

How Reliable is the Story of the Nag Hammadi Discovery?

Journal for the Study of
the New Testament
35(4) 303–322

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DOI: 10.1177/0142064X13482243

jsnt.sagepub.com



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Abstract

James Robinson's narrative of how the Nag Hammadi codices were discovered is popular and compelling, a piece of fine investigative journalism that includes intrigue and blood vengeance. But there are several different, conflicting versions of the story, including two-person (1977), seven-person (1979) and eight-person (1981) versions. Disagreements include the name of the person who first found the jar. Martin Krause and Rodolphe Kasser both questioned these stories in 1984, and their scepticism is corroborated by the Channel 4 (UK) series, *The Gnostics* (1987), which features Muhammad 'Ali himself, in his only known appearance in front of camera, offering his account of the discovery. Several major points of divergence from the earlier reports raise questions about the reliability of 'Ali's testimony. It may be safest to conclude that the earlier account of the discovery offered by Jean Doresse in 1958 is more reliable than the later, more detailed, more vivid versions that are so frequently retold.

Keywords

Nag Hammadi, discovery, James Robinson, Jean Doresse, the Gnostics

The 'Canonical' Nag Hammadi Story

The story of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices in 1945 has attained near canonical status in scholarship of early Christianity. James Robinson's compelling narrative of how Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman and his brothers unearthed the jar containing the codices combines skilled investigative journalism with tales of intrigue and blood vengeance.¹ It is a staple of introductory

1. James Robinson has told the story on multiple occasions but the three key versions are best represented in Robinson 1977: 21–25 (= Robinson 1988: 22–26), 1979 and 1981. See also Robinson *et al.* 1984.

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classes on Christian origins, particularly important for courses introducing the *Gospel of Thomas*. Books on the Nag Hammadi collection narrate the story to grab the reader's attention and to set the scene. The story is comparable to the often-narrated, near contemporary story of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, a story that similarly sets the scene in discussions of Qumran and early Judaism.²

One of the most popular retellings of the story is told at the beginning of Elaine Pagels's seminal *Gnostic Gospels*:

In December 1945 an Arab peasant made an astonishing archeological discovery in Upper Egypt ... Thirty years later the discoverer himself, Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman, told what happened. Shortly before he and his brothers avenged their father's murder in a blood feud, they had saddled their camels and gone out to the Jabal to dig for *sabakh*, a soft soil they used to fertilize their crops. Digging around a massive boulder, they hit a red earthenware jar, almost a meter high. Muhammad 'Ali hesitated to break the jar, considering that a *jinn*, or spirit, might live inside. But realizing that it might also contain gold, he raised his mattock, smashed the jar, and discovered inside thirteen papyrus books, bound in leather. Returning to his home in al-Qasr, Muhammad 'Ali dumped the books and loose papyrus leaves on the straw piled on the ground next to the oven. Muhammad's mother, 'Umm-Ahmad, admits that she burned much of the papyrus in the oven along with the straw she used to kindle the fire.

This find story is already compelling, but it is capped with the tale of an appalling murder:

A few weeks later, as Muhammad 'Ali tells it, he and his brothers avenged their father's death by murdering Ahmed Isma'il. Their mother had warned her sons to keep their mattocks sharp: when they learned that their father's enemy was nearby, the brothers seized the opportunity, 'hacked off his limbs ... ripped out his heart, and devoured it among them, as the ultimate act of blood revenge' (Pagels 1979: xiii).

It is a fantastic story, irresistible for introducing these amazing and important discoveries.³ The bloodthirsty, illiterate peasants happen upon an amazing find while out looking for fertilizer. They worry about genies but lust for gold, they have no inkling of the magnitude of their find, and their mother is as stupid as she is callous, burning valuable documents and then encouraging her sons to use the very mattocks that had broken open the earthenware jar

2. See Collins 2013: 1-32 for a full discussion of the discovery story, a story that has often been simplified and romanticized for pedagogical appeal.

3. For its media appeal, see, for example, *From Jesus to Christ*, broadcast on PBS in 1998, which includes a dramatization of the find, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion>.

now to murder a man. The narrative scarcely hides its moral, that important artefacts like this need to be wrested from the hands of those who cannot hope to understand them, and placed in the hands of responsible, Western academics.

The status of this story in the guild, our love of retelling it, our fondness for its dramatic impact, has deterred us from subjecting it to the kind of critical scrutiny that we apply to ancient texts. In this article, I would like to draw attention to legendary embellishments of the story, contradictions between the different versions, and curiosities that are sufficient to place a question mark over the confidence with which we like to tell this familiar tale.

The Mystery of the Growing Jar

Like many a canonical narrative, the story is subject to legendary embellishment. One interesting example relates to the size of the jar in which the codices were found. The jar itself is no longer in existence.⁴ The bowl that was used as a lid allegedly survived,⁵ but nothing of the pottery itself survived the discovery. According to James Robinson's interviews, Muhammad 'Ali smashed into the jar with his mattock, taking the volumes and leaving the broken shards of pottery behind. They were never retrieved. Robinson therefore estimates the size of the jar on the basis of his interviews in the 1970s⁶ as follows:

The pottery was red slip ware, distinguishing it from the creamy color of the modern Qina ware common in the region, and had four small handles near the opening. The jar was also large, with dimensions roughly illustrated by Muhammad 'Ali as 60 cm or more in height and an opening of some 15 to 20 cm widening to some 30 cm in the flank. The jar had been closed by fitting a bowl into its mouth. Khalifah⁷ had taken this bowl with him to the home in al-Qasr where he was a servant for the Copt, Salib 'Abd al-Masih, who preserved the bowl intact. It is Coptic red slip ware of the 4th or 5th century with a rim decorated with four fields of stripes. The diameter at the outer

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4. Robinson 1979: 212 features 'Ali's drawing of the jar. The lid is pictured on p. 213.
 5. C. Wilfred Griggs, who was present in Nag Hammadi with Robinson in the mid 1970s, implies some doubt about the lid: 'A ceramic dish was once displayed with a Nag Hammadi exhibit and was claimed to be the lid of the jar in which the library was found, but the lid was given to Robinson by a peasant and was not recovered through archaeological excavation at the site' (Griggs 1990: 217 n. 20; cf. 177, 'Ali 'had the presence of mind to save the lid, so the story goes'). On Griggs's doubts, see further note 17 below.
 6. The precision of the measurements should perhaps be treated with caution given Robinson's later scepticism about Muhammad 'Ali's ability to count the number of codices in the jar. See below, pp. 313-14.
 7. Khalifah 'Ali, Muhammad's brother, alone with Muhammad in the 1977 version of the story; see further below, pp. 307-308.

edge is 23.3–24.0 cm, with a diameter inside the bowl of 18.2–18.7 cm, adequate to close a mouth large enough to admit the codices, whose broadest leaves, in Codex VII, measure up to 17.5 cm. There are a few black tar like stains about 2.0 cm from the outer edge on the under side of the rim, perhaps vestiges of a bitumen used to seal the bowl into the jar. Thus, the jar probably could not be opened readily to investigate its contents, which would explain why it was broken by its discoverers (Robinson 1979: 213–14).⁸

So it was ‘60 cm or more’ high, which is just under 2 ft. However, in *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels says that the jar was ‘almost a meter high’ (Pagels 1979: xiii), which is already a lot bigger than Robinson’s estimate. One meter is 3.28 ft. So the jar has grown from just under 2 ft to well over 3 ft.

Subsequently, the jar almost doubles in size. In several interviews and publications, Elaine Pagels states that it was a ‘six-foot jar’. The first example of this is in *The Gnostics* TV series from 1987,⁹ which features a clip of Elaine Pagels teaching a class at Princeton. She says that it was ‘a large earthenware jar, about six feet high’, motioning with her hand to illustrate that the jar was higher than her head (Segaller 1987). It is ‘six feet’ when she appears in the PBS documentary *From Jesus to Christ* (Cran 1998). It features also in written interviews and then again in her *Beyond Belief* (Pagels 2003: 97).

A six-foot jar would be enormous. This is unfeasibly large, three times the size of the two-foot jar of the earliest accounts. The best guess about the origin of this measurement is that it occurred in Pagels’s oralization of the Robinson story in the classroom, an inadvertent error, perhaps brought about by misremembering the ‘60 cm’ figure from Robinson’s story. This kind of corruption can happen easily in story-telling. An error is introduced inadvertently, but it is then retold until it becomes embedded in the story and its origin forgotten.¹⁰

However, the differences between the various versions of the story of the Nag Hammadi finds are not limited just to the subsequent retellings, and the differing versions do not emerge solely through writers’ recasting in their own words, adding legendary embellishments and re-oralizing. There are some interesting differences in the source materials themselves.

8. The detail about the bitumen varies in different retellings. Here it is ‘perhaps vestiges of a bitumen used to seal the bowl into the jar’ (cf. Robinson 1981: 38); similarly, Robinson 1977: 21; 1988: 23: ‘whose lid may have been sealed on with bitumen’; later, there is more certainty, e.g., Robinson 1997: 6: ‘Muhammad ‘Ali had at first feared to open the jar (sealed with a bowl attached with bitumin [sic] to the mouth of the jar) lest it contain a jinn.’ On ‘a jinn’, see n. 46 below.

9. See further below, pp. 310–11.

10. I am grateful to Mike Grondin for drawing my attention to the extraordinary size of the six-foot jar, so encouraging me to check the other recorded dimensions.

Different Versions of Robinson's Narrative

Robinson's accounts are based on extensive research in and around the Nag Hammadi region, and many interviews on several occasions with the protagonists in the 1970s.¹¹ His attempts to dig up the details of what had happened a generation earlier and his success in writing so fascinating an account witness to the industry and expertise of so influential and important a scholar. Nevertheless, the scope of the research and the craft of the story-telling do not mask the interesting fact that there are variant versions of the story.

There are several points of contact between the different versions. The core is the same, and the major differences relate to length and detail. Nevertheless, at the key point, when Robinson is narrating the discovery itself, there are striking differences relating especially to the personnel involved. In the earliest published version, in 1977,¹² the introduction to the classic *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, only two men are said to be present, the brothers 'Muhammad and Khalifah 'Ali of the al-Samman clan'. The more detailed 1979 version, published in *Biblical Archaeologist*, features seven people, three of whom were brothers. The third brother is the youngster Abu al-Majd. In this version, Abu al-Majd, previously unmentioned, is the one who 'actually unearthed the jar' before his older brother takes over.¹³ The next version, in 1981, adds an additional camel-driver, bringing the total number at the site to eight. The similarities and differences are easiest to see in synopsis:

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11. In 1979, Robinson reports that his visits on 3 March and 23 April 1966 produced 'a few leads' but that the major research took place 'toward the end of November 1974, for visits of some days in January and September 1975, and for about a month each of the next three winters' (Robinson 1979: 207-208). This coheres with the fact that Robinson's first publication on the discoveries, a 1974 pamphlet, has none of the detail that emerges in the later accounts, although it does feature the germ of the later, more detailed versions: 'One report is to the effect that the person who actually found the jar was a lad who had avenged the murder of his father by killing the murderer and had then fled to the desert to avoid arrest' (Robinson 1974: 4). It is also worth noting that if 'the next three winters' are 1975/6, 1976/7 and 1977/8, the research continued after the publication of *Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Robinson 1977) and may account for some of the discrepancies between the 1977 and 1979 versions of the story. If so, Robinson does not draw attention to any changes.
 12. Though see also the undeveloped summary version from Robinson 1974.
 13. Ehrman 2003: 52, and 264 n. 10, notes that 'Ali's younger brother first hit a skeleton rather than a jar, citing a private conversation with New Testament scholar and archaeologist Bastiaan van Elderen (1924-2004), who had himself dug at Nag Hammadi (van Elderen 1979). Robinson's longer versions of the story also mention a skeleton: 'Muhammad 'Ali maintained that a corpse with abnormally elongated fingers and teeth and legs lay on a bed of something like charcoal beside the jar and that it was reburied there' (Robinson 1979: 213; 1981: 35-36). Curiously, Abu al-Majd here denies the presence of a skeleton, 'His younger brother Abu al Majd denied that anything other than the jar was found' (Robinson 1981: 36).

Robinson 1977: 21 ¹⁴	Robinson 1979: 213 ¹⁵	Robinson 1981: 37
Two brothers, Muhammad and Khalifah Ali of the al-Samman clan, hobbled their camels on the south side of the fallen boulder and came upon the jar as they were digging around its base.	Three of the sons of 'Ali and 'Umm-Ahmad—Muhammad, Khalifah and Abu al-Majd—were digging <i>sabakh</i> with <u>four other camel drivers</u> at the time the discovery was made. Abu al-Majd actually unearthed the jar , but Muhammad, the oldest brother (he was 26; Abu al-Majd was 15), had assumed the role of paternal authority over Abu.	Three of the sons of 'Ali and 'Umm Ahmad, Muhammad (born 1919), Khalifah (died 1975) and Abu al-Majd (born 1930) were digging <i>sabakh</i> with <u>five other camel drivers</u> at the time the discovery was made. Abu al-Majd actually unearthed the jar , but Muhammad, who had assumed a role of paternal authority over him, took control.

The differing versions have not generated comments in previous scholarship. No doubt this is in large part because scholars are unaware that there are different versions.¹⁶ In so far as there is awareness of the issue, the different versions are simply regarded as terse and summarizing or longer and detailed. Perhaps, then, to focus on these differences would be to nit-pick. Though we may scrutinize ancient texts with excitement where the details diverge, some might argue that contemporary scholarly texts should be treated with more patience. Two scholars involved in the publication of the Nag Hammadi codices would beg to differ.

Kasser's and Krause's Disclaimer

Although the compelling story of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices is frequently narrated, it is not widely known that two scholars questioned the story and wished to distance themselves from it. Rodolphe Kasser and Martin Krause, who worked with Robinson on the Nag Hammadi Library in the 1970s and early 1980s, expressed major reservations about Robinson's story, so much so that they asked him to publish the following remarkable disclaimer in *The Facsimile Edition* on which they collaborated:

14. The account is unchanged in Robinson 1988: 22.

15. Cf. p. 211: 'the seven involved who were not sons of 'Ali', which would bring the total number to ten. Similarly, Robinson mentions these 'seven involved who were not sons of 'Ali' in Robinson 1981: 34, which would also imply that ten were present. See also Robinson *et al.* 1984: 5, 'There were in all eight camel-drivers who had come from Al Qasr', which correlates with the 1981 version.

16. A possible exception is a quotation from Rodolphe Kasser in Krosney 2006: 134. Kasser says that the 'numerous precise and detailed testimonies' were 'often contradictory, it is true, but one knows how to distinguish the good wheat from the chaff'. See further on Krosney's quotation of Kasser below, pp. 314-15.

Rodolphe Kasser and Martin Krause wish to make it known here that they have serious reasons to put in doubt the objective value of a number of important points of the Introduction that follows. They contest especially the detailed history of the discovery of the Coptic Gnostic manuscripts of Nag Hammadi resulting from the investigation of James M. Robinson. Kasser and Krause and others who were involved do not consider as assured anything more than the core of the story (the general location and approximate date of the discovery), the rest not having for them more than the value of stories and fables that one can collect in popular Egyptian circles thirty years after an event whose exceptional significance the protagonists could not at the time understand. R.K. and M.K. (Robinson *et al.* 1984: 3).

Although Robinson's account has often been retold, Krause's and Kasser's publicly stated objection to it is rarely repeated.¹⁷ This is probably simply because of ignorance. This quotation is written in a tiny font in square brackets as the first few lines in a two-page footnote in the preface to an expensive and highly technical volume. And by 1984, when the introductory volume to the *Facsimile Edition* appeared, the discovery story had already been told and retold so many times that the impact of any disclaimer was likely to be minimal.

Clearly stung by the criticisms of those like Krause and Kasser, Robinson responded by suggesting that, like all good science, his research was open to good, repeatable investigation. At the time of writing, the people involved were still alive and they could be found and interviewed:

This methodical and critical investigation is what history is made of, not fable. Like scientific experiment, it can be repeated, and unless that is done with contrary results, it is unscientific to deny the validity of the result attained thus far (Robinson *et al.* 1984: 4 n. 1).

The claim echoed something already in one of Robinson's earlier accounts:

One important dimension of the status of the story of the Nag Hammadi codices from the cliff to Cairo is the quality of the repeatability inherent in the scientific experiment, in that the persons interviewed are still accessible for others who may wish to repeat and advance the investigative process (Robinson 1981: 58).

Unfortunately, the time that has now passed since Robinson's careful and detailed investigations of the 1970s makes it impossible any longer to engage in the kind

17. The only example I am aware of is Griggs 1990: 217: 'The doubts and concerns expressed by this author are similar to those held by Rodolphe Kasser and Martin Krause'. Griggs himself is dubious about the find story after having been involved with two excavations in 1975, which yielded 'no supporting evidence for any of the sites or the story in general' (1990: 177). Griggs may be one of the 'others who were involved' alluded to in Krause and Kasser's disclaimer.

of re-investigation here suggested. And it seems that Robinson's critics themselves never attempted to do this, perhaps not surprisingly given the content of their criticism, which is about the unreliable nature of this kind of testimony in general.¹⁸

The Gnostics (1987)

Here, then, the story might have ended were it not for the fact that a television crew followed in Robinson's footsteps a decade later, for a Channel 4 (UK) documentary series that aired in 1987, *The Gnostics*, in which Muhammad 'Ali himself appears on screen.¹⁹ The man behind the series was Tobias Churton, and as he tells the story, his encounter with Muhammad 'Ali was a case of good luck:

Just over forty years later [after the discovery], Border Television's filmcrew were in the neighbourhood with Gilles Quispel, Professor of New Testament studies at the University of Utrecht, in order to film the location of the discovery. Our production manager, Valerie Kaye, was walking down the main street of al-Qasr with a copy of *Biblical Archaeologist* (Fall 1979) which featured a colour photograph of Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman on its cover. A rather serene looking man, in his mid-sixties, walked up to her and, seeing the picture, pointed to it and then himself.²⁰

The documentary series itself is now difficult to find. It was broadcast only twice, in 1987 and again in 1990, and it was never released on VHS or DVD. After a long search, I was able to track down an anonymously made recording. It is a fascinating series, featuring interviews with Elaine Pagels, Gilles Quispel, Hans Jonas and James Robinson, interspersed with bizarre scenes in which a clean-shaven, blond-haired Gnostic Jesus (played by Nigel Harrison) appears all in white to recite sayings from the *Gospel of Thomas* in an ethereal manner. In a

18. Moreover, Martin Krause had already made his own investigations in the early 1960s (Robinson 1979: 207).

19. *The Gnostics* was produced by Border Television for Channel 4; it was researched and largely written by Tobias Churton, produced and directed by Stephen Segaller and narrated by Tim Pigott-Smith. The four episodes of the series were broadcast from 7 to 28 November 1987, with a debate programme added on 5 December 1987 (*British Film Institute: Film and TV Database*, <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/series/16939>; accessed January 2012). *The Gnostics* was repeated on Channel 4 in 1990 but it was not released on video (Maria King Correspondence, reproduced 25 September 2001, <http://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=38775&messages=10>; accessed January 2012).

20. Churton 1987: 9. The programme itself presents the encounter slightly differently, with the documentary fiction that Gilles Quispel himself had found Muhammad 'Ali. Two earlier readers of this paper asked if we could be sure that the man claiming to be 'Ali in the documentary is indeed the same man. It has to be said that there is indeed a strong resemblance between the younger Muhammad 'Ali as pictured in *Biblical Archaeologist* and the older Muhammad 'Ali as he appears in *The Gnostics*.

remarkable scene in the documentary, Gilles Quispel meets Muhammad ‘Ali and pays him homage. When they interview ‘Ali about what he remembers of the discovery, this is how he responds, speaking through an interpreter:²¹

‘I was digging for sabakh, for fertilizer, with my pick-axe and carrying it back to the fields on the camel. Then I came across this big earthenware pot which was buried in the sand. I had a feeling that there might be something inside ... I came back later the same day and I smashed the pot open. I broke it open exactly where I had found it. I thought there might be an evil spirit inside, a *jinni*. I had never seen anything like it before. I smashed the pot on my own and inside I found these old books. Then I brought the others over to see. They said, “We don’t want anything to do with these books. They belong to the Christians, the Copts.” They said, “It’s nothing to do with us.” ... It was all just rubbish to us. Yes, my mother did burn some in the bread oven.²² ... One of the people from the village of Hamra Dum killed my father so it was decided that I should kill his murderer, in revenge. I did kill him and with my knife I cut out his heart and ate it. I was in jail because of the killing and when I got out of jail I found that my mother had burned a lot of those old papers. Later on I sold one book. All the others had gone. I got eleven Egyptian pounds for it.’

Professor Quispel’s interpreter asked Muhammad ‘Ali if he had any regrets about what happened when he found the books. ‘No, I don’t care. I don’t give a damn about them. It doesn’t even enter my head to think about it.’²³

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21. This is my transcript taken from the film. The ellipses occur where ‘Ali’s testimony is interrupted by narration or interviews with Robinson or both.
 22. At this point, ‘Ali is depicted looking through the 1979 issue of *Biblical Archaeologist* and drawing attention to pictures of himself, his mother and the place of discovery.
 23. The testimony is also given in Churton 1987: 9, but with major differences: ‘I found it at the Hamra Dūm mountain in the December of 1945. By 6 o’clock in the morning when I started my work ... all of a sudden I found this pot. And after I found it I had the feeling that there was something inside it. So I kept it, and because it was cold this morning ... I decided that I would leave it and would come back again for it to find out what’s inside. I came back in the same day in fact, and I broke this pot. But I was afraid at the beginning because there might be something inside it—a jinn, a bad spirit. I was by myself when I broke the pot. I wanted my friends to be with me. After I broke it I found that it was a story book. I decided to bring my friends to tell them about the story. We were seven and we realized immediately that this has something to do with the Christian people. And we said that we don’t really need it at all—it was just useless to us. So I took it to the ministry over here and he told me, well we really don’t need it. It was just rubbish for us. So I took it back home. Some of them were burned and I tried to sell some of them.’ It is possible that Churton has assimilated the testimony more closely to Robinson’s account, e.g. by adding reference to December 1945 (cf. Robinson 1979: 209). It is puzzling, in this version, that ‘Ali should now apparently remember the date when earlier Robinson had had to work it out on the basis of several clues. Churton also narrates the version of the story in which Abu unearths the jar, presumably derived from Robinson, but without drawing attention to the differences between the two versions.

There are points of contact between this version of the story and the earlier ones told to Robinson: digging for *sabakh*, the fear of breaking the pot because of the *jinni* and the mother's burning of the papers.²⁴ The points of divergence, though, are striking. In this testimony, the discovery of the pot and the breaking of it are narrated as separate incidents, and 'Ali is alone at both points and is responsible for both. He is insistent on the point—'I smashed the pot on my own'. There are 'others' subsequently present, but there is a contrast here with all the versions narrated by Robinson, in which the other(s) are present at the point of discovery and breaking of the pot.

This version of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices is today unknown in the guild, in spite of the fact that it is the only extant footage of Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman himself. Television documentaries are quickly forgotten,²⁵ all the more so in the days before the widespread distribution and endless repeats that mark contemporary documentary making for cable networks in the USA.²⁶ Not surprisingly, it does not appear in any of the scholarly literature that deals with the topic. And Tobias Churton's book based on the series has been neglected because of its popular-level presentation.²⁷

A Bottle of Whiskey and a Ten-Pound Note

How reliable, then, is the story of the Nag Hammadi discovery? Can we continue to trust it in our classroom presentations and introductory texts? The question itself conceals the difficulty. There is no single story of the Nag Hammadi discovery but several different versions. It is true that there are major points of

24. Robinson 1979: 213. In the same documentary, Robinson narrates the story in an eight-person version, though with a little caution, 'He and about seven other camel-riders were at the foot of the cliff, digging for fertilizer and lit upon this jar ... When he broke it, he took the books out, claims he divided it, them among the camel-drivers, which is one reason that some got ripped apart; you can't divide thirteen books into eight parts very readily.' Television interviews naturally require more terse narration than is possible in scholarly writing, but in the written versions, 'Ali only attempts to divide the books up among those present.

25. Compare the story of the spy 'Rose' who died in 2010, 'A Spy Called "Rose"', *Today* programme, BBC Radio 4, 29 October 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9138000/9138591.stm: 'Amongst files released today at the National Archives, is the personal file of former SOE agent Eileen Nearne whose death triggered hundreds to gather at her funeral. It was said that she never spoke about her past, which was not strictly true as the *Today* programme has unearthed a *Timewatch* documentary from 1997 where she was interviewed at length under her pseudonym – Rose.' It is worth noting that the archaeological metaphor of unearthing is used for something as recent as 1997, demonstrating how quickly radio and television is forgotten.

26. See note 19 above; the documentary was not released on VHS.

27. I have not been able to find any reviews of Churton's book in any of the academic journals. Outside of academic circles, the book was quite successful. It was translated into Spanish as *Los gnósticos* (Madrid: Edaf, 1988).

contact between the different versions, but there are also significant differences, differences that are sufficient to place a question mark over the reliability of Muhammad ‘Ali’s testimony, all the more so given the doubts raised by Krause and Kasser, and the obvious differences in ‘Ali’s later, on-screen account. To continue to tell the tale of the Nag Hammadi finds in an uncritical way would be akin to treating the Synoptic Gospels in a harmonizing fashion, ignoring differences and suspending the kind of healthy scepticism that is so important in the armoury of the scholar of early Christianity.

A degree of scepticism about the find stories, though, inevitably raises questions about the nature of the research that led to them. One of the difficulties is that the kind of careful ethnographic research that is now common in universities was in its infancy in the 1970s. Detailed guidelines about how to conduct interviews, how to record interviews and how to investigate without contaminating the field were not available at the time. Robinson did not tape-record his interviews and he did not publish his notes. This is not to say that his work was shoddy. His narratives are strong in scope and precise in detail and there is no question about the initiative, the energy and the time that went into researching them. However, there are question marks over elements that may have emerged from the imagination of the protagonists rather than their memory of the events, from providing the researchers with what they wanted to hear rather than accurate recollection.

The difficulty is illustrated in Robinson’s most recent discussion of the Nag Hammadi find story. In *The Secrets of Judas*, Robinson is attempting to set the record straight about the provenance of the *Gospel of Judas*, and he wishes to make it clear that it did not come from Nag Hammadi (Robinson 2007: 39). He produces a lengthy quotation from one of his articles on the discovery²⁸ in an attempt to clarify the number of codices that were found, but then he adds the following revealing commentary:

Muhammad ‘Ali had heard me and others talk of thirteen codices, and so he would quite naturally speak of thirteen, not recalling what he had counted at the time (if he had counted at all—he was illiterate). In all probability, he was just playing back what he had learned was the ‘correct’ number.²⁹

28. Robinson 2007: 39, quoting Robinson 1979: 214. The piece is a curious over-reaction to a post on Stephen Carlson’s blog (2005), which comments briefly on the possibility of a missing codex at Nag Hammadi, itself quoting an article by Roger Pearse (Pearse nd), which conflates two of Robinson’s different find stories, 1979 and 1988).

29. Robinson 2007: 40. Contrast Robinson’s earlier reflections: ‘Although one cannot exclude the hypothetical possibility that such a report could have been contaminated by input from the interviewers, further considerations suggest that the figure may well be an independent and in one sense a correct report’ (Robinson 1984: 20).

Aside from the surprising note that illiteracy might imply inability to count, the comments are striking in demonstrating that the witness's testimony was contaminated. Although in 1979, 'Ali is cited as maintaining that there were thirteen codices in the jar,³⁰ it now appears that this may have been no more than the repetition of a detail 'Ali had heard from those questioning him.³¹

Still more seriously, there are questions over Muhammad 'Ali's trustworthiness. If the nasty but implausible tale of modern-day cannibalism, eating a man's heart raw, were not enough to raise suspicion, it is clear that Robinson himself sometimes had trouble with 'Ali's honesty. He refers to 'instances of not impeccable veracity on his part' (Robinson 1979: 213) and notes that on at least one occasion a 'financial consideration' was necessary to overcome 'Ali's unwillingness to explore the possible location of the find (Robinson 1979: 212). Herb Krosney suggests that such incentives were a major element in the research:

Robinson made inquiries with the Egyptian fellahin in the area of Nag Hammadi. He found witnesses who would often tell him to come back in a short time and they would reveal the story to him. Robinson would return as requested, ready with the proper incentives. 'Whenever I went down, I would bring the villagers a bottle of whiskey and a ten-pound note. That was big money at the time. That was my chore in tracking it down. I am not a field archaeologist. I went from rumor to rumor, village to village' (Krosney 2006: 132).³²

The same note is confirmed in Krosney's report of Rodolphe Kasser's scornful comment on Robinson's research:

Robinson went down [to the area of Nag Hammadi] in full force, accompanied by Egyptian notables, promising compensation to his informants. For them [the Egyptian fellahin], the windfall was beautiful.³³

Krosney's account of Kasser's scepticism sheds light also on the disclaimer that appeared in the *Facsimile Edition* in 1984:³⁴

30. Robinson 1979: 214. Cf. also the discussion of the number in Robinson *et al.* 1984: 20, concluding with the statement 'But when pressed as to whether the number were not actually twelve, he insisted that it was thirteen.' See further Robinson *et al.* 1984: 20-24.

31. This is corroborated further by the vagueness with which 'Ali speaks about the discovery in 1987: 'these old books ... these books ... those old papers' (above, pp. 308-309).

32. The source of Krosney's quotation of Robinson is unclear, though it would appear to be from an interview conducted by Krosney.

33. Krosney 2006: 134. The source of Krosney's quotations of Kasser is also unclear, but again, it appears to be Krosney's own interviews, no doubt conducted during his research for this book, published in 2006.

34. See above, xx.

Krause and I, who knew Egypt well, and the fabricating capabilities of the Egyptian fellahin lured by the prospect of gain, disapproved, asking Robinson to restrict himself to the minimum kind of presentation foreseen by our committee back in 1970 (Krosney 2006: 135).

For Kasser, the testimonies gathered were simply unreliable. According to Krosney, Kasser wondered ‘whether a small event of minimal importance for the local population could be remembered in such detail so many years after the fact’ (Krosney 2006: 135).³⁵ The time gap between the discovery in the mid-1940s and the interviews in the mid-1970s is certainly a concern in research of this nature, and it encourages some reflection on how it is that Robinson is able to discover so much detail in the 1970s when Jean Doresse had failed to find the same kind of detail in the 1940s.³⁶

The Original Story of the Find: Jean Doresse

One of the many curiosities of this story is the difference between what Jean Doresse was able to discover in his investigations in the late 1940s, within years of the discovery, and what James Robinson was able to discover in the mid 1970s, three decades after the discovery. Doresse found out ‘rather vague’ information in his visits to Upper Egypt in 1947, 1948 and 1949 (Doresse 1960: 128)³⁷ and followed this up with a fact-finding mission in January 1950 (Doresse 1950b). Doresse describes the site of the discovery in some detail (Doresse 1960: 128-33), and he captions his photograph with a note that it was at the ‘south-east flank of the Gebel et-Tarif’, where there are ‘entrances to the tombs of the princes of the sixth dynasty’ (Doresse 1960: ii). Doresse writes:

Was it in one of these tombs that the papyri were found? Certainly, one cannot, even if one searches very far around, see any other place—any ruin or sepulchre—from which they could have come. The peasants who accompanied us and who did not know the real object of our search (we had come here on the pretext of visiting

35. Krosney suggests that there is bad blood between Kasser and Robinson. He goes on to quote Robinson: ‘I know that Kasser hates my guts because of the article on the Jung Codex’ (2006: 136). See further Robinson 2007: 95-96 et passim.

36. See North 1962: ‘In two visits to Qaçr Sayyâd and Dabba (Hamrâ-Dûm, hamlet of the finders), I found no townfolk able (or willing!) to clarify the circumstances of the discovery’ (155 n. 6).

37. ‘Whence, precisely, did these documents come, and in what circumstances were they found? ... [T]he information we collected in one way and another led us to believe that they were dug up near Hamra Dûm, in the vicinity of Naga Hamadi, some sixty-odd miles from Luxor. They had been found buried in an earthenware pot near the site of the ancient townlet of Chenoboskion, at the foot of the mountain called Gebel et-Tarif. The discovery had taken place about 1945.’

the pharaonic tombs) guided us, of their own initiative, to the southern part of the cemetery and showed us a row of shapeless cavities. Not long since, they said, some peasants of Hamra-Dûm and of Dabba, in search of manure, found here a great *zir*—which means jar—filled with leaves of papyrus; and these were bound like books. The vase was broken and nothing remains of it; the manuscripts were taken to Cairo and no one knows what then became of them. As to the exact location of the find, opinion differed by some few dozen yards; but everyone was sure that it was just about here. And from the ground itself we shall learn nothing more; it yields nothing but broken bones, fragments of cloth without interest and some potsherds (Doresse 1960: 133).

One of the values of Doresse's research is that he does not appear to have asked leading questions, and he avoids the danger of contaminating the field. He writes:

Given as they were, quite spontaneously, I am sure that these testimonies related to our library: they agreed perfectly with the details we had been able to collect through different channels (Doresse 1960: 134).

Although much shorter and more basic, the story Doresse tells is, in fact, similar to the one told by Robinson, but the precise, colourful details are missing: the brothers, the *jinn*, burning leaves in the oven, the blood vengeance.³⁸ Curiously, Doresse does appear to have been aware of versions of the story more akin to those told by Robinson, but he treats these details with scepticism:

Rumour added—as we have said—that two of these volumes had been used by the fellahs as fuel for making their tea, and that the rest had been sold for a trifling sum to the dealers who had taken them to Cairo (Doresse 1960: 128).³⁹

Doresse may be right to treat the motif of the burning of valuable ancient texts as mere rumour since it is a trope that also appears in other stories of westerners rescuing documents from those who do not understand their value, seen in the legends surrounding both Codex Sinaiticus⁴⁰ and the Dishna Papers.⁴¹ The

38. Robinson's comments on Doresse's investigations are generally disparaging, but he adds, 'What is new is not so much the story in its broad outlines as the pedantry with which it has been tracked down, fleshed out, pinpointed and, to the extent possible, verified or rectified' (Robinson 1981: 28).

39. See also Doresse 1950a: 69-70 and Puech 1950: 94. According to Robinson 1981: 31, Doresse had also heard the murder story but he was sceptical about it—'Tano reported on 20 December 1971 that the discoverer had avenged his father's death, and Doresse has reported that, though he had not accorded enough credence to this report to publish it, he had in fact heard it.'

40. See Parker 2010: 128-31 for scepticism over Tischendorf's claim to have rescued the Codex Sinaiticus from being burnt.

41. Robinson's story of the discovery of the Dishna Papers bears a striking resemblance to the stories of the Nag Hammadi finds: 'Then he pulled out the books from the jar and put them in

difficulty for the researcher is the possibility that motifs like this find their way into the retellings of the story through hearsay, rumour and the creative imagination.

The Ramifications

What does this strange story teach us? Is there a moral? I would like to suggest that there are several. First, it reminds us of the importance of applying a healthy scepticism to our work, and to ask questions even—or especially—about the things we think we know. The appeal of the Nag Hammadi find story is connected with its pedagogical appeal. We like to tell the story in the classroom⁴² because it has some blood, some mystery, some intrigue.⁴³ It comes from a world totally different from ours and features characters quite different from us. In its orientaling representation of illiterate, ignorant, blood-thirsty peasants, it enables academics to celebrate their literacy, civilization and wealth. It is a story of the rescue of valuable documents from the hands of superstitious murderers who would have thrown them all on the fire if they had not wanted to make a quick buck.

But pedagogical usefulness is not a barometer of truth, and there are dangers in suspending our scepticism in order to tell a good tale. Moreover, when it comes to the *Gospel of Thomas*, there is an alternative discovery story that is usually relegated to second place if it is discussed at all, namely Bernard Pyne Grenfell and Arthur Surridge Hunt's unearthing of the Oxyrhynchus papyri, the first of which, P.Oxy.1 (Grenfell and Hunt 1897) caused a minor sensation in the 1890s (Grenfell 1897). The difficulty with this story is that it features people a little bit like us, academics with an interest in antiquity, and it has nothing like the same classroom appeal. And yet the prioritizing of Robinson's Nag Hammadi story in introductions to the *Gospel of Thomas* functions subtly to downplay the importance of the earlier textual evidence in Greek and so to increase the distance between the *Gospel of Thomas* and the Synoptics.⁴⁴

the skirt of his *jallabīyah*. Some that were torn and in very bad condition were burned on the spot' (Robinson 2011: 109). I am grateful to Nicola Denzey Lewis for drawing my attention to this.

42. *The Gnostics*, for example, features footage of Elaine Pagels telling the story in a 1980s classroom at Princeton. Moreover, the key literature on the Nag Hammadi codices begins with a version of Robinson's tale, e.g. Meyer and Pagels 2007: 3-4.
43. Cf. Krosney 2006: 133, 'The narrative Robinson put together was detailed. It was also colorful, full of action and bursting with passion and deception—in short, the stuff of a Hollywood thriller.'
44. See further Goodacre 2012: 27-29. One of the difficulties with studies on *Thomas* is the 'Coptic Priority Fallacy', which inflates the importance of the Coptic witness at the expense of the Greek witnesses (Goodacre 2012: 29, 31, 68).

A second, related point is the reminder to be as ethical in our dealings with secondary sources as we encourage our students to be. The multiple retellings of Robinson's story in the secondary literature often sail perilously close to plagiarism. Every scholar who tells the tale is of necessity dependent on James Robinson. The debt is clear in passages like this one, where Werner Kelber retells certain details of the story, his debt to Robinson clear from the tell-tale phrase 'the ultimate act of blood revenge', a phrase that only occurs in the literature where authors are dependent on Robinson:⁴⁵

James Robinson (1979: 209)	Werner Kelber (1983: 42)
<p>The date of <u>the discovery</u> of the Nag Hammadi codices can be established by two murders—not altogether uncommon happenings <u>in the blood feuds</u> still found in <u>rural Egypt!</u> ... They fell upon Ahmad Isma'il pitilessly. Abu ai-Majd, then a teenager, brags that he struck the first blow straight to the head. After having <u>hacked Ahmad Isma'il to pieces limb by limb</u>, they <u>cut out his heart and consumed it among them—the ultimate act of blood revenge.</u></p>	<p>The general area of <u>the discovery</u> is deeply <u>rural</u> and virtually untouched by urban, <u>Egyptian</u> culture. Peasants in this part of the world live in a preliterate society, forever involved in <u>blood feuds</u> among each other and against neighboring villages, and not averse to taking the law into their own hands. Members of the family who made the discovery were before and afterwards victims of brutal murders. They were <u>hacked to pieces limb by limb</u>, their <u>hearts cut out and consumed</u> by the murderers—<u>the ultimate act of blood revenge.</u> It is now admitted that considerable damage and losses occurred as the manuscripts were divided up by the Islamic natives who did not recognize their true significance ...</p>

It is easy to understand the problem. I once tried to write an introduction to the story and I continually found myself inadvertently drifting into the all too familiar words from Robinson. I used to love the *Arabian Nights* as a child and I desperately wanted to talk about Muhammad 'Ali's fear that the jar might contain 'a jinn',⁴⁶ but that his lust for treasure overcame his fear.⁴⁷ Robinson's accounts are the only detailed sources for the story and they are so compelling that the temptation to something approaching plagiarism has proved irresistible

45. Kelber's redaction of Robinson has introduced some errors into his version in a way analogous to Matthew's redaction of Mark and Thomas's redaction of the Synoptics; e.g., the members of the family who made the discovery were not just 'victims of brutal murders' but also murderers themselves. See further Goodacre 2012: 47-48.

46. Although Robinson and those following him (e.g., Pagels 1979: xiii) speak about 'a jinn', *jinn* is in fact the collective plural in Arabic. The singular is *jinnī*. Robinson also constructs the erroneous plural 'jinns', e.g., in Robinson 1988: 23, 'Out swirled gold-like particles that disappeared into the sky—neither jinns nor gold but perhaps papyrus fragments!'

47. See Pinault (1992) for an exploration of the tales of the *Arabian Nights*. Pinault draws a parallel between the story of the Fisherman and the Genie and Robinson's account: 'This *Arabian Nights* reference to genii confined in bottles finds an echo in an actual twentieth century occurrence, the 1945 discovery in Egypt of a collection of ancient Coptic Gnostic manuscripts' (1992: 37 n. 17).

to some.⁴⁸ Given the seriousness with which plagiarism is treated in our universities, though, it is a temptation that should be avoided.

There is also some value for the study of the Nag Hammadi codices in trying to get the story right. It is important to know whether any valuable texts were lost in an oven in Hamra Dûm. How complete is the collection? Should we continue to speak about ‘thirteen codices’ when it is clear that only twelve complete codices have survived?⁴⁹ Is it true that massive damage was done at the site of the discovery? Did the *fellahin* attempt to rip up the codices and divide them among themselves? If there were only two present, how could this have happened? If there were seven or eight present, could the division of the library indeed go back to its discovery? And were the discoverers really just farmers out looking for *sabakh* or were they grave-robbers who found the jar in an ancient cemetery? If so, what might that tell us about those who buried them back in the fourth century?⁵⁰ These questions are now, of course, difficult to answer, but the uncritical acceptance of one version of the find story may run the risk of throwing us off the scent.

Finally, the discussion of the Nag Hammadi discovery story provides some enjoyable analogies for the exploration of Christian origins. There is a dark, oral period for several decades during which knowledge of the find is limited, and only Doresse can help, just as knowledge of the Jesus movement in the early decades is limited largely to Paul. James Robinson in the 1970s, like Mark in the 70s, provides a compelling new written account that then forms the basis for several subsequent accounts. Elaine Pagels produces so strong a new version, embellished with legendary details, that it becomes as famous as Robinson’s, just as Matthew writes a new version of Mark, likewise embellished with legendary details. But Robinson is also like Luke, who tells the same story on different occasions with different details, most famously the story of Paul’s conversion (Acts 9, 22, 26). Perhaps too, the story reminds us of the caution necessary in conducting research on early Christianity. Sometimes, admitting our ignorance is a virtue.⁵¹

48. Some have attempted to steer clear by moving to quotation when they get to the most compelling parts of the story, e.g., Pagels 1979: xiv; Foster 2009: 28-29.

49. The so-called thirteenth is actually one tractate tucked into Codex VI (Robinson 1988: 10; 1979: 214).

50. For a fascinating related investigation, see Denzey Lewis 2011 and Denzey Lewis and Blount forthcoming.

51. Earlier versions of this article were presented in the Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism section of the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting, London, July 2011 and at the Christianity in Antiquity discussion group at UNC Chapel Hill in February 2012. I am grateful to the audiences on both occasions for helpful feedback. I also shared this research with Nicola Denzey Lewis, and I am grateful for her helpful comments.

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