and 1 Pet 4:16). Although scholars should take careful note of what insiders call themselves in their own literature, scholarship need not be restricted to those designations and groupings. Indeed, the outsider definitions and categories employed in scholarship facilitate important analytical work.

While the word *gnostic* doesn't show up where researchers might expect or want it to, such as in the Nag Hammadi and related Coptic gnostic writings, conversely another challenge is that the word occurs as a self-designation in the writings of some early Christians that most specialists would not call gnostics. For instance, Clement of Alexandria, a Christian intellectual (c. 200 CE), and Evagrius of Pontus, a Christian monk (c. 390 CE), referred to the ideal Christian as gnostic, but they were not Sethians, Valentinians, nor the rest. In fact, Clement opposed Christian movements that according to him called themselves gnostics (and that scholars today would call gnostics) even as he referred to the ideal Christian as the same.

Because word usage by insiders and their opponents is not in and of itself a satisfying starting point for definitions of gnosticism, several specialists turn to typology (e.g., Markschiefs 2003, 16–17). A *typology* is a category that has been constructed based on prevalent features within a set of data, in this case literary data. Constructing typologies is challenging. Researchers disagree as to which features are the most prevalent in gnostic belief and practice. They also disagree as to how many features there should be in the typological construct of gnosticism as a whole. And they disagree as to the number of features that must be found in any given text for it to be considered gnostic. A commonly identified feature is the belief in the cosmic separation between the Creator God and a transcendent God above, and in turn between the human body, which comes from the Creator, and the spirit or soul, which comes from the transcendent God and seeks to return there. Another is the belief in knowledge or gnosis of the divine that is secret and may be revealed by a savior figure. At best, these kinds of features are strongly representative of the literature. At worst, they become stereotypes.

In part, this challenge involves the tension of identifying what is prevalent in gnostic belief and practice and yet also identifying what makes gnosticism unique. Some scholars

stress the similarities within gnostic literature itself, while they highlight the differences that mark it off from contemporary and geographically proximate writings, such as the bulk of early Christian literature (e.g., DeConick 2016). Other scholars do the reverse. They emphasize how disparate gnostic literature itself is, while they underscore how much it has in common with the writings of Christians, Jews, and Greek philosophers, for instance, who were not gnostics (Williams 1996; King 2003). So scholarship is split on whether to maintain the relatively small category or to dissolve it into bigger categories such as Christianity, Judaism, or even ancient Mediterranean literature in all its diversity.

One of the most difficult challenges to definitions of gnosticism is that scholars define it in terms of different things. Gnosticism, gnostic, and gnosis have been defined in terms of social groups and religious movements, such as philosophical schools and cults, sects, and churches (Layton 1995; Logan 2006). They have also been defined in terms of a phenomenon, a zeitgeist, a cognitive system, a certain spirituality or worldview perhaps recurring from time to time without necessarily being connected historically (Culianu 1992; Broek 2013; DeConick 2016). Some scholars even define gnosticism in terms of learned invention so that for them gnostic studies means the study of modern scholarship about gnosticism, not, strictly speaking, the ancient Sethians or Valentinians (e.g., King 2003). They argue that the constructed category of gnosticism doesn't exist much beyond academic discourse.

At the heart of this challenge lies a widespread and fundamental debate over what humanities scholarship is capable of. Researchers mostly have gnostic texts and a few stone artifacts to study, not living gnostic people who can be interviewed or observed. These texts and artifacts are often far removed from the present, not to mention preserved by chance. Some specialists think they can reconstruct the history of the people who wrote the texts, including the social groups and religious movements they belonged to, their beliefs and practices. Others think this is impossible. For them, reconstructions of the past are really constructions of the present motivated by cultural dynamics here and now. In between, many scholars think scholarship is a mix of both.

Due to all these challenges, experts not only define gnosticism variously, but some put the word in quotation marks or even abandon it (Williams 1996; King 2003; Thomassen 2006; Dunderberg 2008). They propose that study be focused on individual traditions, features, or texts, apart from the overarching definition and category. Other scholars still employ the words *gnostic* and *gnosis*, writing of gnostic religious movements, even gnostic religions, but not gnosticism (e.g., Broek 2013). Some others have written and will keep writing responsibly about gnosticism (e.g., DeConick 2016). Academic consensus may never emerge. The number of definitions and categorizations could easily increase. What matters is that each piece of scholarship be as methodical and transparent as possible in its own definition and categorization of gnosticism.

## WHERE DID GNOSTICISM COME FROM?

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The Nag Hammadi codices were found in the 1940s in Egypt where fifteen hundred years earlier they had been written in Coptic. Before that, most, if not all, of the texts in the codices were originally written in Greek. Prior to their translation into Coptic, they could have been written by many people living in many places in the Greek-speaking Greco-Roman world, not just Egypt. The trouble is that almost without exception the texts were

written either anonymously or pseudonymously, that is, attributed either to no one or to someone authoritative, such as a biblical hero, who did not write them, however. Thus, biographical information about the actual authors of the texts is scarce. The same is true of the texts in the other Coptic gnostic codices, namely the Tchacos, Berlin, Bruce, and Askew books.

### INFLUENCES AND ORIGINS

Evidence that gnostic texts were circulating in the second century is provided by Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon. He was reading and paraphrasing Valentinian and Sethian writings in Greek around the year 180 CE. For instance, he cited some Valentinian prayers for heavenly ascent that are also found in the First Apocalypse of James in the Tchacos codex and in Nag Hammadi codex V (*Against Heresies* 1.21.5). He and other Greek-speaking leaders of the church, such as Justin Martyr before him and Hippolytus after him, opposed the Valentinians along with myriad other Christians they had determined were heretics, whether gnostics or not.

One of the techniques used by these church leaders in order to determine and oppose heresy was to attempt to trace a given group of heretics and their beliefs and practices back to a nefarious origin, thereby discrediting them. In a literal sense, *heresy* means choice. In a pejorative sense, according to whatever religious group asserts dominance, it means the wrong way to believe or practice. Justin Martyr stated that the heretics were influenced by demons or rogue angels and magic (*First Apology* 26, 56; *Dialogue with Trypho* 35). Irenaeus did the same, adding Satan himself and astrology to the list of influences. Irenaeus also tried to connect the heretics to each other in a kind of devilish family tree with its roots going back to Simon Magus (first described in the New Testament book of Acts 8:9–24) who was considered the originator of heresy. Furthermore, Irenaeus said that the Valentinians and their heretical ancestors, such as the Sethians, had developed their beliefs from a misinterpretation of scripture and from the writings of a Greek philosopher and poet or two (*Against Heresies*). Hippolytus, though, would not admit scripture as a source of heresy. The heretics were supposed to be pagan in origin. Hippolytus tried to connect them along with their beliefs and practices to the philosophy, secret initiation rites, astrology, and magic of the Greeks as well as the Persians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and even the sages of India (*Refutation of All Heresies*).

Modern scholarship has argued for some of the same influences on gnosticism and has been concerned with origins, too, but mostly for different reasons. Until the late 1800s and even thereafter, the emphasis in research was Christianity. Gnosticism was understood to be Christian but with an over-influence of Greek thought. From the late 1800s through the early 1900s, scholars of the German school of the history of religion, known as the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, took a more widely comparative approach and emphasized the ancient Near East, Persia in particular, as the font of pre-Christian gnostic myth about a descending and ascending redeemer figure. Now Persian origin is largely considered to be a dead end because the texts that the German school treated as sources of pre-Christian gnostic myth are Manichaean and Mandaean writings that historically developed in the Iranian context during late antiquity. Nag Hammadi texts, however, tell a different origin story. So starting in the mid-1900s, scholars began to emphasize the Jewish origin of gnosticism. This is still a viable position in the ongoing debate (e.g., Pearson 2007, 15–19). Christian, Greek philosophical, and Greco-Egyptian influences and origins are also on the table.

But influences don't necessarily add up to origins, and some specialists argue that whatever the influences on gnosticism were, it was self-originating, something new and irreducible to its components (e.g., Broek 2013, 226–231). Other experts argue that the influences and origins were so simultaneously numerous that any prioritization of this or that one will be misleading (e.g., Williams 1996, 213–234). Likewise, some others argue that scholarship can only ever jump into the middle of things (e.g., King 2003, 169–190). All origins in time and space, presumably in the history of modern scholarship no less, are ultimately arbitrary points, they argue. And these points are plotted in a present exercise of power to form identity through an opposite. They argue that research has not been and won't be successful in learning where gnosticism came from. Instead it has (unwittingly) perpetuated the church fathers' rhetorical techniques of causally determining and opposing heresy as the opposite of Christian orthodoxy. *Orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy* mean the right way to believe and practice—right, that is, according to whatever religious group asserts dominance.

The debate over gnostic origins is indeed largely driven by the question of gnosticism's relationship to Christianity as well as Judaism. But most specialists in the field of gnostic studies aren't tracing the influences on gnosticism in order to discredit it (e.g., DeConick 2016). Unlike the church leaders Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, they do not posit a metaphysical evil behind gnostic belief and practice. The relative theological values of orthodoxy and heresy, of Christianity, Judaism, and paganism, are usually bracketed or set aside as inconsequential for the goals of historically minded scholarship, with the exception of some more conservative scholars.

#### AFTER OR BEFORE CHRISTIANITY

Many gnostic texts can be understood to be Christian. Others can be understood to have been secondarily Christianized through processes of editing and rewriting or to be entirely non-Christian. The corollary is that gnosticism may have been independent of Christianity and even preceded it, at least in some places. A few specialists argue for dates at the start of the Common Era or even before that (e.g., DeConick 2016). Most argue for dates beginning in the late first or early second century CE.

So long as gnosticism is defined to include Hermetics, Manichaeans, and Mandaeans, independence is indisputable. The real issue is precedence. Mani and his followers came after Christianity, which they claimed to fulfill along with the teachings of the Buddha and Zoroaster, somewhat similar to the way Christians claimed to supersede Judaism. According to their literature, the Mandaeans, on the other hand, claim to precede Jesus and Christianity through John the Baptist. But that is hard to prove historically because their presence in ancient Palestine cannot be dated much before the second century CE, if even that early. As for the Hermetics and their literature, which contains almost no mention of Christianity (an important caveat being Zosimus of Panopolis), their philosophical writings may not be older than the earliest Christian texts.

In the wake of the German school of the history of religions and the theory of gnosticism's Persian origin, when the Nag Hammadi codices were found the search for a pre-Christian gnostic myth about a descending and ascending redeemer figure didn't stop. It looked toward Judaism, the Sethians, and their myths in texts such as the Apocryphon of John, which survives in four copies (in the Nag Hammadi codices and in the Berlin codex) representing two main versions, one longer and one shorter. Irenaeus paraphrased a Greek version of part of the same myth in the apocryphon along with another overall similar myth

(*Against Heresies* 1.29–30). He called the purveyors of these myths gnostics, and he claimed that they were among the heretical ancestors of the Valentinians, his foremost Christian rivals. In modern scholarship, they are often called Sethians and regarded as paradigmatic or classic gnostics because several experts think that notwithstanding his opposition, Irenaeus was right that the first Sethians came before the Valentinians, hence before the middle of the second century (Layton 1995). It's debated just how old Sethian mythology may be and whether the Sethians were originally Christian or Jewish.

Sethian myths are about how deity exists, how the universe and humans came to be, what will happen at death, and what provisions have been made for human salvation (Turner 2001; Pearson 2007, 51–100; Rasimus 2009; DeConick 2009, 26–46, 218–224; Denzey Lewis 2013, 118–130). They are largely retellings of the opening chapters of the book of Genesis from a unique perspective informed by Jewish readings of scripture and Jewish traditions about God's Wisdom or Sophia. This perspective was also informed by Greek philosophy, such as the writings of Plato, especially his *Timaeus*, and by popular cosmological and astrological belief, such as can be found in the technical and philosophical Hermetic literature.

What makes the perspective of Sethian mythology unique, among other things, is the way in which the biblical Creator God is viewed. He is generally demonized and vilified. Some of the myths show little to no signs of Christian influence other than the frame stories in which they may be set. For example, in the Apocryphon of John, Jesus is supposed to be teaching his disciple, but his death is never mentioned nor the Christian ritual known as the Eucharist, which today some Christians call Communion (cf. 1 Cor 11:23–26; Mark 14:22–25; Matt 26:26–29; Luke 22:15–20; John 6:52–59). Indeed, the savior figures in the Apocryphon of John are described as female (the Mother, Wisdom, Eve) or androgynous (the Mother-Father). They are not male, as they are in Christian narratives. A ritual akin to Christian baptism is mentioned in Sethian myths, although Christians were not the only religious group to baptize. Assorted Jewish groups had comparable practices, and the Mandaeans, who are not Christians, still do. Ultimately, the Sethians and earliest gnosticism may have simply been contemporary with Christianity, but not initially Christian.

## ARE GNOSTICISM'S ANCIENT OPPONENTS RELIABLE?

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Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus were not the only church leaders to oppose the Valentinians and others they determined to be heretics. For instance, there was also Tertullian of Carthage who wrote in Latin at the start of the 200s CE, as well as Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, who wrote in Greek at the end of the 300s. And these church leaders were not alone in their opposition. The pagan Greek philosophers Celsus, Plotinus, and his student Porphyry opposed gnostics too. Celsus, in his book *True Doctrine*, wrote against gnostics and the rest of Christianity in the middle of the 100s CE, perhaps in Egypt. Plotinus wrote against them in the middle of the 200s, in Rome. His student Porphyry prepared his writings for publication in the early 300s. Porphyry prefaced them with a biographical introduction mentioning the gnostics who attended Plotinus's school (see *Life of Plotinus* 16; *Against the Gnostics*). Most of these writings of the church leaders and Greek philosophers were rather well transmitted and preserved from late antiquity into modernity, unlike the texts of those they were opposing.

#### FIRSTHAND AND SECONDHAND EVIDENCE

Modern scholarship had to rely on their accounts until the Coptic gnostic codices were found, especially the thirteen Nag Hammadi codices. Since then, experts have been faced with the fortunate problem of how to piece together two kinds of information about gnosticism: secondhand evidence from its opponents, and firsthand evidence from the primary texts in the Coptic gnostic codices.

When most researchers began to study the texts in the newly discovered codices, they naturally read them in the context of what the church leaders and Greek philosophers had said, because that's what they were familiar with. The reading was done critically, but all the same a few scholars thought then that the field of gnostic studies and its research agenda were preconditioned and even biased by those accounts as a result. And more scholars think so now (e.g., King 2003).

Some specialists propose that gnostic studies should rely on the Coptic texts and that the field should exclude accounts from gnosticism's opponents, at least temporarily. Radically formulated, this proposal means studying the Nag Hammadi, Tchacos, Berlin, Bruce, and Askew codices in the context of their Coptic production in fourth-century Egypt and thereafter, not in the context of the earlier Greek stage of textual composition and transmission throughout the Greco-Roman world (Kaler 2009; Jenott and Pagels 2010; Lundhaug 2015). In other words, the Coptic manuscripts are not to be read as translations of earlier Greek versions. The Coptic stage is taken to be more certain than the Greek stage, which is sometimes reduced to speculative hypothesis. Though these arguments have been pushed far, the problem does not require an either/or solution. Gnostic studies can sustain both projects: one that looks mainly at the Greek stage and includes evidence from Irenaeus and others, and one that looks mainly at the Coptic stage.

To be sure, the church leaders and Greek philosophers were prejudicial in their opposition. And they are known to have been misinformed, some more frequently than others, starting with Justin Martyr's claim that Simon Magus, the alleged father of heresy, was honored as a god with an inscribed statue on the island of the Tiber River in Rome (*First Apology* 26). There was an inscription there, and Simon or his followers may well have claimed that he was divine. But the inscription was to Semo Sancus, the pagan god of oaths, whom Christians confused with Simon.

Notwithstanding, many scholars continue to rely on secondhand evidence from gnosticism's ancient opponents in addition to the evidence from the Coptic gnostic texts, for several reasons (Pearson 2007; Broek 2013; DeConick 2016). Precisely because these texts were written anonymously or pseudonymously, the contextual evidence provided by the church leaders and Greek philosophers remains valuable. Their accounts, however inimical and erroneous, offer a basic historical framework that the primary texts simply don't. So even if Irenaeus's paraphrases of Valentinian and Sethian writings are not from any of the exact texts in the Coptic gnostic codices as they survive in that language, thanks to his record there is no question that Greek versions of these kinds of texts were already circulating in the late second century in Lyon, on the other side of the Greco-Roman world from Egypt.

Along with dates and locations, this basic historical framework includes the titles of some texts and the names of some of the men and women who wrote and read them. A handful of such titles matches texts in the Coptic gnostic codices. The Gospel of Judas is a striking and informative example. Irenaeus had mentioned it by title and even described its contents briefly (*Against Heresies* 1.31). Scholarship was skeptical that it ever existed, until a

copy was found in the Tchacos codex and published in 2006 (Kasser et al. [2006] 2008; Kasser and Wurst 2007). Irenaeus's description of the text obviously should not be privileged over the surviving Coptic manuscript, but the fact is that he was right about its existence and general contents. This should give experts pause before dismissing too much of what the church leaders and Greek philosophers said about one gnostic group or another, their beliefs and practices, especially where firsthand evidence to the contrary is lacking.

Moreover, the opponents didn't just paraphrase and describe. They also quoted directly, and these quotations are the only evidence available in some cases. For instance, fragments of otherwise lost writings of Valentinus have been preserved in paraphrase and direct quotation by Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus. In another notable case, an extensive instructional letter from a Valentinian man named Ptolemy to a woman named Flora has been preserved verbatim by Epiphanius (*Medicine Chest* 33.3–7). It was written and luckily quoted in full in Greek. There is no other record of it, not in any of the Coptic gnostic codices or elsewhere. Circumstances such as these are not uncommon in the transmission and preservation of writings from the ancient Mediterranean, where the overwhelming majority of what was written and once circulating does not survive, not even in medieval manuscript copies.

#### GREEK AND COPTIC STAGES OF COMPOSITION AND TRANSMISSION

As for the hypothetical nature of the Greek stage of composition and transmission preliminary to the more certain Coptic stage, it could be that some of the texts in the Coptic gnostic codices were not written in Greek. Most probably were, however, and others definitely were written in Greek then translated into Coptic. Not only do paraphrases and quotations by the Greek- and Latin-speaking opponents of gnosticism point to Greek originals, quite a few Greek manuscripts of texts in the Coptic gnostic codices have survived. The oldest are fragments of the Gospel of Thomas from the second or third century CE (P. Oxy. 1.1; 1.654; 1.655). These are followed by fragments of the Gospel of Mary from the third century (P. Oxy. 50.3525; P. Ryl. 3.463) and by a fragment of the Sophia of Jesus Christ from the early fourth (P. Oxy. 8.1081). To this list of Greek fragments can be added a complete Greek manuscript of the Hermetic Prayer of Thanksgiving that was incorporated into a bilingual Greco-Egyptian ritual handbook from the 300s CE (P. Louvre 2391 = PGM III). Most of these Greek manuscripts are demonstrably older than their generally better-preserved Coptic counterparts in the Nag Hammadi and Berlin codices.

The Greek and Coptic stages are best understood as overlapping. In the Greek stage, a number of people throughout the ancient Mediterranean composed, rewrote, edited, and copied most of the texts that were further rewritten, edited, translated, and copied into the Nag Hammadi and related codices during the Coptic stage in Egypt. To some degree, all of these people were the authors of the texts, because rewriting and editing and translating and even copying were sorts of composition and authorship. But the preponderance of composition was done in the Greek stage.

#### WHO PRODUCED, COLLECTED, AND OWNED THE COPTIC GNOSTIC TEXTS?

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Nag Hammadi is a small city in Upper (i.e., southern) Egypt. In antiquity it was known as Chenoboskia. Further up the Nile River, about seventy miles, is the famous city of Luxor,

ancient Thebes, with its Valley of the Kings and Valley of the Queens. The Nag Hammadi codices are named for the small city because it is the most prominent settlement in the immediate region where they were found, but the codices were actually found outside the village of Hamra Dom, about seven miles northeast of Nag Hammadi, at the bottom of a cliff called Jabal al-Tarif. This is the site of a cemetery that was in long-standing use from the Sixth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom (third millennium BCE) through the end of the Roman and Byzantine periods in the 640s CE. In the cemetery there are over 150 rock-cut tombs and caves. They bear hieroglyphic, Greek, and Coptic inscriptions. A few of the tombs and caves show signs of occupation by Christian monks. On the walls of those designated T8, T25, and T65 were painted crosses and portions of the book of Psalms in Coptic translation. Roman and Byzantine Egypt was home to diverse kinds of Christian monks—some who lived alone, some who lived in cities and villages, and some who lived together in monasteries. Indeed, the cemetery of Hamra Dom at the bottom of the Jabal al-Tarif is about five miles west of the site of what was once the monastery of Pbow, the administrative center of the great monastic leader Pachomius during the 330s and 340s CE and then his successors. Other Pachomian monasteries were close by, too. These are the facts (see Robinson 1979 and the Nag Hammadi Archive in the Claremont Colleges Digital Library). Beyond them, scholars disagree on everything from the production and collection of the Nag Hammadi codices to their burial—when, by whom, and why.

#### THE MONASTERY THEORY

One theory is that the codices were produced and collected in a monastic setting and hidden by Pachomian monks soon after the year 367 CE (e.g., Robinson [1977] 1990, 10–22). That's when Athanasius, the archbishop of Alexandria in Lower (i.e., northern) Egypt, wrote his thirty-ninth festal letter forbidding Christian literature that he denounced as apocryphal and heretical. In a literal sense, *apocryphal* means hidden. In a pejorative sense, according to whatever religious group asserts dominance, it means non-canonical and untrue. Besides the proximity of Pachomian monasteries, support for the theory comes from monastic references in some of the wastepaper that was recycled to make the covers of the Nag Hammadi codices.

This leaves much to be explained (Wipszycka 2000; Goehring 2001; Logan 2006, 12–35; Emmel 2008; Denzey Lewis and Blount 2014). Athanasius was probably not aiming at the specific kinds of literature represented by the codices. Even if his letter was interpreted that way and Pachomian monks did feel pressure to hide their collection, it isn't clear why they would have walked five miles from their monastery in order to bury the codices in a graveyard. There must have been closer and more convenient hiding spots, though perhaps they thought the cemetery would not be searched.

It also isn't clear why Pachomian or other monks would have produced and collected the texts to begin with. One argument is that before Athanasius's letter, the monasteries were free to read so-called apocryphal and heretical literature (e.g., Jenott and Pagels 2010). There was no New Testament canon, no orthodoxy and heresy, not even in the middle of the 300s CE, the argument goes. There were just varieties of Christianity freely exchanged. If the monks were copying and reading the Nag Hammadi texts in such an environment, though, there should be some traditional biblical literature copied right alongside Sethian, Valentinian, and Hermetic writings in the codices. But there isn't.

Whoever produced and collected the texts had a relatively diverse interest that was not limited to only Sethian or only Valentinian or only Hermetic writings. Still, their interest

was focused enough that they seem to have recognized the broad distinctions between traditional biblical literature and what they were collecting, and rightly so. For example, repeatedly in Sethian texts, including the Apocryphon of John, the traditional biblical Creator God is portrayed as a demonic villain who (with his angels) is said to have raped Eve and enslaved humanity to his worship. Although the producers and collectors of the codices were not only interested in Sethian writings, the Apocryphon of John is the central text of the entire collection, having been copied separately into three of the Nag Hammadi codices, more than any other text. Whoever the producers and collectors were, they apparently read it and other Sethian writings with approval.

The nearby monastery theory doesn't readily account for several other factors. The manuscripts were written in different dialects of the Coptic language, they were copied in different handwriting styles, and they were bound in different covers. This suggests that the translation and copying and binding of the texts were done in multiple locations. It also suggests that the thirteen codices were produced and collected in smaller groups before they were buried together, which is no doubt why they contain multiple copies of the same texts. There are copies of the Gospel of Truth in codices I and XII, the Apocryphon of John in codices II, III, and IV, On the Origin of the World in codices II and XIII, the Gospel of the Egyptians in codices III and IV, and Eugnostos the Blessed in codices III and V. So if all thirteen codices were ever housed together in one of the Pachomian monasteries near Hamra Dom, they could have only been brought there, such as by traveling monks, not produced there.

About the monastic references in the wastepaper that was recycled to make the covers of the Nag Hammadi codices, they are not specific to Pachomian monasteries. Furthermore, they all come from the cover of codex VII. At most they might support a theory of production in a monastic setting for one of the thirteen codices. Even that much is debatable, however. The production of the codices would have involved multiple steps. The pages of these ancient books were made from papyrus, a plant that grew along the Nile. By extension, the word for the plant refers to the writing material also, and the plural is papyri. A stack of papyri folded over in the middle is called a quire, and each codex consists of one or more of these, fastened to a cover. The covers for the quires were made from animal hides and reinforced with recycled papyri pasted together something like papier-mâché. This material is often called cartonnage. Not enough is known about book making in the Greco-Roman world to be sure that different people manufactured the quires, then filled the pages of the quires with writing, and then fastened them to covers. But there is some indication that these were separate jobs.

In the case of the Nag Hammadi codices, and depending on the codex, it could be that one person made the quires, another copied the texts onto them, and another bound them. The sequence of binding before writing is also possible. At any rate, for codex VII, someone used about a dozen recycled monastic papyri and even fragments of a copy of the book of Genesis to make the cover. But he himself wasn't necessarily a monk, let alone a Pachomian monk, and he didn't have to get the wastepaper from a monastery. He also used about eighty recycled papyri from every-day Egyptian life, such as a deed of sale or loan of wheat, papyri that were not monastic or even Christian. He did not get most of this wastepaper for the binding of codex VII from a monastery and may have gotten all of it from the town trash or perhaps from a wastepaper trader. In sum, only about 20 percent of the recycled papyri from the cover of codex VII is monastic or identifiably Christian. There is zero monastic wastepaper among the rest of the cartonnage used in the binding of codices I, IV, V, VI, VIII, IX, and XI.

No wastepaper was used for the covers of codices II, III, and X, or if it was, it does not survive. The covers of codices XII and XIII do not survive at all (see Robinson et al. 1972–1984, 1:71–86; Robinson ed. [1975–1995] 2000, 4:xiii–xvi, 1–11, 121).

Finally, the timeline for the monastery theory is highly compressed. Almost all of the recycled papyri from the covers of the codices are undated, including most from the cover of codex VII. But a few from that codex have dates on them in the 340s CE: two loans of wheat and a deed of surety (nos. 63, 64, and 65 among the Greek papyri of the cartonnage). The other twelve codices could have been produced before or after codex VII. But the dates on these papyri mean that all thirteen Nag Hammadi books could only have been collected as a set at the earliest around 350 CE. This assumes that the dated papyri from the cover of codex VII were no longer needed and so were thrown away almost as soon as they were written, then quickly recycled as cartonnage. This leaves precious little time for codex VII to have been bound, collected with the rest of the thirteen codices, and then hidden because of Athanasius's letter in 367 CE as the theory purports. Without the supposition of Athanasius's involvement, however, there is nothing to prevent the cover of codex VII from having a manufacture date later in the fourth or fifth century, and a burial date with the other codices sometime afterward.

#### THE GRAVE GOODS THEORY

Another theory is that the Nag Hammadi codices were buried in the cemetery of Hamra Dom at the bottom of the cliff, not because of Athanasius's letter or any subsequent need to purge monastery libraries, but because their owner died and was interred there with them as grave goods (e.g., Lewis and Blount 2014). According to some of the testimonies of the discovery of the codices in the 1940s, they were found next to a human body or skeleton. On the whole, these testimonies were given by the locals who said they were the ones who accidentally found the codices. The testimonies were given years, decades, after the fact and can be self-contradictory as reported by European and American scholars (Goodacre 2013). But the detail of finding a skeleton with the codices fits the location. It's also not something that the discoverers would have wanted to add gratuitously to their testimonies because even unplanned grave-robbing was illegal, not to mention taboo.

If the body of the owner of the codices was buried with them, scholars were unable to identify it when they conducted archaeological digs in the cemetery in the 1970s (Säve-Söderbergh 1994, 25–27). Who the owner and final collector may have been can only be guessed at from what is deducible from the codices as artifacts. For instance, there is the Chi-Rho symbol at the close of the Prayer of the Apostle Paul in codex I, which suggests that it was produced by someone who believed in Jesus Christ, and that it was to be read by others who did, too. The common denominator of the literature also suggests that the producers and collectors were Christians with a focused interest in texts other than the traditional biblical literature.

To judge from the Hermetic texts, including the Scribal Note in codex VI, perhaps some of them were Hermetic Christians, or else Hermetics who read certain esoteric Christian writings as did the Hermetic alchemist Zosimus of Panopolis (third/fourth century CE). Specialists have occasionally compared the producers and collectors of the Nag Hammadi codices with him, for their reading interests anyway. Zosimus wrote in Greek, not Coptic. And most of the writings associated with the Greco-Egyptian god Hermes Trismegistus survive in Greek independent of the Nag Hammadi codices. But according to the Scribal Note, the producers and collectors of codex VI had in their possession many

Hermetic texts besides the Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth, the Prayer of Thanksgiving, and sections of the Asclepius copied there. According to the same note, these many Hermetic texts were commonplace for them.

The theory could work for the badly damaged Tchacos codex, too, found at another gravesite a couple hundred miles down the Nile. This codex contained the Hermetic text known as Corpus Hermeticum XIII, along with Christian gnostic texts. Reportedly, it was found in the 1970s in a burial cave inside a stone box that also held a Greek manuscript of the book of Exodus, a Coptic manuscript of letters of Paul, and a Greek mathematical treatise.

## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE WHEN THE NEXT MANUSCRIPT IS FOUND?

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Archaeologists were not the ones who discovered the Tchacos codex in the 1970s, or the Nag Hammadi codices in the 1940s, or the Berlin codex before that in the 1800s, or the Bruce and Askew codices in the 1700s when the discipline of archaeology did not exist. If they were, scholars might have more conclusive evidence about who owned the surviving Coptic gnostic texts. This brings with it an issue that must be raised even though it is uncomfortable, namely, scholarship's more-or-less indirect involvement in the antiquities market, which has consistently been supplied by manuscripts unprofessionally, and even illicitly, removed from the sands of Egypt.

In the event that a trained archaeologist finds something after obtaining a permit to excavate, it is treated carefully, and the details of the discovery are recorded. These details are vital for knowing as much as possible about how old the item is, what it was for, who owned it, and so forth. Once the item has been catalogued alongside any other items from the site, ideally it goes to a museum, such as a state or national museum in the locale of the discovery where the item forms part of the cultural heritage of that country's citizens. From there, if the item has writing on it, language experts might study it and prepare the text for publication. Also from there, the item might be loaned to other museums across the globe for traveling display.

But many items are not found in this manner and do not go directly from a professional archaeological dig to a museum. Not only are the details of their discovery lost forever, the items themselves are regularly damaged, even mutilated. The black or gray market for buying and selling unprovenanced art and antiquities is a multi-billion-dollar international industry. The market is said to be gray in that it includes both legal and illegal activities (see Manacorda and Chappell 2011). Unprovenanced is a euphemism for the high probability that an item was smuggled out of the state or nation that would claim it as cultural property. Academics may become entangled in the market as they interact with those antiquities dealers who traffic in stolen items in disregard for national and international laws and resolutions.

On the one hand, interaction and involvement have been justified as necessary if the items are to be preserved at all. On the other hand, by getting involved, scholarship runs the risk of contributing to the economics of the market and thus the further destruction and exploitation of cultural heritage. Everyone agrees that professional excavation is superior to accidental discovery, not to mention the circumstances of smash-and-grab looting, of course. The disagreement is over what to do with an ancient Coptic manuscript, for instance, after it has already been stolen from Egypt and surfaces on the antiquities market, typically in Europe or the United States. Therefore, from one vantage, that of the 2006

National Geographic television special *The Gospel of Judas*, the Tchacos codex was rescued by the antiquities dealer for whom the codex is named and by the team of scholars who translated and published it. From another vantage, scholarship may be complicit in what would amount to a laundering scheme that could result in more illegal trafficking (Brodie 2006 and 2009).

Whatever happens with any future discoveries, the Tchacos codex is still in Switzerland and has yet to be returned to Egypt, at least as of the filming of the 2015 CNN television special *Finding Jesus*. The Nag Hammadi codices, by contrast, are in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, where they have been for decades. In fact, most of them never left the country. But even the topic of returning art and antiquities to their rightful state or nation is complicated. Certain countries with outstanding cultural property can be politically unstable. Egypt itself experienced a revolution in 2011 that put its antiquities in jeopardy from some of its own citizens (Thomas 2013).

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## Summary

Four methodological and interpretive debates in the field of gnostic studies have been covered in this chapter, along with another more ethical debate. They are multifaceted and unfinished, but below is a partially prescriptive résumé:

Gnostic studies is not the only field with challenges to its definitions and categorizations. Some scholars will define gnosticism variously, whereas others abandon it. The important thing is that the definitions, categories, and substitute categories be rigorous, and that the scholarship be responsive to critique. Although the word *gnosticism* is frankly modern, *gnostic* isn't. The earliest gnostic men and women came from the ancient Mediterranean world of the first century CE. They stood at the crossroads between Judaism, Greek philosophy, Greco-Egyptian traditions, and nascent Christianity. Gnostics such as the Sethians and Valentinians wrote in the Greek language overall. Their writings survive primarily as Coptic manuscripts from the fourth century or later. One of the reasons for relying on secondhand evidence from the Greek-speaking church leaders and pagan philosophers who opposed ancient gnostics is that these opponents paraphrased, and sometimes even quoted, gnostic writings that are otherwise lost. The surviving Coptic manuscripts can be read as translations of earlier Greek texts. The manuscripts can also be read in the fourth-century Egyptian context of production. The producers and collectors of the Nag Hammadi codices were unlikely to have been Christian monks, whether Pachomian or otherwise. They weren't interested in traditional biblical literature. They were Christians of a sort interested in texts such as the Apocryphon of John and its portrayal of the biblical Creator as a demon, a villain. They were also interested in texts associated with the Greco-Egyptian god Hermes Trismegistus. The Nag Hammadi codices were found buried in a cemetery. The Tchacos codex was also found in a grave. The codices weren't discovered by archaeologists. Before the next manuscript is unprofessionally and even illicitly excavated, scholars should seriously reconsider any involvement in the black or gray antiquities market.

The debates covered in this chapter are not the only major ones in the field of gnostic studies. There are also many minor debates over the interpretation of each gnostic text and specific passages within those texts. New students to the field, as they begin to formulate their own arguments and take up positions in the debates, will do well to range widely in

cognate areas such as biblical and religious studies, the history of Judaism and Christianity, and the languages and cultures of the ancient Mediterranean.

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### *Chapter 3: Gnosticism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field*

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