**The Nag Hammadi Library.**

I was surprised when I read this section of *What is the Bible?* that it did not mention the Nag Hammadi discoveries which are as important, and some would argue more important, than the Dead Sea Scrolls. It’s a strange story and I think for many a somewhat disturbing one.

The term “Nag Hammadi Library” refers to a collection of some fifty-two texts which were written in Coptic (an Egyptian Christian language) in the second century CE. Thus, they date from the time of the writing of the New Testament and some may be even older. They are codices; the singular is codex. A codex is a handwritten book, quite similar to the books we read today as distinguished from a scroll.

The story of their discovery really is truth which is stranger than fiction. They were discovered in December, 1945 near the town of Nag Hammadi which is in Egypt, just south of Luxor. The whole story which I won’t go in to, includes a blood feud and a grisly murder. A set of brothers discovered a red earthenware jar more than a meter tall. They broke it open and out tumbled out some thirteen papyrus books bound in leather plus some loose papyrus leaves. The men brought the material back to their home and some of the loose pages were actually used as fuel for the oven.

The story gets murkier as it goes along. The men, realizing that the codices might be valuable, sold some of them to various dealers. Some of them were smuggled out of the country, others wound up in the Coptic Museum in Cairo. Some were put in a safe deposit box in Zurich. Various scholars studied them but restricted access to them. UNESCO got involved to protect the documents and eventually in 1961 they were published, sixteen years after their discovery. The first English translation was in 1977.

The majority of the documents discovered consisted of the Gnostic Gospels. These are accounts of the life of Jesus, written about the time as the gospels we read, that were not included in the canon, in the Bible. Their existence had been known primarily through the writings of the early Christian church fathers who wrote in opposition to them and regarded their theology as heresy. That is probably why they were so carefully hidden away some two thousand years ago. These books include the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Apopcryphon (secret book) of John, the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel to the Egyptians, the Secret Book of James, and on and on.

I won’t attempt to explain the nuances of Gnosticism; it’s probably beyond my ability. It was indeed regarded as heresy by the early church. It tended to be “secret.” Gnosis means wisdom and the suggestion is that knowledge of God is limited to a few people. It is mystical and relies heavily on personal inner experiences. Gnosticism appears to draw on Eastern traditions and presents a rather different view of the life and teachings of Jesus.

The whole topic interests me because it confirms that in the early days of the Church, there was a wide diversity of views, perhaps wider than there is today. Certain people decided which accounts of Jesus life would be included in the canon and often those decisions were highly political in nature. It’s a fascinating subject, at least to me.

As to why Rev. Robertson chose not to include Nag Hammadi in the chapter on archeology, one can only guess. It is controversial. It also opens up the whole topic of how and why some writings were excluded from the canon and perhaps she simply didn’t want to address the subject at this point.

If any of you find it interesting, a very good source of information is Elaine Pagels. She is a Professor of Religion at Princeton and has written extensively on the Nag Hammadi documents and on other aspects of early Christian history. Her books are written for general readers and are challenging, but not really difficult, reading. They are readily available in the Westchester Library System

I googled Elaine Pagels and discovered that in addition to having once been married to someone I knew as a child, she was also at Stanford at the same time I was. I didn’t know her; I was a graduate student and she was an undergraduate. Small world…

Joan Austin