A few days ago I posted about the Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library, giving the remarkable story that scholars — for as long as I myself have been a scholar — have been telling about how it happened. I also mentioned that my New Testament colleague at Duke, Mark Goodacre — who is on this blog and who has an important blog of his own, as well as the most important website on the New Testament on the entire Internet — has written an article calling this story into question.

I asked Mark if he would be willing to summarize his objections to the story as it is typically recited, and he has done so in the following post. In my next post I will respond to his objections, and then Mark will respond to my response. Isn’t scholarship great?

Here’s Mark’s post on the matter:

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Five Reasons to Question the Story of the Nag Hammadi Discovery

I am grateful to my friend and colleague Bart Ehrman for mentioning me in his blog in connection with the fascinating and compelling story of the Nag Hammadi discovery in 1945. I must admit that I have always found the stories of the discovery utterly gripping, and I have narrated them many times in the classroom. In fact, it was on one such occasion that I checked myself for a moment and just listened to what I was saying. Genies? A six foot jar? The discoverer’s mum burning the manuscripts to make her tea? Cannibalism and blood vengeance? I realized that I was telling this story not because I knew it was good history but because I loved its exotic details. It was a little bit of The Arabian Knights in a story that I could tell in class!

So is it true? I have my doubts. Here are five reasons to question the popular account:

• The Mystery of the Growing Jar: Like all good legends, the details get ever more impressive with repeated retellings. In the earliest versions of the story, the jar in which the manuscripts were found is just under two feet tall. In later versions, it grows to a remarkable six feet in size!
• The people keep changing: In some versions of the story, two brothers (Mohammed Ali and Khalifah Ali) discover the jar. In others, their brother Abu Al Majd is the one to find it. Sometimes there are only two people present. Sometimes there are seven. Sometimes eight.
• James Robinson is the scholar responsible for the detailed reporting of the find in several different versions over the years. But two of his closest collaborators, who were there with him in Egypt in the 1970s, were sceptical about his story. Buried deep in an abstruse footnote of an expensive volume of photographs of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, Rodolphe Kasser and Martin Krause contested Robinson’s story. They had “serious reasons to put in doubt the objective value” of points in his story, they said. In other words, they didn’t believe a word of it.
• There are no recordings and no transcripts of the research conducted by Robinson in the 1970s. But a decade later, the alleged discoverer, Muhammad Ali Al Samman, appeared on camera in a British TV documentary in which he narrated the story afresh. His version has
still more anomalies, yet more contradictions with the earlier versions.

- There was actually a scholar present in Nag Hammadi not long after the discovery of the codices. He was the French scholar Jean Doresse, an expert on Egyptian Christianity. There are pictures of him in the area from the late 1940s. He had the instinct for how to conduct field research. He got among the people there and he did not ask leading questions. Unlike Robinson, he did not offer them whiskey or Egyptian pounds. He heard legends about blood feuds and the burning of manuscripts, but he attributed them to a kind of sensationalist tittle-tattle. His story is more lean, less detailed, and probably more historical. Several peasants, no one knew who, had found the manuscripts in a jar in that area a few years earlier. Sometimes history is a little less interesting than legend.

If you would like to read the full story of my doubts about the Nag Hammadi finds, it’s published in Mark Goodacre, “How reliable is the story of the Nag Hammadi discovery?”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35/4 (2013): 303-22