CHAPTER TWO

COPTIC GNOSTIC WRITINGS*

The term “Coptic Gnostic writings” is a modern term invented by modern scholars to indicate arbitrarily all sorts of currents of Late Antiquity which stressed Gnosis, an intuitive knowledge of revealed mysteries. It ought, however, to be limited to writings of the group which called themselves Gnostics (e.g. those who authored the *Apocryphon of John*) and to products of thinkers like Basilides (Alexandria, ca. 120), Valentinus (ca. 150, Alexandria, Rome) and Marcion (Sinope, Rome, ca. 150), who were familiar with the concepts of the “Gnostics” and christianized them.

Original works rightly attributed to Gnosticism are all in Coptic, with the exception of the second-century Greek *Letter to Flora*, by a certain Ptolemaeus, preserved in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius. The oldest of the Coptic texts are the Codex Askewianus (containing two *Books of Jeu*) and the Codex Brucianus (with four books of the *Pistis Sophia*). Both are written in Sahidic, the dialect of Luxor, and were probably acquired there by the Scottish explorer James Bruce in the eighteenth century. They were most likely not translations, but written directly in Coptic. The *Pistis Sophia* amongst other things refers to Mary Magdalene’s authoritative interpretation of the Psalms, as if she were an early Christian prophetess, and she is criticized for this by Peter. This may reflect tensions in the local congregation of Luxor between a Gnostic faction, which had preserved the primitive office of prophet(ess), and a catholic faction, inspired by Rome, which favoured an episcopal Church Order.

In 1896 the German scholar Carl Schmidt announced the acquisition of a Coptic codex, *Papyrus Berolinensis 8502*, which was, however, left unpublished until 1955. It contains:

1. the crucial text of the so-called “Gnostics”, namely the *Apocryphon of John*, which notwithstanding its Christian title is originally a Jewish writing of Alexandrian origin and describes the Unknown God and the spiritual world, then continues to tell the story of

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the world and the history of mankind as a constant struggle between Wisdom that bestows freedom of the spirit and allows consciousness to grow, and Jaldabaoth, a foolish demiurge, who forbids men to eat from the tree of knowledge;

2. the Gospel of Mary, in which Mary Magdalene recounts her visionary experience of the risen Christ and is criticized by Peter;

3. the Sophia of Jesus, a Christianized version of the non-Christian Letter of Eugnostos the Blessed;

4. a fragment of the Acts of Peter which are not gnostic at all, but ascetic and miraculous only, and beloved by Catholics. For this reason it may very well be possible that Papyrus Berolinensis 8502 was written in the scriptorium of a Catholic monastery.

In the second half of the third century the great Gnostic Mani (216–277) sent his missionaries Papos and Thomas to Egypt where they settled in Lykopolis on the Nile above the Thebais in Middle Egypt. There they proselytized among the pupils of the Platonic philosopher Alexander of Lykopolis, who wrote a preserved treatise against them. There they also seem to have translated, or to have had translated, the Manichaean writings found at Medinet Madi in 1930–1931 (Kephalaia, Psalms, Homilies etc.), from East Aramaic into Sub-Achimic, the Coptic dialect of Lykopolis and surroundings.

In 1945, an Egyptian farmer of the Nag Hammadi region called Muhammad Ali al Samman found a jar containing a collection of some 13 codices, 52 writings in Coptic, falsely called a Gnostic Library. One of the codices, number II, ends with the typically monastic invocation: “Remember me, my brethren, in your prayers”. This alone is sufficient to suggest that these manuscripts were copied in one of the nearby recently founded Pachomian monasteries. It is not unthinkable that some old-fashioned monks valued these dear, pious books and indignantly left the monastery when archbishop Athanasius stressed the importance of the Canon (367) and the abbot urged them to surrender their precious treasures. Later, with increasing pressure, they would not have destroyed them, because they possessed an inherent quality of holiness, burying them carefully instead, just like Jews put devalued materials in a hidden place, a geniza. All other stories about the discovery are untrustworthy. Nor are all the writings Gnostic, rather they reflect the situation of the second-century Alexandrian Church and can be used to illustrate the history of Gnosticism, which is largely an Alexandrian phenomenon. Just as Athens is a symbol of Logos, reason, and Jerusalem a symbol of