

# Treasure in earthen vessels: The Library found at Nag Hammadi

*by Frederic E. Blume*

To most readers of these pages the word "Nag Hammadi" will mean very little. It is perfectly understandable why this should be so, since it designates a place in modern Egypt where, almost thirty years ago, discoveries of some ancient books were made that will prove to be of immense help to us for our understanding of the history of the early Christian Church and its Bible, in particular its New Testament. However, information about these books discovered there has for a variety of reasons been slow in coming to us, and the reading and understanding of them has been much slower still.

These books, thirteen bound leaf-books (not book-rolls like the Isaiah from Qumran) containing forty-nine different documents, were found at just about the same time when the discoveries of the now famous Dead Sea Scrolls were being made. The latter have to a large extent been published and are being read and interpreted in all sections of the Jewish and Christian worlds. Their vast importance for our understanding of the Jewish sects that existed in Palestine at the time of Jesus, for new insights into the meaning of the language of the Old Testament prophets, and for information about the very words of the Old Testament in both their Hebrew original and in the Aramaic and Greek forms into which they were translated, is universally recognized. Here are original writings, copies of the Scriptures, and copies of literary works from quite far afield that came into being at the time when our Lord Jesus Christ walked this earth. Surely, they cannot help being of interest and importance to us.

With the find at Nag Hammadi the situation is quite different. Here the approximately thousand pages of text are written in a language that at the time of the find could be read by only a very small number of scholars scattered over many different countries. The language is Coptic, which is the form the Egyptian language took when it was used by Egyptian Christians in the first centuries after the time of Christ. Today, however, the Christians of Egypt have lost the understanding of their ancestral language, though they continue to use it in the liturgical parts of their church services, for the language ordinarily used by Egyptian Christians now is that of their land, the Arabic.

At present, about three decades after the discovery at Nag Hammadi, there are many who are studying and understanding Coptic, thanks to the impetus to these studies given by the discovery. Courses in the language are offered here in America and various European centers, text-books on beginning Coptic are to be had, and advanced grammars and dictionaries are being produced or old ones are being reissued. But the ready availability of the books does not by any means make the learning of the language itself any easier. It is written, for the most part, in the Greek alphabet, with a few signs borrowed from the popular Egyptian writing where the Greek had no equivalent for certain sounds in the Coptic (like 'sch', 'tch', and 'kql'); so the beginner does not have to learn the Egyptian hieroglyphic, hieratic, or demotic script, though the language itself is that of the old pharaohs, plus what was obviously an injection from the speech of the Hebrew slaves who before the time of Moses served the Egyptians in the land of Goshen. That is, in the Coptic there are some things that are like the Hebrew.

Adding to the difficulty of reading the Nag Hammadi writings is the fact that these were not originally in Coptic at all but are copies of translations from Greek originals into the Egyptian language. And these Greek writings were by false teachers who were branded as heretics by the early church and were put out of it because of their destructive doctrines.

Now that we have these writings, the understanding of them still presents problems though more and more of the questions about them are apparently being answered. But back in the 1940's just getting these writings into our hands was a matter of extreme difficulty. Egypt was then in a state of political turmoil. A strong nationalist movement looked with suspicion on all "Europeans;" it was illegal to take archaeological finds like this out of the country; the chance was offered a few natives to make a quick buck by 'bootlegging' their accidental find. All these factors contributed to the early uncertainties about Nag Hammadi. Apparently,

the first discovery was made by a handful of natives digging in an old cemetery. But just where remains uncertain. To them these pieces of old writing had money value if they could be peddled. Prospective buyers in America who were contacted thought the price was too high. Other material wound up in Switzerland. But today all this confusion has been settled, and the Nag Hammadi finds rest in the Coptic Museum of Cairo, Egypt, where they are photographed, copied, and studied, by scholars from all over the world.

But why should these Egyptian translations of the writings of some Greek-speaking heretics in the early Christian Church be of such interest and value to us today?

On that we shall have something to say in another article in this series.