

1 | Christian Book Culture, New Philology and Gnosticism

The last fifty years have seen a considerable boom in the study of ancient book culture and reading and scribal habits. This chapter situates the study as a whole within these scholarly developments and raises some critical questions about previous approaches to the Nag Hammadi codices in light of what is now known of antique religious materiality.

Religious Change in Antiquity: Christian and Gnostic Texts

One thing that separated Christians from other religious people in antiquity was their relationship to texts and the book, or more precisely the codex. Few religions active in the Mediterranean Basin in antiquity considered texts sacred. The Jews were an exception, a people whose attachment to the written word was already strong when a new Jewish faction took form around the preacher Jesus and his followers. This was enhanced when the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE and their connection to the sacred land concomitantly diminished. This dimension of antique religiosity, its association with text and place, has been the subject of considerable recent study, pioneered and championed by Jonathan Z. Smith who highlighted a shift occurring in religious life in late antiquity which is central to the new-found focus. Once place-bound – earlier cults were centred around sacrifice to gods and religious customs attached to home, village

and city (what Smith calls ‘here’ and ‘there’ religion¹) – several new religions appeared in Hellenistic times that were detached from place-boundness, one of which developed into Christianity. Religion was slowly being transformed into something that followed people ‘anywhere’. Although simplifying processes that are undoubtedly more complex, these very broad generalising schemes concerning the nature of antique religiosity are still worth noting as they provide context to the very specific relation between Christianity and texts.

The role played by the book in these religious changes has been highlighted in a number of recent studies.² As Christianity slowly took over, the Graeco-Roman as well as Jewish blood sacrifice was slowly replaced by an internal sacrifice attached to the written and spoken word, whether internalised or spoken out loud. Guy Stroumsa, among others, has emphasised the end of sacrifice in light of the new importance placed on the written word and in particular the Christian development of the codex.³ This new, easily transportable medium fitted perfectly into the religious landscape that was established in late antiquity.⁴ Texts not only were mobile, like Smith’s ‘anywhere’ religion, but also spoke to the growing focus on internalising religion. The image of Socrates is an early and ideal candidate to represent the beginning of a new

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, ‘Here, There and Anywhere’, in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 323–339.

² One of the earliest discussions of this is found in Guy Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009 [2005]); and one of the more recent books on this is edited by Eduard Iricinschi and Chrysi Kotsifou: *Coping with Religious Change in the Late-Antique Eastern Mediterranean* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

³ Guy Stroumsa, *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), chapter 2.

⁴ This part of the present chapter is a development of the conclusions of an article published as: Paul Linjamaa, ‘The Diminishing Importance of Fate and Divine Femininity during the High and Late Roman Empire’, *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 57:1 (2021): 81–121.

preoccupation with what has been called ‘the care of the self’. Wandering the streets of Athens, questioning every value and unreflective statement he encountered, Socrates is identified by many key minds in the Western history of ideas as beginning something new.⁵ In the early nineteenth century, Hegel argued that Socrates (or perhaps rather the symbol of him) was the first to challenge the old view of self where one’s worth was based on one’s success and value as a citizen – that is, in the eyes of others.⁶ Socrates introduced a new moral stance which stressed the inward gaze; self-improvement was fundamental for meaningfulness. In Plato’s *Alcibiades*, Socrates is described as stating that one’s first duty to both oneself and others, was to ‘take care of oneself’ (ἐπιμελεία ἑαυτοῦ/cura sui); such care was the only way to reach true happiness (εὐδαιμονία)⁷ – a focus picked up and promoted by Christians. A task which had only occupied philosophers and religious specialists, it was universalised by Christianity, as observed by Michel Foucault⁸

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, trans. E. S. Haldane, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. I: *Greek Philosophy to Plato* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995 [1822–1830]).

⁶ Worth mentioning is that we are discussing male morality. Women’s worth was determined by their relationship to men. This distinction was seldom a topic of discussion in the nineteenth century.

⁷ *Alcibiades* 128e–129a; 124a–b, 133c–134b. The term εὐδαιμονία was a technical one involving much more than the colloquial and somewhat commonplace English term ‘happy’. For more, see David L. Norton, *Personal Destinies: A Philosophy of Ethical Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

⁸ In his unfinished work, *The History of Sexuality*, he discusses the changes that occurred in the view of the self and sexuality with the dawn of Christianity. The new Christian ideal, Foucault claimed, was to master the will completely, a task which only philosophers had previously had the inclination to undertake. But as was obvious by outward appearance, most people never got that far. In Foucault’s analysis, a new morality was advanced by early Christian writers, one of engaging in constant self-regulation and self-scrutiny in order to ascertain and ensure one had not fallen victim to desire and sin. Thus, one was no longer only measured outwardly by others, but inwardly by oneself. The act of confession was the prime example of this, according to Foucault, an occasion to scrutinise and confess one’s failures. Sexual desire was of

(via Nietzsche⁹) and, more recently, the great scholar of late antiquity, Peter Brown.¹⁰ The latter's work on the late ancient world is perhaps the best and most influential example of the continued interest in the themes of the ancient changes of self, and much of Foucault's notions are echoed here.¹¹ Brown also observes the importance of the written word and the physical aspects of the codex to the religious changes taking place in late antiquity.¹² As mentioned above, in recent years there has been a proliferation of literature devoted to early Christian reading and

course of particular importance for Foucault's study, an impulse that could cause great distress since it was interpreted as a sign of other and graver failings. In this new morality promoted by Christianity, people were expected, according to Foucault, to 'lead a life not of this world' ('une vie qui n'est pas de ce monde') (*Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair*, ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 234).

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche maintained in his work *On the Genealogy of Morality* (trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1969 [1887])), that the broader morality governing ancient societies was rather occupied with what could be called a 'master morality'. He claimed that Christians introduced a new ideal which suppressed the natural tendency towards dominance, instead, universalising an internalisation of moral perfection. But the result was not, in Nietzsche's eyes, greater happiness, but rather the birth of a 'slave morality' that subjugated humans.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Concern for the Self', in *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961–1984)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1996 [1984]).

¹¹ See the following works by Peter Brown: *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London: Harper and Row, 1972); 'The Notion of Virginité in the Early Church', in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. B. McGinn and J. Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 427–443; *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1988); *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992). See also Peter Brown, G. W. Bowersock and Oleg Grabar (eds.), *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). In his recently published biography (*Journeys of the Mind: A Life in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023)), chapters 83–84, Brown discusses his relation to Foucault and other theoreticians.

¹² The book and the written word play central roles in Brown's studies of the continuation and transformation of classical to Christian *paideia* (e.g. Brown, *Power and Persuasion*, 71–78; Brown, *Body and Society*, 252ff; see also Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 4).

book culture and, as we can see, the topic attaches itself to the broader religious transformations taking place in antiquity.

There are some more specific and authoritative paradigms regarding the nature of late antique religiosity which should also be mentioned here, as they have undoubtedly influenced the reception of texts that have been defined as 'heretical', like the Nag Hammadi collection. Much of the twentieth century was influenced by existentialist perspectives popular at the time, reflected, for example, in the work of the classicist E. R. Dodds. Dodds argued that people in the high and late Roman period and all the way up to late antiquity were troubled by a pressing feeling of alienation, an anxiety caused by the fear of Fate and the sense of smallness triggered by a growing knowledge of the vastness of the universe. This subsided, Dodds argued, as Christianity began to spread, supplanting anxiety with feelings of awe for the infinite provided by the idea of a pending immortality.¹³ Dodds' model was broadly accepted and supported by many prominent historians, including France Cumont, Arthur Darby Nock and André-Jean Festugiere.¹⁴ Its popularity coincided with another view advanced by classicists in which the victory of Christianity and the subsequent downfall of Graeco-Roman philosophy brought with it a vulgarisation and decline in scientific, philosophical and religious curiosity.¹⁵ Gnostics had their foot in both camps, which was seen as divisive, as they were neither purely Christian nor philosophers.¹⁶ The

¹³ E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

¹⁴ This is discussed in Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 184; and developed by myself in Linjamaa, 'The Diminishing Importance of Fate'.

¹⁵ As Peter Brown has previously suggested, a theme recently developed by Nicola Denzey Lewis. Brown, *Religion and Society*; Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*.

¹⁶ One of the few who treated the Gnostics as worthy of serious study was Hans Jonas. He credited the antique existential crisis – which he traced to the influence of 'Eastern' dualism – with the birth of Gnosticism, which in his view was its culmination, a crisis

reading of the Nag Hammadi texts, a corpus to this day known as containing ‘the Gnostic Gospels’, has been influenced by these overarching paradigms.¹⁷

The portrayal of Christianity as representing a decline in antique culture was, unsurprisingly, countered by theologians. Showing little interest in Gnostic texts, influential theologians, such as Adolf von Harnack, presented Christianity as a phenomenon apart, not determined by its historical surroundings or its Jewish and Graeco-Roman framework. Christianity was actually not a religion at all, some Protestant apologetics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries argued; it was only when Jesus’ original teachings had become part of a formalised (read, Catholic) structure that Christianity as a religion, comparable to other religions, took form.¹⁸ The first time we encounter the term Gnosticism, it is used in this way, to critique Catholicism for importing unnecessary foreign elements into a once pure phenomenon.¹⁹ Yet the essentialising nature of Protestant theologians’ search for the uniqueness of Christian origins was matched by the equally problematic

Gnostics solved by rejecting the evil creator god, the Demiurge/Jehova. See Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, vols. I–II (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1954).

¹⁷ The popularity of the term, the ‘Gnostic Gospels’, was popularised by, among other sources, the work by Elaine Pagels who, in 1979, published a very popular book by that title, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books). For more, see Karen King, *What Is ‘Gnosticism?’* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard, 2003); Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*; Linjamaa, ‘The Diminishing Importance of Fate’.

¹⁸ I have expanded on this previously, in my chapter ‘Gnosticism as Inherently Syncretistic? Identity Constructions among Ancient Christians and Protestant Apologetes’, in *Theological and Philosophical Responses to Syncretism: Beyond the Mirage of Pure Religion*, ed. Mika Vähäkangas and Patrik Fridlund (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 25–40. The inspiration for this perspective is Jonathan Z. Smith’s *Drudgery Divine: On Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 43–45; H. S. Versnell, ‘Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion’, *Numen* 38:2 (1991): 177–197.

¹⁹ Henry More, *An Exposition of the Seven Epistles to the Seven Churches Together with a Brief Discourse of Idolatry, with Application to the Church of Rome* (London: James Flesher, 1669).

approaches represented by Dodds' existentialist views of ancient religions' ineffectiveness in meeting the inborn human need for comfort. Paradigms concerning the nature of ancient religion have included the view that Gnostic texts were something less valuable, diluted and an offshoot of something pure.

Studies in Early Christian Book Culture

Many previous studies of early Christian materiality have pursued the intent of 'the' author of a text, aiming to get as close as possible to an 'unpolluted' original text. This has generated a new and recalibrated approach to ancient texts as naturally 'fluid', highlighting the problem of always looking for texts we no longer have in texts that we do. Yet the perspective currently spreading among scholars of antique materiality, sometimes termed 'New Philology' (discussed in more detail below), has not, in my opinion, attracted enough attention to discourses of orthodoxy and heresy in the formation of early Christian texts. As Chris Keith recently argued, and as we shall see below and further into this study, Christians spoke of sacred things in the language of books and written words, even if there was not a book or written word at hand.²⁰ The written word was not just a medium of effective and long-lasting communication, it became a metaphor, a religious way of thinking.²¹ But where do texts that have been deemed heretical fit into all this? What role did books play in promoting a particular kind of Christianity? In light of the revolutionising changes that took place from the second century – when the invention of the codex intersects with the changing view of the self – the question of the impact of the introduction of the book on religious life and practice,

²⁰ Chris Keith, *The Gospel as Manuscript: An Early History of the Jesus Tradition as Material Artifact* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1–12.

²¹ R. A. Karter, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 78–90.

although noticed by many, still remains understudied. This is even more true when it comes to the topic of the book's role in constructions of orthodoxy.

Not everyone, including those high in the social ranks, in church structures and monasteries (all the way up to bishop and abbot), was literate.²² Studies of the socioeconomics of Christian and Graeco-Roman education have made it clear that only a minority of people underwent any formal education in the Roman Empire during the imperial age. Illiteracy was the norm. In Edward Watts' estimation, only between one-third and one-tenth of the population in the high imperial period were literate to the level of being able to read and write basic documents.²³ Some estimate it as even lower.²⁴ Very few people completed the time-consuming and costly project of a specialised education that went beyond basic literacy. Those who received formal education of any sort would most likely have focused on mastering basic skills in reading and writing and not much more. Edward Watts argues that many of those who began such basic literacy training would not have finished and of those who did – as literacy is a skill that has to be developed and maintained continuously for a long time before becoming permanent – many would probably have forgotten much of what was learned as they continued their lives, which seldom necessitated reading and writing.²⁵ In short, anything beyond basic literacy was

²² Christoph Marksches, 'What Ancient Christian Manuscripts Reveal about Reading (and about Non-Reading)', in *Material Aspects of Reading in Ancient and Medieval Cultures*, ed. Anna Krauß, Jonas Leipziger and Friederike Schücking-Jungblut (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 203–205.

²³ See Edward Watts, 'Education: Speaking, Thinking, and Socializing', in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 467–486.

²⁴ W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Harris estimates that at no point would literacy have exceeded 10–15 per cent. For a more optimistic reading, see Ann Hanson, 'Ancient Literacy', in *Literacy in the Roman World*, ed. J. L. Humphrey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 159–198.

²⁵ Watts, 'Education', 469.

reserved for the elite spheres of society and, furthermore, was not centred on furthering a knowledge of ethics or spiritual pursuits but, rather, rhetoric and a career in public life. Wealthy literati and officials with administrative duties kept scribes, copyists and slaves, lectors educated for the purpose of handling texts.²⁶ Books were copied and disseminated through literary networks.²⁷ Christians were very much part of this culture. High-ranking people within ecclesiastical structures would be tasked with having copies made and disseminating texts and letters deemed beneficial for the congregations in a particular network.²⁸ The dawn of organised monasticism in fourth-century Egypt, however, brought new forms of concentrated literate and scribal milieux, where books and texts of all kinds were copied and produced, kept and disseminated, read and debated. It is largely thanks to these libraries and scribal milieux that a considerable number of early Christian texts have been preserved from antiquity.²⁹

Nonetheless, although book production and reading belonged to the sphere of literate elites, the book was still useful for illiterate Christians. As Christoph Marksches has recently argued, textual communities were not necessarily reading communities; that is, people could rise to power without the ability to read (knowledge of Scripture was important, however), using books as symbols of knowledge or for practical gain – as protective amulets and signs of

²⁶ Roger Bagnall, *Reading Papyri, Writing Ancient History* (London: Routledge, 1995).

²⁷ Raymond J. Starr, 'The Circulation of Literary Texts in the Roman World', *Classical Quarterly* 37:1 (1987): 213–223; Felix Reichmann, 'The Book Trade at the Time of the Roman Empire', *Library Quarterly* 8:1 (1938): 40–76; A. F. Norman, 'The Book Trade in Fourth-Century Antioch', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 80 (1960): 122–126.

²⁸ Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*.

²⁹ J. W. Thompson, *Ancient Libraries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1940); Herman A. Peterson, 'The Genesis of Monastic Libraries', *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 45:3 (2010): 320–332. For a collection of essays which studies the continuation of monasticism with the classic *paideia* culture, see Lilian I. Larsen and Samuel Rubenson (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical 'Paideia'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

authority, for example.³⁰ What is more, as already mentioned, as Christianity grew and developed, it became clear that its language was very much built around the idea of the book, Gospel and letters. The book was a metaphor as much as a physical object, providing its owner protection and legitimacy as well as being an object at the centre of performed religion.

In 1 Corinthians 2:13–14 Paul makes a distinction between human knowledge and divine wisdom, ‘words not taught by human wisdom’ (οὐκ ἐν διδακτοῦς ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας λόγοις).³¹ The ability to communicate with the divine without words had been lost when Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, and it was necessary to reinstate it. This was achieved through reading or hearing Scripture, divine wisdom in printed form.³² Today, most scholars would agree that silent reading did occur in antiquity, but that the norm would have been to read aloud.³³ The persistent arguments claiming the impossibility of silent reading³⁴ are perhaps a legacy of form criticism, an influential scholarly perspective in Bible Studies that viewed the earliest Christians as uninterested in the written word. The first Christian texts have been portrayed as being of a low level of literacy compared to Graeco-Roman literature, a result of the humble beginnings of the Jesus movement. This introduced a dichotomy between artless Christian literature (Kleinliterature) and advanced Graeco-Roman literature (Hochliterature). But as

³⁰ Markschiefs, ‘What Ancient Christian Manuscripts Reveal’, 212.

³¹ If nothing else is indicated, all the translations of Bible texts (including the Hebrew Bible) that are referenced in this book come from The New Revised Standard Version, ed. and trans. Bruce M. Metzger et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

³² For a study of early Christian attitudes towards the spoken and heard word, see Carol Harrison, *The Art of Listening in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³³ A. K. Gavrilov, ‘Techniques of Reading in Classical Antiquity’, *Classical Quarterly* 47:1 (1997): 56–73; William A. Johnson, ‘Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity’, *The American Journal of Philology* 121:4 (2000): 593–627; Keith, *The Gospel as Manuscripts*, 18–23.

³⁴ Josef Balogh, ‘*Voces Paginarum*: Beiträge Zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreibens’, *Philologus* 82 (1927): 84–109.

studies into Christian book culture advance, this division becomes ever more problematic, assuming and placing the early literate Christians in an unreasonable opposition to their cultural context.³⁵

In a recent study, Chris Keith has expressed concern for what he argues is an overvaluation of the importance of the spoken word and oral tradition, leading to the view that texts were less important than the spoken word for early Christians.³⁶ And it is true that some contemporary scholars still treat early Christian scribal practice as unimportant for understanding the development of early Christianity.³⁷ Kim Haines-Eitzen and many others have shown the error of such analyses but, considering the recent surge in scholastic interest in material culture and the way scribal practices determine the transmission of early Christian texts – which are the main sources for our understanding of early Christian history – there is no immediate danger that materiality is being neglected or the scribe's contribution to early Christian history disregarded.³⁸

³⁵ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 16.

³⁶ Keith, *The Gospel as Manuscript*, 5–7. Keith acknowledges that some ancient people themselves portrayed the written word as less valuable, and favoured the spoken word. This has trickled down to inform the modern scholarly overemphasis of the spoken word. Considering the ease with which texts lend themselves to manipulation and outright forgery, a healthy dose of mistrust is to be expected, even from ancients who lacked our modern training in text criticism. The ancient literary style of writing in other people's names was widespread; consider the century-long debate concerning who *actually* wrote the Gospels. It was not considered an aberration to – in the name of a good cause – exaggerate or miscredit your opponents or boost the merits of your own arguments. This is common in the ancient heresiological genre, on both sides of what today is sometimes called proto-orthodoxy. Thus, if one were really interested in knowing what Jesus said or in getting details about some other historical event, perhaps it is not so strange that early Christians favoured the spoken word, that they wanted to look people in the eye and get the news from the horse's mouth. This being said, this does not mean that ancients did not see value in the written word.

³⁷ For example, Robin Lane Fox, 'Literacy and Power in Early Christianity', in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. A. K. Bowman and G. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 131.

³⁸ Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters*.

From one perspective, the primacy of the written word over the spoken word and ‘performed’ religion means that it has been anything but undervalued since the Reformation onward. The importance of the Christian canon has formed the way the phenomenon ‘religion’ itself has been conceptualised; not only has it determined our understanding of religions in cultures differing from our own, but it has also influenced the way we look at ancient culture in general; the latter must be viewed as just as exotic as, for example, cultures in the East, which generated considerable interest and excitement as they were discovered by scholars of religion.³⁹

Nevertheless, it is highly likely that the very first Christians (many of whom had been Jews) did not produce texts. In light of this and the estimated statistics on ancient literacy, the first Christians (Jesus and his immediate followers) were probably illiterate or, as some scholars have suggested, perhaps just uninterested in recording anything in writing due to the conviction that the world would soon come to an end with Jesus’ return.⁴⁰ As the first letters and Gospels were put to paper, the writers showed little awareness or interest in the finer points of rhetorical strategy popular among the literate elite of the time. How the particular literary features of the Gospels – and also, to some extent, the letters of Paul – related to their intellectual milieu is an ever-debated topic.⁴¹ In any case, the lack of rhetorical ‘finesse’ in Scripture was

³⁹ As Gregory Schopen has argued of Buddhism, early religious scholars’ presuppositions about what is important in religion (governed by their Protestant context) determined much of their studies as well as their results, highlighting the search and study of text while neglecting archaeological sources and religious practice. Gregory Schopen, ‘Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism’, *History of Religions* 31:1 (1991): 1–23.

⁴⁰ Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1971 [1934]), 1; see also Johan Nilsson, ‘As a Fire beneath the Ashes: The Quest for Chinese Wisdom within Occultism, 1850–1949’ (PhD diss., Lund University, 2020).

⁴¹ Was it the new forms of *bios* writings? Or was the style of rhetoric a reflection that the intended audience was not the higher spheres of society? Answers to these questions have little consensus in scholarship.

addressed by later Christian writers, many of whom *did* belong to the literate elite. Some tried to turn the modest origins of Scripture into a strength, like Origen of Alexandria, who wrote in the third century that the 'pure' style of writing in the Bible was a positive quality in that it meant it lacked the manipulating tendencies of rhetoric and sophistry.⁴² Other early Christians simply rejected the heritage of ancient *paideia* by categorising Graeco-Roman traditions as unsound or uninteresting.⁴³ Yet the dependence of early Christian authors on *paideia*, producing works that could be viewed as its continuation, has been the topic of many fine recent studies.⁴⁴ The early Christians singled themselves out in antique literacy not only because few other religious groups produced sacred texts as they did, but also because what they wrote (Gospels, for example) – and perhaps more importantly, to whom they wrote (*everyone*) – did not follow expected patterns. It is perhaps as a result of these circumstances that it is among Christians that the revolution in book culture – the introduction of the codex – would first take place.

Compared to the roll, the codex was more efficient, easier to carry, less fragile and cheaper. It was better in almost every way.⁴⁵ According to estimates produced by Roberts and Skeat, the codex accounted for only 1 per cent of books in the first century, 2 per cent in the second century, 17 in the third, 70 in the fourth and finally

⁴² Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.62.

⁴³ See, for example, Epiphanius *Panarion* I.3–8 for an overview of the errors of pagan learning. However, it is hard to imagine even the most ardent opponent of Graeco-Roman learning being unaffected by it, especially considering the heritage of the educational system as well as the fact that the system had been structured to suit the needs of the Roman ruling elites for centuries before Christianity emerged. For more on this, see Brown, *Power and Persuasion*.

⁴⁴ For example, Lilian and Rubenson (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity*.

⁴⁵ It could be held in one hand, it was easier to open, close and reopen, it was more convenient to store, a greater number of words could be fitted on expensive papyrus/parchment since one wrote on both sides of a codex leaf. A codex could hold much more text without becoming impractical.

89 per cent in the fifth.⁴⁶ As noted, it has been suggested that it was the unique nature of Christian literacy that facilitated the revolution in book making in the second to fifth centuries. Christian texts were not just read aloud from start to finish, they were studied, scrutinised and dissected in ways that made the roll obsolete and impractical. Harry Gamble has argued that it was the popularity of Paul's letters that made the need for a new method of keeping and handling texts acute.⁴⁷ Paul's writings were not attached to an oral tradition in the same way as the gospel texts, but were sent as letters. They gained authority quickly, and were copied, imitated and widely circulated in the Christian communities around the Mediterranean. They were most likely the first Christian texts to be kept in a collection,⁴⁸ while the first known prototypes of the Bible, like Marcion's, displayed Paul's letters at the fore.⁴⁹ They would, however, have been too voluminous to be kept in a single roll; moreover, they were not written in a narrative form meant to be read from beginning to end, as were the Gospels. A codex would have enabled readers to flip between Paul's letters at leisure, comparing the different content and more easily accessing the particular topic of interest. They were cause for study and discussion, and quickly gained almost universal recognition among Christians as

⁴⁶ Colin H. Roberts and Theodore C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 36–37. Nongbri has argued for an even higher percentage (*Gods Library*, 19–22).

⁴⁷ Other reasons have also been suggested. For example, Roberts postulated that it was an accident that the first Gospels were written in codex form but that the sacredness of the text was transferred to the codex medium, which is the reason why Christians favoured the codex to such an extent. There is not much, in my opinion, that supports such a stance. Colin H. Roberts, 'The Codex', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 40 (1954): 169–204.

⁴⁸ P46 is the earliest manuscript containing Paul's letters, dated to around the year 200. See Harry Y. Gamble, 'The Pauline Corpus and the Early Christian Book', in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, ed. William S. Babcock (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990), 265–280.

⁴⁹ Dieter T. Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

authoritative.⁵⁰ In Chapter 3 I extend our understanding of the early codex's development by looking more closely at one of the first multi-quire codices we possess: Codex I of the Nag Hammadi collection.

The work of Larry Hurtado and Roger Bagnall has done much over the last two decades to add further perspectives to early Christian book culture, chiefly through new socioeconomical and scribal approaches.⁵¹ Hurtado drew attention to, among other things, the visual characters of Christian manuscripts: abbreviations, corrections, writing style, reading aids. Hurtado has argued convincingly that these aspects contain a great deal of information about who produced a text and how it was read. As recent studies have shown, there are indications even in rabbinic literature – the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud – that there were rules or guidelines when copying Scripture, parameters a scribe should follow relating to layout.⁵²

Bagnall drew attention to everyday perspectives, to the economic and social resources that supported the production of different codices, which offer vital facts when seeking insights into the context of the people behind a particular text. Much of his work – as well as that of others like Gamble, Roberts and Haines-Eitzen – rests on the dynamic contribution made by Eric Turner, chiefly

⁵⁰ Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 58–66.

⁵¹ Larry Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); Roger Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). As Nongbri notes (*God's Library*, 12–13), Hurtado's work has the drawback that it divides early Christian literature into New Testament, Old Testament and Other Early Christian texts, a system that does not reflect the actual content of early Christian books, where one can find a mixture of these categories as well as non-Christian texts.

⁵² For example, scribes were taught to start certain sentences on a new line, sentences like 'In the beginning . . .' (Gen 1:1) or 'How fair' (Num 24:5), and to take into account the aesthetic quality of certain letters or the use of spaces when planning the copying of a text. For more on these aspects, see Javier Del Barco, 'From Scroll to Codex: Dynamics of Text Layout Transformation in the Hebrew Bible', in *From Scrolls to Scrolling*, ed. Bradford A. Anderson (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 91–118.

with his seminal volume *The Typology of the Early Codex*.⁵³ Turner did what had not been done before; he compared and systematised a large number of actual antique manuscripts and their material features, such as dimensions and manufacturing techniques.

Something that has changed considerably since Turner's days is the evaluation of the palaeographical features of ancient texts. Before radiocarbon dating – and in some cases after it – a text's age was regarded as determinable by identifying its writing style. The form of print as well as aesthetic ideals were at times standardised.⁵⁴ Turner identified three main groups (during 0–300 CE) separated by different features, such as the number of pen strokes when a scribe wrote a letter, the direction the text leaned and the width and length of letters. The accuracy of this technique has been problematised, most recently by Brent Nongbri, who responded to a general appeal made by scholars like Bagnall and Hurtado to scrutinise the paleology of ancient writings, and then levelled severe critique at the viability of palaeographical methodology.⁵⁵ The degree of uncertainty in this subjective method is very high, leaving palaeography virtually unsustainable as a basis from which to draw conclusions regarding a text's age – or any detailed provenance, for that matter.

Radiocarbon dating, a technique which, by identifying a papyrus' or ink's carbon offprint, gives an estimate spanning two dates, has also resulted in inexact dating of texts.⁵⁶ If a text is radiocarbon dated to 200–400, it is just as likely that the tested material derived from the year 200 as the year 400, and all the dates between. Owing to the tendency to find older texts more interesting ('older is better'

⁵³ Eric G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977). See also Eric G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World*, 2nd edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987 [1971]).

⁵⁴ Ruth Barbour, *Greek Literary Hands AD 400–600* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); C. H. Roberts, *Greek Literary Hands 350 BC–AD 400* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956); and Turner, *Greek Manuscripts*.

⁵⁵ Nongbri, *God's Library*, 56–72.

⁵⁶ Nongbri, *God's Library*, 72–80.

or, rather, ‘older equals more “original”’) there has been a trend in favouring the earliest date when presenting a find or, in an attempt to be unbiased, to give the intermediate date. Both these ways of rendering the results of radiocarbon dating are erroneous, since one cannot say where in the span a text originates. This, and the fact that one cannot be sure when a codex was made – whether the material used for a text actually comes from the same period as the manufacture of the book, or if it is older – makes the ‘dating game’, as Nongbri has called it, a very precarious business.⁵⁷

After this short overview of the materiality of early Christian texts – which situates the following study of the Nag Hammadi codices in an ever-growing field of research – let us now scrutinise some specific methodological trends which have developed in relation to the Nag Hammadi texts.

Hypothetical Origins and New Philology

A recent trend in historical studies of antiquity is the so-called New Philological perspective.⁵⁸ As discussed briefly above, I subscribe to the approach that treats each ancient manuscript as the unique specimen it is. At the outset of any study on ancient texts one needs to detach oneself from modern preconceptions of what actually constitutes an author and a literary work. Contemporary views are much informed by the changes that took place in European book production with the invention of the printing

⁵⁷ See an excellent discussion of these issues in Nongbri, *God’s Library*, 47–82.

⁵⁸ Also sometimes termed ‘Material Philology’. A pioneering work for this new perspective was Stephen G. Nichols, ‘The New Philology: Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture’, *Speculum* 65:1 (1990): 1–10. For an overview of the development of the field, see Hugo Lundhaug and Liv Ingeborg Lied, ‘Studying Snapshots: On Manuscript Culture, Textual Fluidity, and New Philology’, in *Snapshots of Evolving Traditions: Jewish and Christian Manuscript Culture, Textual Fluidity, and New Philology*, ed. Liv Ingeborg Lied and Hugo Lundhaug (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 1–19; Lundhaug, ‘Material Philology’, 108–110.

press. No ancient manuscript is exactly like another. Each text had to be copied by hand, editorial changes and additions were common and the idea of an author being intimately tied to an 'original' was not self-evident at all. In fact, when copying a text in antiquity, if the situation called for it, transcribers did not shy away from changing, adding to or breaking away from a *Vorlage*. The ending of the Gospel of Mark, the attributions of the Gospels and the pseudo-Pauline letters are perhaps the most known examples of ancient views of what was allowed to be done with a literary work or what an 'author' really was.

New Philology is an important perspective that foregrounds the distinctions between modern and ancient views on the written word. It also calls for historical studies to be substantiated in the ancient material, that is, in actual manuscripts. One cannot, without serious caveats, draw conclusions about events in a certain period solely based on material that derives from a much later period, and studies of the earliest *Christianities* have to take this into consideration. Those texts we possess – whether the Nag Hammadi texts, the Pauline letters, the Gospels or almost any other early Christian writing – have been exposed to copying, re-copying, editing, translation and sometimes re-translation, often all of these. This is a methodological problem that constrains most historical studies of antiquity. Not only did ancient manuscripts undergo an editorial process which is often impossible to describe exactly, but the fluidity of ancient texts is not always clear from the texts that we do possess. Texts were produced for particular purposes, often to be read aloud (in liturgical situations, for example), or for study, reference and the like, which is why the shift signalled by *New Philology* focuses on the performance, reading and handling of texts, rather than the intention of an original author and the context of a hypothetical original version.

It is indisputable that many early studies devoted to the Nag Hammadi collection focused on ascertaining details about the texts' 'original' context, and not the Coptic versions that are actually

preserved. In a recent study of early Christian and Jewish texts (including the Nag Hammadi texts) from the perspective of New Philology, Hugo Lundhaug and Liv Ingeborg Lied observe, ‘A perspective informed by New Philology has several consequences when applied to the study of Christian and Jewish texts from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Rather than speculating regarding hypothetical original texts and their contexts, the emphasis is on the production, use, and historical context of each individual copy.’⁵⁹ These are laudable objectives. Moreover, Lundhaug has stated that Nag Hammadi scholarship should ‘focus primarily on the texts as we have them in the manuscripts, without trying to get back to an earlier form of the text’.⁶⁰ However, in this study the New Philology perspective is treated as one of many tools in the historian’s toolbox, not as the only or principal way forward. It is true, if a textual source is not preserved from the period we wish to study or if we lack direct textual evidence – surely the case in studies of many antique phenomena – we face a difficult methodological problem. But this does not have to entail abandoning claims to that context.

A purist approach to New Philology would demolish any larger picture of history. Most history books would need to be rewritten or, rather, expunged.⁶¹ Thus, I approach New Philology as *one* perspective that brings another important piece to a larger puzzle, one that makes the important point that we need to cease equating textual fluidity with textual corruption. Rather than viewing textual fluidity as a deviation from an original, the changes and alterations

⁵⁹ Lundhaug and Lied, ‘Studying Snapshots’, 7.

⁶⁰ Lundhaug, ‘An Illusion of Textual Stability’.

⁶¹ The manuscripts we have that are attributed to Plato and Aristotle are much more problematic than those that contain biblical books. The ancient manuscripts of Plato’s writings are almost all from the common era, i.e., 300 years after Plato. T. W. Allen, *Codex Oxoniensis Clarkianus*, 2 vols. (Leiden: 1898–1899); John Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997); Aristotle’s works are even more problematic, surviving mostly through medieval manuscript transmission. Felix Grayeff, ‘The Problem of the Genesis of Aristotle’s Text’, *Phronesis* 1:2 (1956): 105–122.

we observe in texts should be regarded as predictable and organic reactions to new contexts and uses. We should treat them as the norm rather than as anomalies.⁶² In this study I demonstrate that recognising and using material aspects of ancient manuscripts *can* serve more than one master. Looking more closely at the material aspects of the Nag Hammadi texts offers clues as to their background *before* they took their present form, as well as – admittedly, perhaps chiefly – casting light on the context of their manufacture and use in fourth-century Egypt.

As recent studies have shown, following a text's many changes and variants is a vital part of attaining a more complete picture of texts as 'living' things, in contrast to the older paradigms wherein ancient texts are treated as more or less corrupt versions of idealised originals.⁶³ This perspective is of particular importance in Chapter 7 of this study, where I discuss those Nag Hammadi texts that have been preserved in more than one version. That being said, most of the texts in the Nag Hammadi collection – probably because they have been branded as heretical – do not offer an opportunity to approach the 'lived' perspective which has become so acclaimed among Bible scholars. In the case of the Nag Hammadi texts, we can very seldom – as Wasserman and Knust recently and so successfully achieved with regard to John 7:53–8:11 – compare a multitude of different versions, over many centuries, in order to track the changes in the living history of a text (not to mention a single *passage* of a specific text).⁶⁴ This study is devoted to those texts that did *not* end up as Scripture. So, how should we treat the neglected textual history of writings that have been branded

⁶² Lundhaug, 'An Illusion of Textual Stability', 20. Lundhaug is influenced by, among others, John Bryant, 'Witness and Access: The Uses of the Fluid Text', *Textual Cultures* 2:1 (2007): 18–19.

⁶³ Discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

⁶⁴ Tommy Wasserman and Jennifer Knust, *To Cast the First Stone: The Transmission of a Gospel Story* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

heretical? This is what the present study is dedicated to: the material history of texts that became irrelevant, or worse, banned or destroyed because of their content.

The Nag Hammadi Codices as the Heretics' Bible

The search for 'pure' origins goes far beyond the focus on texts. As we have seen, eighteenth-century Christian theologians were engaged with interpreting the earliest Christian writings in order to define once and for all the 'essence' of Christianity, what made it stand out in comparison to other ancient religions. Below, I briefly problematise this approach and argue that similar motives – which cannot be identified as anything other than sheer apologetics – have played a part in more recent and less convincing scholarship on the Nag Hammadi texts.

Many early studies of the texts were polluted by the negative connotations attached to the term Gnosticism. The problem goes all the way back to the Church Fathers' polemical portrayals of an imagined collective enemy identified as 'the Gnostics', a paradigm which has too often been applied uncritically.⁶⁵ Influential theologians like Adolf von Harnack have portrayed 'the Gnostics' as people who were prone to mythologising and distorting, lured in by syncretistic 'Hellenism';⁶⁶ however, after 1945, when the Nag Hammadi writings were discovered, the scholarship on Gnosticism began to change. Many of the texts in the collection actually fit some of the specific patterns that the Church Fathers rejected, but the

⁶⁵ Irenaeus of Lyon disputed those who claimed possession of a certain knowledge (*gnosis*) which Irenaeus viewed as a 'knowledge falsely so called' (probably citing 1 Tim 6:20–21). For a history of the use of the term, see King, *What Is Gnosticism?*

⁶⁶ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma I*, trans. Neil Buchman (New York: Dover Publishing, 1961 [1886–1889]); King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 55–70; Linjamaa, 'Gnosticism as Inherently Syncretistic?.'

extent to which patristic polemics had influenced the definition of the category, producing stereotypes, also became clear, as demonstrated by Michael A. Williams.⁶⁷ Owing to Williams' work, and that of many others following in his footsteps, scholars examining the Nag Hammadi texts today have largely ceased using the term Gnosticism, arguing that it is just too laden with ambiguity and apologia to be applied in an effective and neutral way. I sympathise with Williams' view that we should simply relinquish the term as a category in early Christian studies, including studies of the Nag Hammadi texts;⁶⁸ not all agree, however. Alexandr Khosroyev, for example, has argued that the Nag Hammadi texts would not have interested 'mainstream' Christians because they were 'Gnostic', that is, too strange and 'syncretistic'.⁶⁹ Yet this forced dichotomy of Christian/Gnostic, pure/syncretistic does not reflect historical actuality,⁷⁰ leaving us still struggling with the influence of the old

⁶⁷ Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). See also Morton Smith, 'The History of the term Gnostikos', in *Sethian Gnosticism*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 796–807.

⁶⁸ A recent trend among some scholars is to narrow down the use of the terms 'Gnostic' and 'Gnosticism' to refer to the Sethian material, beginning with those Irenaeus first called 'multitude of Gnostics' at the end of Book I of *Against Heresies* (chapters 29–31). See *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 2nd edn, ed. Bentley Layton and David Brakke (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021); David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Tuomas Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Rethinking Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). I simply use the term 'Sethian' when referring to this category to avoid confusion. But, as Rasimus has shown, the Sethian category is not unproblematic and most likely includes several different groups and myths. For example, the creation story of the Ophite traditions was most likely foundational for what we today call Sethianism. Nevertheless, I wonder if this category becomes clearer if we instead call it Gnostic, which brings with it many other preconceived notions.

⁶⁹ Khosroyev, *Die Bibliothek von Nag Hammadi*, 10–13.

⁷⁰ I have previously reasoned that the term 'syncretism' is a poor analytic concept in historical studies on religion (unless the category is clearly defined). See Linjamaa, 'Gnosticism as Inherently Syncretistic?'

apologetic paradigms depicting Gnostics in generalising and often negative terms.⁷¹

On the other hand, scholars in their eagerness to approach the ancient material without the preconceptions attached to the term 'Gnosticism' have ignored or denied the existence of certain phenomena in their interpretations of the texts' background, leading to other problems. One example, which I have studied in detail in previous works, concerns Christian determinism,⁷² when a number of Church Fathers accused their so-called Gnostic opponents of immoral behaviour resulting from their deterministic convictions. Michael Williams dismissed this as a polemical device that had been generalised and showed that many of the so-called Gnostic texts did not contain a deterministic world view at all. His critique of determinism as a polemical trope has since been interpreted as support for the notion that Christian determinism was an outright invention, that it never existed. Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, for example, has stated that the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts has revealed 'for example, that determinism, in spite of the heresiologists, did not characterise Gnostic anthropology'.⁷³ But, do we really know that? Or is it just another generalisation, this time attached to rejection of the term Gnosticism? As I have shown, there were clear and vibrant representations of early Christian determinism from the second century, some of which found their way into the Nag

⁷¹ For another recent example, see Panayotis Coutsoumpos, 'The Strong/Gnosis: Paul, and the Corinthian Community', in *Paul and Gnosis*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and David I. Yoon (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 195. Here the ethics of so-called 'Gnostics' (what is meant by that is not explained) are portrayed as prone to either renouncing the world or libertine behaviour.

⁷² Paul Linjamaa, *The Ethics of The Tripartite Tractate (NHC I,5): A Study of Early Christian Determinism and Philosophy of Ethics* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

⁷³ Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, 'A Way of Salvation: Becoming Like God in Nag Hammadi', *Numen* 60:1 (2013): 72–73. This has been repeated by Nicola Denzey Lewis in regard to the Valentinians. She writes that there is 'no substance to Irenaeus's claim' that Valentinians were determinists, but that 'it is merely a standard critique of an opponent's theological position applied, mutatis mutandis, to the Valentinians' (*Cosmology and Fate*, 27).

Hammadi codices.⁷⁴ We should, therefore, be careful not to reject certain phenomena completely merely because they have been attached to polemical discourses and, as such, have been erroneously represented.

If some scholars have approached the Nag Hammadi texts from the perspective of notions we find among nineteenth-century heresiologists and Christian theologians – people who regarded ‘real’ Christianity as a pure and unmitigated religious phenomenon separate from ‘Gnosticism’ – some contemporary scholars have supported a similar notion, while taking their departure in and ‘siding with’ Gnosticism. In the Nag Hammadi codices, such scholars have argued, we find the voices the Church managed to silence. Gnosticism is represented as a suppressed religion that once thrived but now lives on only at the fringes and among religious minorities, in mysticism and occult circles naturally drawn to the forbidden and dangerous. This view of Gnosticism, with its origins in nineteenth-century European esoteric milieux, was revitalised in academia in the wake of the Nag Hammadi discoveries.⁷⁵ The esoteric and occult milieux of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be viewed as apologetic forebears of Gnosticism in which the idea was widespread that Gnosticism represented what can be termed ‘the ancient wisdom narrative’. This paradigm – identified and employed by, among others, Wouter Haanegraaf⁷⁶ – has been part of Western esotericism since the Renaissance and involves the notion that a universal spirituality has always been present behind the scenes: a hidden tradition that has been conserved in esoteric circles in the face of conventionality. I have previously argued that

⁷⁴ Linjamaa, *The Ethics of The Tripartite Tractate*, passim.

⁷⁵ Paul Linjamaa, ‘The Reception of *Pistis Sophia* and Gnosticism: Uncovering the Link between Esoteric Milieus and Contemporary Academia’, *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 22:1 (2022): 1–39.

⁷⁶ Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

this way of viewing Gnosticism, as part of a prevailing ancient wisdom tradition, is still current in academia.⁷⁷ Rather than being a simple polemic invention, Gnosticism has been treated, particularly since the seventies when the Nag Hammadi texts began appearing in translation, as a suppressed and progressive form of early Christianity which was marginalised by the mainstream patriarchal Church – a view of Gnosticism that is as ideologically driven as rejecting it as a form of vulgar Christianity. Yet it is a view that has been used to promote contemporary egalitarian and modern gender discourses by depicting ancient Gnostics as pioneers fighting for universal ideals only recently realised in our Western societies, such as gender equality, female leadership and progressive views of sex.⁷⁸

This study does not take its departure from the Gnosticism–Christianity dichotomy – rejecting both the narrative of a pure and authentic Church under attack by syncretistic and bizarre heretics and that of an evil Church suppressing a progressive form of Christianity that, incidentally, upheld ‘universal’ ideals like those in our own liberal societies. In my mind neither paradigm has any convincing basis in firsthand sources and both are chiefly ideological constructions. Thus, in the following I will not treat Christian texts that were later branded heretical or Christian texts that were controversial on account of their theological positionings as anything less or other than Christian. In the next chapter we will return to some examples of how the ideological constructions surrounding the concept of Gnosticism is potentially misleading scholars of early Christianity and in particular those focused in the Nag Hammadi texts.

⁷⁷ Linjamaa, ‘The Reception of *Pistis Sophia*’.

⁷⁸ With this ‘counter-cultural’ perspective of Gnosticism, one is liable to overlook those people, ancient as well as modern, who identified as Gnostics but who did not fit the counter-cultural mould, such as Clement of Alexandria in antiquity (a Church Father who considered himself a Gnostic) or Bricaud’s *Église Gnostique Universelle*.

Conclusion

The chief implications of the above deliberations, which have a bearing on the following study, are threefold. Firstly, judging from studies in ancient literacy, the Nag Hammadi texts must be considered as having been produced by and for the direct use of a small educated societal minority, which does not, of course, exclude the possibility of their being part of a larger context to which an illiterate majority also had access. Secondly, this chapter has identified various obstructive paradigms and ideological frames that threaten to obscure study of the Nag Hammadi texts. I am convinced that the murky term 'Gnosticism', as an analytic category, does more harm than good in studies of antique religion – reasons for which have been give above – and thus it will not be used in this study. That being said, aspiring to impartiality, I strive neither to neglect actual differences and particularities attached to individual texts nor to disregard conclusions that could go beyond the texts' immediate context. Thus, I am not bound only to New Philology. Lastly, the fact that the texts contain extracanonical material which was banned in the second half of the fourth century does not mean that they could not have been read by orthodox Christians before and after the ban. But neither can their attachment to heresy simply be ignored. A study of the Nag Hammadi texts' history should be informed by negotiations over orthodoxy and the dynamics of Christian identity constructions.

As was made clear at the beginning of this chapter, the changes taking place in religion and the view of the self in antiquity were intimately tied to the developments in book culture. Thus, what follows not only casts light on the Nag Hammadi codices' specific context(s) but also contributes to the larger discourse pertaining to the development of religion and self in antiquity by scrutinising one of our most important and voluminous textual finds from the period. The next chapter lays the final foundation stone for the rest of the study by revisiting the story attached to the Nag Hammadi discovery.