I have started a short series in response to a question about the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, discovered in 1945 among a cache of documents near Nag Hammadi Egypt. In my last post I gave the story typically recited by NT scholars for the discovery of this “Nag Hammadi Library.” Some scholars have doubted the story, and we may never know the details. What is not in dispute is what was actually discovered.

This is what I say about it in my undergraduate textbook on the matter.

What was this ancient collection of books? The short answer is that it is the most significant collection of lost Christian writings to turn up in modern times. It included several Gospels about Jesus that had never before been seen by any Western scholar, books known to have existed in antiquity but lost for nearly 1500 years. The cache contained twelve leather-bound volumes, with pages of a thirteenth volume removed from its own, now lost, binding and tucked inside the cover of one of the others. The pages are made of papyrus. And the books are anthologies – collections of texts compiled and then bound together. Altogether there are fifty-two treatises preserved among these volumes; but six of the treatises are duplicates, making a total of forty-six documents in the collection. They include Gospels by such persons as Jesus’ disciple Philip and secret revelations delivered to his disciple John and another to James; they include mystical speculations about the beginning of the divine realm and the creation of the world, metaphysical reflections on the meaning of existence and the glories of salvation; they include expositions of important religious doctrines and polemical attacks on other Christians for their wrong headed and heretical views — especially Christians we would call proto-orthodox.

The documents are written in Coptic. But there are solid reasons for thinking that they were each originally composed in Greek. For some of the books there is no question about it: among the texts, for example, is a small extract taken from Plato’s Republic. For other works, including the Gospel of Thomas, we have Greek fragments that date from a much earlier period. For some works, linguists are able to determine that the Coptic is “translation” rather than “original composition” Coptic.

The leather-bound books themselves were manufactured in the second half of the fourth century. We know this because the spines of the leather bindings were strengthened with scrap paper, and some of the scrap paper came from receipts that are dated 341, 346, and 348 CE. The books thus must have been manufactured sometime after 348 CE.

The date of the books, of course, is not the same as the date of the documents found within the books — just as the Bible (another anthology) lying on my desk was manufactured in 1998, but the documents it contains were written some 1900 years earlier. So too with the Nag Hammadi texts: they were originally written long before the end of the fourth century when these particular books were made. The Greek fragments of the Gospel of Thomas I just mentioned date from the second century; and as I’ve pointed out in an earlier chapter, this Gospel – along with others in the collection – was known to church fathers of the second and third centuries. When, then, were the texts of these books written? Obviously they were produced at different times and places (Plato’s Republic, e.g., in the fourth century
BCE); but most of them appear to have been in existence by the second Christian century at the latest. Scholars have engaged in hard fought debates over the dates of some of these books, especially over whether they were composed as early as the first century, before the books of the New Testament. Among these particular debates, those over the Gospel of Thomas are probably the most heated.

We do not know exactly who wrote these books, or why they came to be hidden under the cliff of Jabal al-Tarif, just above the bend of the Nile, north of Luxor. It is probably significant that a Christian monastery, founded by the famous Christian monk Saint Pachomius in the fourth century, is located just three miles away. Scholars have been inclined to think that these books may have come from the library of the monastery, a view supported by the contents of the scrap paper in their bindings. But why would monks have disposed of the books? As we will see more fully in a later chapter, a significant moment occurred in the history of the formation of the New Testament canon in the late fourth century. It was in the year 367 CE that the powerful bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, wrote a letter to the churches throughout Egypt under his jurisdiction, in which he laid out in strict terms the contours of the canon of Scripture. This was the first time anyone of record had indicated that the twenty-seven books that we now have in our New Testament canon, and only those twenty-seven books, should be considered as Scripture. Moreover, Athanasius insisted that other, “heretical,” books not be read. Is it possible that monks of the Pachomian monastery near Nag Hammadi felt the pressure from on high, and cleaned out their library to conform with the dictates of the powerful bishop of Alexandria? If so, why did they choose to hide the books instead of burn them? Is it possible that they – the ones who hid the books in an earthenware jar off in the wilderness – were actually fond of these books, and decided to hide them away for safekeeping until the tides of scriptural preference shifted, and they could be retrieved for their library of sacred texts? We will never know.

We will be discussing others of these books in the so-called Nag Hammadi library later, when we come to examine one form of early Christian Gnosticism, arguably the most significant, and certainly one of the most fascinating forms of Christianity that came to be “lost.” For now, we will look at just one of the books, the one that has proved most intriguing and significant for historians of early Christianity, a forgery known by name from ancient times, which came to be lost only now to be discovered. It is a forgery of the teachings of Jesus written in the name of one who should know them better than anyone, his twin brother, Didymus Judas Thomas.