James M. Robinson


James Robinson (*1924*), who started his scientific career as a New Testament scholar, especially made a name for himself as editor of the Nag Hammadi codices. What is probably his final publication in this field appeared as *The Nag Hammadi Story* in two sizeable hardback volumes in 2014.¹ To a certain extent, the much smaller (and less durable) paperback under review here is a pendant to the former publication.²

The author starts his book with a (virtually unchanged) republication of his admirable overview ‘The Fate of the Manichaean Codices of Medinet Madi, 1929-1989’, first published in 1992.³ Mainly based on archives kept in Berlin and Dublin, he then relates in Part I the acquisition, initial conservation and editing by Carl Schmidt, Chester Beatty, Hugo Ibscher, Hans Jakob Polotsky, Alexander Böhlig and others. Part II concentrates on the later conservation work by Rolf Ibscher. Parts III and IV provide overviews of the Berlin and Dublin holdings respectively. The book concludes with a brief overview of ‘Scholars, Collectors, Dealers, and Others’, a Bibliography and an Index of Names.

The relative value of this publication lies in its assembling of unpublished documentation. Robinson’s excerpts, however, for the most part date to the years 1984-1986. Also, he concentrates on the Berlin codices and thus, understandably, pays less attention to the Chester Beatty manuscripts now kept in Dublin. In his Preface, the author shows himself well aware of this fact.

The book is some sort of inventory, not a history. Reading this book full of excerpts from beginning to end is a rather tiresome task. At times the author loses himself in details, for instance in the case of a full four pages extract from a guidebook to Schloss Friedrichsfelde at Berlin (136-140). The relevance of such an excerpt from ‘the castle’s current guidebooklet’ [n.d.] is all the more questionable because it seems to date from 1986 or even earlier and does not reveal anything on the Berlin *manichaica*.

Historians of Manichaeology in particular may find relevant info in the long excerpts (and, on occasion, come across the author’s sometimes less

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¹ James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Story. From the Discovery to the Publication* (NHMS 86), Leiden-Boston: Brill 2014 (in two vols., 1216 pp.)

² Another pendant seems to be: *The Story of the Bodmer Papyri. From the First Monastery’s Library in Upper Egypt to Geneva and Dublin*, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co 2013 (*non vidi*).

flattering opinion of some of his former colleagues). The most cited scholar is Carl Schmidt, and the lasting value of the report he and Polotsky (with Hugo Ibscher) published in 1933⁴ comes to the fore throughout the book. The said ‘Sitzungsbericht’ reports about the ‘original’ state of the immensely important Coptic codices shortly after they had become available. After so many vicissitudes (the Second World War; its aftermath so disastrous to many of the MSS; the subsequent failures of scholars; the general neglect), Robinson’s not always rewarding task was largely to document their fate. Illustrative in this context may be a quote from a 1966 report written by Rolf Ibscher: ‘Leider ging mir ein wundervolles Blatt nach seiner Ablösung restlos atomisiert verloren. Ich musste niesen, konnte mich nicht blitzschnell abwenden—und alles war spurlos verschwunden’.⁵

In the past decades, however, and not least due to new technical findings,⁶ the story of the Medinet Madi codices moved on in an increasingly positive way. Apart from the work of Wolf-Peter Funk and some others on the Berlin Kephalaiα and Synaxeis codices, Robinson does not relate those new initiatives and recent achievements. Here I only mention the already published work by Gregor Wurst, Siegfried Richter and Nils Arne Pedersen;⁷ the planned first ever edition of the first part of the (Dublin) Manichaean Psalmbook by Richter, Pedersen, Wurst and Jessica Kristionat;⁸ the planned first ever edition of the remains of Mani’s Epistles from the Berlin Codex P. 1599⁹ and, most recently,

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⁵ In Robinson’s translation (156): ‘Unfortunately a marvellous leaf, after being separated [from the book block], was lost, completely atomized. I had to sneeze, but could not turn away with lightening speed—and all had disappeared without a trace’.
⁶ See e.g. Iain Gardner in: Gardner a.o., Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings (NHMS 87), Leiden-Boston: Brill 2015, esp. 9-10.
⁸ To appear in the Series Coptica of the Corpus Fontium Manichaeorum as well.