NAG HAMMADI CODEX I

The Jung Codex

A Critical Introduction and Textual Commentary

Introductions, the Textual Situation, and Analytical Commentary to the Five Tractates

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Prolegomena to a New English Translation

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Preface

This volume is the critical apparatus for a new English translation of Nag Hammadi Codex I—the introductions, the description of the manuscript and its problems, the text-critical notes, and an analytical commentary on the contents of each of the five tractates. It is offered as the necessary first stage of a responsible translation, and it is deliberately candid about a constraint that governs the whole project.

The works of Codex I survive in a single Coptic manuscript, written in a difficult dialect (Lycopolitan), physically damaged, and translated in antiquity from Greek originals that are now lost. There is no public-domain English translation of these texts; every existing version is a modern, copyrighted work of scholarship resting on the editors' own reconstruction of the damaged Coptic. A faithful critical translation—one a scholar could cite—must therefore be made from the Coptic text itself, with every lacuna and editorial restoration marked. For that reason this volume provides the full scholarly framework and contents-analysis now, and the running translation will be produced from the Coptic, tractate by tractate, as set out in the final chapter. What follows neither paraphrases nor reproduces any copyrighted translation; the analyses are stated independently.

General Introduction: The Codex and Its Texts

The Jung Codex

Codex I is the first of the thirteen books recovered near Nag Hammadi in 1945. The greater part of its leaves was acquired in 1952 for the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich—whence the name “Jung Codex”—while the remaining folios stayed with the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo; the manuscript was effectively reunited only in scholarship. Its editio princeps appeared in installments between 1956 and 1975, and the standard critical edition is Harold W. Attridge (ed.), Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex): Introductions, Texts, Translations, Indices, Nag Hammadi Studies 22–23 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), which prints the Coptic with English translation, introductions, and a full apparatus. Any new translation works in dialogue with that edition.

Scribes, order, and dialect

The codex contains five tractates, copied by more than one scribal hand, in the Coptic dialect now called Lycopolitan (older designation Subakhmimic; siglum L6 or L-NagH), with admixtures of Sahidic; the Tripartite Tractate in particular displays distinctive sub-dialectal features that have figured in the debate over how many scribes worked on the codex. The five pieces stand in the order: the Prayer of the Apostle Paul (added last, on the front flyleaf), the Secret Book of James, the Gospel of Truth, the Treatise on the Resurrection, and the Tripartite Tractate.

Greek originals, Coptic copy, and the dates

All five tractates are translations from lost Greek originals—the point is put beyond doubt by the Prayer of the Apostle Paul, whose title is written in Greek letters. The compositions themselves are products of the second and third centuries; the Coptic codex that preserves them was copied about the middle of the fourth century. A translation must therefore reckon with two languages at one remove: an English rendering of a Coptic rendering of a Greek text no longer extant, with only occasional external checks (patristic citation, or a second Coptic copy) on what the Greek said.

Lacunae and the problem of restoration

Because the texts survive in a single, damaged manuscript, gaps are pervasive, and a substantial part of the printed text of the longer works—above all the Tripartite Tractate—consists of editorial restoration of broken passages. This is decisive for translation: at many points what is being rendered is itself a modern scholarly conjecture, and an honest translation must signal where the manuscript is intact, where it is restored, and where it is simply lost. Only the Gospel of Truth has a second witness (a fragmentary copy in Codex XII,2), permitting genuine textual comparison; elsewhere the single manuscript is the only control.

Provenance

On the origin of the collection, James M. Robinson’s influential hypothesis—that the codices belonged to a Pachomian monastic milieu and were buried after Athanasius’s Festal Letter of 367 condemned non-canonical books—has been developed by Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott (2015) and others. It remains debated, but it frames Codex I as a book read, and perhaps uneasily treasured, within fourth-century Egyptian Christian monasticism.

I,1 — The Prayer of the Apostle Paul

Introduction

The shortest piece in the codex is a brief liturgical prayer pseudonymously placed in the mouth of the apostle Paul. Its idiom is Valentinian: it addresses the Father through Christ the Beloved and petitions for redemption, illumination, and the gift of saving knowledge. The pseudonymous ascription lends apostolic authority to a prayer that is at home in second- or third-century Gnostic devotion.

Textual situation and witnesses

The prayer is written on the inner front flyleaf of the codex and was evidently added after the longer tractates had been copied—a fly-leaf filler in the same book. Its title is given in Greek, confirming the Greek origin of the text. The opening is damaged: roughly the first two lines are lost. It survives only here (NHC I,1).

Textual-critical notes

Three things bear on a translation. (a) The initial lacuna must be marked, not silently filled. (b) The vocabulary is technical Valentinian liturgical language—redemption (apolytōsis), the “psychic” and “pneumatic,” the Father of light—and should be rendered consistently with the same terms elsewhere in the codex. (c) The prayer stands close in form to the Valentinian initiation and redemption prayers reported by Irenaeus (Adv. Haer. 1.21), a parallel that helps gauge the sense of damaged clauses.

Analytical synopsis

After the lost opening, the speaker invokes the Father (the “light” and source) and appeals through the Beloved, Christ; he petitions for healing of body and redemption of the enlightened soul, for the granting of what no angelic eye has seen and no archon’s ear has heard, and for the illumination of true knowledge; the prayer closes with a doxology and the Greek title.

Significance

One of the very few surviving Valentinian prayers, it is a rare direct window into Gnostic worship, as distinct from Gnostic myth or polemic, and a useful control on the liturgical language presupposed by the longer tractates.

I,2 — The Secret Book of James (Apocryphon of James)

Introduction

A revelation dialogue cast as a secret letter written by James, reporting a post-resurrection appearance in which the risen Jesus draws James and Peter aside and instructs them. Despite the Valentinian company it keeps in this codex, the tractate is not distinctively Valentinian; it reads as an independent composition, probably of the second or early third century, drawing on early sayings traditions. It survives only here (NHC I,2).

Textual situation and witnesses

A single copy. The epistolary frame at the beginning is damaged, and the name of the addressee of the letter is lost—one of the text's standing puzzles. The body is reasonably preserved, with scattered lacunae.

Textual-critical notes

The frame presents the work as a secret writing transmitted in Hebrew, a claim about its own authority that the translation should render without smoothing. Several of the sayings and parables stand close to Synoptic and to Thomasine material; whether the author drew on the canonical Gospels, on Thomas, or on independent tradition is disputed, and a translation should avoid harmonizing the wording toward the New Testament. The number "five hundred and fifty days" for the interval after the resurrection is a fixed datum of the text.

Analytical synopsis

James writes that, as the twelve sat recalling the Savior's words, the risen Jesus appeared, took James and Peter apart, and discoursed: on prophecy now fulfilled and ended; on the summons to be "filled" and to become better than (even) himself; on the necessity and blessedness of suffering and martyrdom; on loving the kingdom rather than the flesh and on not fearing death; a series of kingdom-parables follows; the two are granted a vision as the Savior ascends; James then sends the disciples out and reflects on who will be saved, closing the letter.

Significance

A hybrid of dialogue-gospel and epistle, it is important for the study of post-resurrection revelation literature, for its sayings-source questions, and for its striking call to surpass the apostles and attain fullness.

I,3 — The Gospel of Truth

Introduction

Not a narrative gospel but a homiletic meditation on the “gospel” understood as the joy of coming to know the Father. It is widely judged a Valentinian work, and many scholars, following Gilles Quispel, have proposed that it is the very Gospel of Truth that Irenaeus says the Valentinians used (Adv. Haer. 3.11.9)—and possibly a composition of Valentinus himself. It was written in Greek about the middle of the second century.

Textual situation and witnesses

The fuller copy is NHC I,3, in Lycopolitan. A second, badly fragmentary copy survives in Codex XII,2, in Sahidic; the two allow the rare luxury of comparing witnesses, though XII,2 is too damaged to settle most questions. The work bears no title in the manuscript: the modern name is taken from its opening words, which happen to match Irenaeus’s notice.

Textual-critical notes

The two-copy situation and the dialectal difference between I,3 and XII,2 are the principal text-critical asset and should be collated in any edition. The personified figures—Error (Planē), Oblivion, and the Father—carry Valentinian mythological weight and must be rendered as named powers, not abstractions, where the text intends. A number of passages are restored at the edges of the columns; these should be flagged. The relation between this homily and the developed Valentinian system (the Pleroma, the Name, the Son) is interpretively loaded and bears on lexical choices.

Analytical synopsis

The discourse opens by declaring the gospel of truth a joy to those who have received grace to know the Father through the Word. It narrates the rise of Error and the anguish and fog of ignorance that Error breeds; the coming of Jesus, who is nailed to a tree and so “publishes” the Father’s edict, becoming a fruit of knowledge; the book of the living, opened at the cross; the Father’s search for the one who has gone astray (the parable of the shepherd and the lost, and the imagery of the Name); and the return of the knowers to the Father as rest, fullness, and fragrance. The whole is meditative rather than argumentative.

Significance

A literary and spiritual high point of Valentinian Christianity, central to debates over Valentinus’s authorship and over whether “Gnosticism” is even a coherent category (so the critiques of Michael Williams and Karen King). For many readers it is the most accessible and moving of the Codex I texts.

I,4 — The Treatise on the Resurrection (Letter to Rheginos)

Introduction

A short didactic letter instructing a pupil named Rheginos on the resurrection. Its framework is Valentinian, but it argues in the common idiom of Hellenistic philosophical instruction and leans heavily on Paul. It was composed, probably late in the second century, in Greek.

Textual situation and witnesses

A single copy (NHC I,4), comparatively well preserved, with some lacunae. The modern alternative title, “Letter to Rheginos,” derives from the addressee named within.

Textual-critical notes

The genre is a philosophical letter or diatribe to a named student; the translation should preserve the second-person, pastoral register. The argument turns on technical anthropology (the human as flesh, soul, and spirit) and on a realized eschatology—the resurrection is a present, spiritual reality already possessed by the enlightened—so terms such as “resurrection,” “transformation,” and “the living” must be handled with care. The position stands in pointed relation to the error condemned in 2 Timothy 2:18 (that the resurrection is already past), and the author’s appeals to Paul should be rendered transparently to their sources.

Analytical synopsis

The writer states the problem of the resurrection and affirms that the Savior, by becoming flesh and conquering death, has secured it; he analyzes the human composite and argues that what rises is the inner, spiritual reality; the resurrection is defined as the disclosure of those who have (already) risen, a present possession to be lived out now rather than awaited; the letter exhorts Rheginos to regard himself as already risen and to flee divisions, and closes with greetings.

Significance

An early, philosophically sophisticated Christian-Gnostic treatment of the resurrection as realized eschatology, and a valuable witness to second-century use of Paul outside the emerging orthodox mainstream.

I,5 — The Tripartite Tractate

Introduction

The longest tractate in the codex and one of the longest works in the whole Nag Hammadi library: an anonymous, systematic theological treatise that lays out a distinctive—"monistic" or reformed—Valentinian system. It was composed in Greek, perhaps in the third century, and survives only here (NHC I,5). It is also the most difficult text in the codex, both linguistically and conceptually.

Textual situation and witnesses

A single copy, of great length, with significant lacunae at a number of points; a substantial amount of the printed text rests on editorial restoration. The work is untitled in the manuscript; the modern name reflects its evident division into three large sections. Its peculiar dialect and orthography have made it a focus of debate over the codex's scribes.

Textual-critical notes

Two features dominate. First, the heavily reconstructed state of the text means a translation must be unusually explicit about what is manuscript and what is restoration; long stretches cannot be rendered with confidence. Second, the theology is unusual: in place of the classic Valentinian myth, in which the female aeon Sophia falls, here a single masculine aeon—the Logos—oversteps his bound in a presumptuous reach toward the Father and so produces the deficient lower order; there is no thirty-aeon Pleroma scheme of the familiar kind, and the system is markedly more unitary. Whether this represents an Eastern Valentinian school, a later harmonizing or "churchly" revision answering catholic criticism, or an independent development is contested, and it shapes how key terms (Totalities, the Logos, the "economy," the three natures) should be translated.

Analytical synopsis (three parts)

Part I (protology): the Father is utterly transcendent, single, and incomprehensible; from him proceed the Son and the Church and the "Totalities" (the aeons); the youngest aeon, the Logos, in a presumptuous act reaches beyond what is granted and falls into deficiency, generating a divided lower realm of "likeness" and the powers that rule it. Part II (anthropogony and cosmogony): the ordering of the lower world under the demiurgic powers; the creation of humanity; and the doctrine of three human natures or races—spiritual, psychic, and material—determined by their response to revelation. Part III (soteriology and eschatology): the descent of the Savior; the calling of the natures and their differing responses; and the final restoration (apokatastasis)—in this system the psychic, and not only the spiritual, can be saved—culminating in the return of the redeemed into the Pleroma.

Significance

The most complete surviving Valentinian "summa," indispensable for reconstructing developed Valentinian theology. Its monistic revision of the myth and its comparatively inclusive soteriology (salvation extended to the psychic class) make it a key witness to how Valentinian thought adapted under pressure and over time.

Toward a New Translation: Method and Next Steps

With the framework above in place, a faithful translation can proceed from the Coptic text—ideally Attridge's critical edition, or a Coptic transcription you supply—rather than from memory of existing English versions. I propose the following apparatus conventions for each tractate, consistent with the John and 1 Enoch volumes:

- Lacunae and restorations marked explicitly—square brackets for editorial restoration of lost text, angle brackets for emendation, and ellipses for what cannot be recovered—so the reader always knows the state of the manuscript.
- Notes on the Coptic dialect (Lycopolitan) where it affects sense, and on the underlying Greek where it can be recovered from patristic citation (e.g., Irenaeus on the Gospel of Truth) or from the second copy.
- For the Gospel of Truth, collation of NHC I,3 against the fragmentary parallel in NHC XII,2.
- A consistent glossary of Valentinian technical terms (Pleroma, aeon, Totalities, apolytōsis/redemption, the Name, the three natures) applied uniformly across the five tractates.

A sensible order of work is to begin with the two short texts—the Prayer of the Apostle Paul and the Treatise on the Resurrection—then the Gospel of Truth (with its second witness), then the Secret Book of James, and finally the Tripartite Tractate, whose length and damaged state make it the most demanding. If you can provide the Coptic for a tractate (or point me to a transcription I may use), I will produce the translation and apparatus for it in this same book format.

Select Bibliography and Sources

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Online resources

The Gnostic Society Library, Nag Hammadi archive (codex index and texts). gnosis.org/naghamm

Claremont Coptic Encyclopedia (dialects; the Jung Codex). Claremont Coptic Encyclopedia

“The Nag Hammadi Codices and Gnostic Christianity.” biblicalarchaeology.org