Wielding Occam's Razor: Frederik Wisse's Scholarly Contributions

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When compiling this bibliography, two comments made by Dr. Frederik Wisse during my time at McGill University came to mind. The first occurred in a University chapel session when he pronounced that the task of New Testament studies had largely been completed. Needless to say this was a little unsettling for those of us in the midst of doctoral programs, just setting out on careers in the field. Is it really possible that centuries of intense scrutiny of the meager literary remains of earliest Christianity have yielded all they can?

... virtually the only evidence available to the historian for the first hundred years of the Christian church are later copies of literary texts, many of them anonymous or pseudonymous, with no hint of the date, place and historical circumstances of their original composition. By their very nature they are ill suited to furnish the historian with the kind of data which is necessary for historical reconstruction. . . Under such circumstances the historian may well decide that the evidence does not allow a critical historical reconstruction of the period, but the scholarly interest in Christian origins is too great to give up.\(^1\)

There is, to be sure, more to motivate than mere academic curiosity. Doctoral dissertations (original contributions to knowledge) need to be written, tenure committees pressure young scholars to produce, and publishers want to sell books. How does one make original and meaningful contributions to scholarship, when traveling the well-worn path that is New Testament and Early Christian studies?

The second comment was made in a less formal setting. During one of our many conversations in his office, Fred expressed appreciation for Umberto Eco's brilliant novel *Foucault's Pendulum*. In this story, the main characters—all scholars—engage in playful historical research reflecting far more interest in speculations about the Holy Grail,

Templar Knights, and Gnostics (!) than historiographical sophistication. As they did so, guided by their fascination with hermeticism and occultism, Drs. Belbo, Casaubon, and Diotallevi found relationships between dates, names, events, numbers, and texts and in the light of these not only studied history, but rewrote it. The result was a grand narrative, created out of random bits of information, coincidences, unbridled imaginations, and a healthy appreciation for the power of a good conspiracy theory. In Casaubon's words, "wanting connections, we found connections—always, everywhere, and between everything." For one of these scholars—Dr. Belbo—this careless approach to history proved disastrous.

It occurs to me now that both comments point to a recurring concern in Fred's academic writing. For many, the pressure is great to allow imagination and speculation more space in research than is warranted—wanting connections, finding connections—to the point where, like Causabon, they find themselves "lulled by feelings of resemblance: the notion that everything might be mysteriously related to everything else."3 But if the bulk of the work has been completed, and if the texts available are not suitable for historical inquiry, and if we are to be suspicious about elaborate historical hypotheses, how can we proceed? Borrowing from the canons of textual criticism, Fred has on occasion called scholars to consider the simplest solution, explicatio simplicior potior, or said differently, Occam's Razor.⁴ Though reasonable, "there is a powerful scholarly bias against it, and particularly in historical studies it is violated with impunity."5 As historians, the alternative is to find ourselves hanged, as it were like Belbo-on Foucault's Pendulum. These important warnings will be missed in the classroom.

I am pleased to be a part of this *Festschrift* and join with others in congratulating Fred on the occasion of his retirement. As part of this celebration, I have attempted to compile a reasonably full list of his work,⁶ organized under broad headings.⁷ We find here evidence of a full and productive academic career, one modeling methodological caution and historiographical integrity.

New Testament Textual Criticism

- "The International Greek New Testament Project: A Status Report." *JBL* 87: 187–97. With Ernest Cadman Colwell, Irving, Alan Sparks, and Paul R. McReynolds.
- 1970 "Family E and the Profile Method." *Bib* 51: 67–75. With Paul R. McReynolds.
- The Profile Method for the Classification and Evaluation of Manuscript Evidence as Applied to the Continuous Greek Text of the Gospel of Luke. SD 44. Edited by Irving Alan Sparks. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. This book was originally Dr. Wisse's Ph.D. dissertation, supervised by Ernest Cadman Colwell, entitled "The Claremont Profile Method for the Classification of Byzantine New Testament Manuscripts: A Study in Method" (Claremont Graduate School and University Center, 1968).
- "The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament." ARC 12: 22–28.
- "The Nature and Purpose of Redactional Changes in Early Christian Texts: The Canonical Gospels." Pages 39–53 in Gospel Traditions in the Second Century. Edited by William L. Petersen. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- "Textual Limits to Redactional Theory in the Pauline Corpus."
 Pages 167–78 in Gospel Origins and Christian Beginnings: In Honor of James M. Robinson. Forum Fascicles 1. Edited by J. E. Goehring et al. Sonoma: Polebridge.
- "The Coptic Versions of the New Testament." Pages 131-41 in The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis. A Volume in Honor of Bruce M. Metzger.
 SD 46. Edited by Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes.
 Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- "How Reliable is the Text of the Bible?" Pages 193–97 in The International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twentieth-First Century. Edited by William Reuben Farmer, Andre LaCocque, and Sean McEvenue. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press.

New Testament and Early Christianity; Historical Methodology

- "The Epistle of Jude in the History of Heresiology." Pages 133-43 in Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Alexander Böhlig.

 NHS 3. Edited by M. Krause. Leiden: Brill.
- 1972 "The Righteous Man and the Good Man in Romans 5:7." NTS 19: 91-93.
- "The Use of Early Christian Literature as Evidence for Inner Diversity and Conflict." Pages 177–90 in Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity. Edited by Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson. Also as pages 365–78 in Gnosticism in the Early Church. Studies in Early Christianity 5. Edited by D. M. Scholer. New York and London: Garland, 1993.
- 1987 Editorial Preface for ARC 15: 3-4.
- "Historical Method and the Johannine Community." *ARC* 20: 35–42.
- "Early Christian Literature and Natural Selection." *Grail* 11: 11–22.
- 2002 Preface for Jon M. Isaak's Situating the Letter to the Hebrews in Early Christian History. Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 53. Lewiston: Mellen.
- "The Origin of the Christian Species: Lessons from the Study of Natural History for the Reconstruction of the History of Earliest Christianity." Bulletin 63 (2003/04): 5–23. This paper was read as the presidential address at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies' Annual Meeting in May 2003 (Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia).
- 2006 "HETERODIDASKALIA: Accounting for Diverse Teaching in Early Christian Texts." Pages 275–89 in The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity and other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity. Studien zu den Jüdischen Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit 2. Edited by Ian Henderson and Gerbern S. Oegema. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

New Testament and Gnosticism

- 1981 "The 'Opponents' in the New Testament in Light of the Nag Hammadi Writings." Pages 99–120 in *Colloque International sur les textes de Nag Hammadi (Québec, 22–25 août 1978)*. Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi, Section "Études" 1. Edited by Bernard Barc. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval / Louvain: Éditions Peeters.
- "St. Paul and the Gnostics: Can There Be Progress in New Testament Studies?" ARC 10: 28-37.
- 1983 "Prolegomena to the Study of the New Testament and Gnosis." Pages 138–45 in *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honour of Robert McL. Wilson*. Edited by A. H. B. Logan and A. J. M. Wedderburn. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- "Indirect Textual Evidence for the History of Early Christianity and Gnosticism." Pages 215–30 in For the Children, Perfect Instruction: Studies in Honor of Hans-Martin Schenke on the Occasion of the Berliner Arbeitskreis für koptisch- gnostische Schriften's Thirtieth Year. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 54. Edited by Hans-Gebhard Bethge, Stephen Emmel, Karen L. King, and Imke Schletterer. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Gnosticism and The Nag Hammadi Library

- 1970 "The Redeemer Figure in the Paraphrase of Shem." NovT 12: 130-40. Also as pages 130-40 in Essays on the Coptic Gnostic Library. An off-print from NovT 12.2. Leiden: Brill, 1970.
- 1971 "The Nag Hammadi Library and the Heresiologists." VC 25: 205–23.
- 1974 Das Agypterevangelium von Nag Hammadi. Das Heilige Buch des Grossen Unsichtbaren Geistes. Translated, with Alexander Böhlig and Pahor Labib. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- "Nag Hammadi Codex III: Codicological Introduction." Pages 225–38 in Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts: In Honour of Pahor Labib. NHS 6. Edited by M. Krause. Leiden: Brill.

- "On Exegeting 'The Exegesis on the Soul.'" Pages 68–81 in Les textes de Nag Hammadi: Colloque du Centre d'Histoire des Religions (Strasburg, 23–25 octobre 1974). NHS 7. Edited by J.-É. Ménard. Leiden: Brill.
- 1975 "Die Sextus-Sprüche und das Problem der gnostischen Ethik."
 Pages 55–86 in Zum Hellenismus in den Schriften von Nag Hammadi.
 GOF VI-2. Edited by Frederik Wisse with Alexander Böhlig.
 Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- 1975 Nag Hammadi Codices III, 2 and IV, 2: The Gospel of the Egyptians (The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit). NHS 4. Edited, translated, and commentary, with Alexander Böhlig, in cooperation with Pahor Labib. Leiden, Brill / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- 1975 Zum Hellenismus in den Schriften von Nag Hammadi. Edited, with Alexander Böhlig. Göttinger Orientforschungen, VI. Reihe: Hellenistica, Band 2. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- "John, Apocryphon of." Pages 481–82 in Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume. Edited by Keith Crim et al. Nashville: Abingdon. Also as pages 899–900 in vol. 3 of ABD. Edited by David Noel Freedman, et al. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- 1978 "Gnosticism and Early Monasticism in Egypt." Pages 431–40 in Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas. Edited by Barbara Aland. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- "Language Mysticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts and in Early Coptic Monasticism." *Enchoria* 9: 101–20.
- 1979 Introduction, critical text, and translation of NHC VI, 4:
 The Concept of Our Great Power, with Francis E. Williams.
 Pages 291–323 in Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI with
 Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4. NHS 11. Edited by Douglas
 M. Parrott. Leiden: Brill.
- "Textual Restoration in 'On the Origin of The World' (CG II,5)."

 BASP 17: 87–91.
- "Stalking Those Elusive Sethians." Pages 563-76 in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, March 28-31, 1978*. Vol. 2: Sethian Gnosticism. SHR 41. Edited by Bentley Layton. Leiden: Brill. (See also "Discussion,"pp.578-87).

- "The Status of Women in Early Christian Heterodoxy." ARC 8: 33–43.
- "The Paraphrase of Shem." Translator. Pages 101–15 in *The Other Bible*. Edited by W. Barnstone. San Francisco: Harper & Row. Also as pages 339–61 in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, with the title "The Paraphrase of Shem (VII,1)" (see below).
- 1985 Acts of the Second International Congress of Coptic Studies: Roma, 22-26 September 1980. Edited, with Tito Orlandi. Rome: CIM.
- "Appendix: Fragments of the Gospel of Truth from Codex XII."
 Pages 119-22 in Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex):
 Introductions, Texts, Translations, Indices. NHS 22. Edited by Harold W Attridge. Leiden: Brill.
- 1985 Contributor to Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex): Notes. NHS 23. Edited by Harold W. Attridge. Leiden: Brill.
- "Gnosticism, Ethics of." Pages 250-51 in The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics. Edited by J. F. Childress and J. Macquarrie. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- "Flee Femininity: Antifemininity in Gnostic Texts and the Question of Social Milieu." Pages 297–307 in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*. SAC. Edited by Karen L. King. Philadelphia: Fortress. Also as pages 161–71 in *Gnosticism in the Early Church*. Studies in Early Christianity 5. Edited by D. M. Scholer. New York and London: Garland, 1993.
- 1990 Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII. NHS 28. Translated, with Charles W. Hedrick (ed.), Elaine Pagels (trans.), and John D. Turner (trans.). Leiden: Brill. Also, "Introduction to Codex XII" (pp.289–94).
- 1990 The Nag Hammadi Library in English. Gen. ed. James M. Robinson. Third, Rev. ed. New York: HarperCollins. First published, 1978 (Leiden: Brill). Second Edition, 1988 (Leiden: Brill).
 - pages 104–23, introduction to and translation of The Apocryphon of John (II,1, III,1, IV,1, and BG 8502,2)
 - pages 208–19, introduction to and translation of The Gospel of the Egyptians (III,2 and IV,2), with Alexander Böhlig
 - pages 312–17, translation of The Concept of Our Great Power (VI.4)
 - pages 341–61, translation of The Paraphrase of Shem (VII,1)

- pages 434–37, translation of The Letter of Peter to Philip (VIII,2)
- pages 503–08, introduction to and translation of The Sentences of Sextus (XII,1)
- pages 509–10, introduction to and translation of Fragments (XII,3)
- 1991 Nag Hammadi Codices VIII. NHS 31. Edited by J. H. Sieber. Contributor with Bentley Layton, Marvin W. Meyer, and John H. Sieber. Leiden: Brill.
- "The Naples Fragments of Shenoute's 'De Certamine Contra Diabolum.'" OrChr 75: 123-40.
- "Egyptians, Gospel of the." Pages 413–14 in vol. 2 of ABD. Edited by David Noel Freedman, et al. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday.
- 1992 "Peter, Apocalypse of." Pages 268–69 in vol. 5 of *ABD*. Edited by David Noel Freedman, et al. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday.
- "Shem, Paraphrase of." Pages 1195–96 in vol. 5 of ABD. Edited by David Noel Freedman, et al. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday.
- 1995 The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II, 1, III, 1 and IV, 1 with BG 8502, 2. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 33. Edited, with Michael Waldstein. Leiden: Brill.
- "After the Synopsis: Prospects and Problems in Establishing a Critical Text of the Apocryphon of John and in Defining its Historical Location." Pages 138–53 in The Nag Hammadi Library After Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 44. Edited by John D. Turner and Anne McGuire. Leiden: Brill.
- "The Nag Hammadi Corpus." Pages 1241–45 in The International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twentieth-First Century. Edited by William Reuben Farmer, Andre LaCocque, and Sean McEvenue. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press.

Selected Book Reviews

- 1971 Review of Marvin R. Wilson, Coptic Future Tenses: Syntactical Studies in Sahidic. CBQ 33: 155-56.
- 1972 Review of J. -É. Ménard, L'Évangile selon Philippe. JAOS 92: 188-89.

- 1974 Review of Hans Quecke, Das Markusevangelium saïdisch: Text der handschrift Palau Rib Inv-Nrr m182it den Varianten der handschrift M569. CBQ 36: 288–89.
- 1977 Review of M. Krause und P. Labib, Gnostische und hermetische Schriften aus Codex II und Codex VI. ZDMG 127: 95–98.
- 1978 Review of A. F. J. Klijn, Seth in Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Literature. JBL 97: 612-13.
- 1981 Review of Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels. Int 35: 206-07.
- Review of M. K. H. Peters, An Analysis of the Textual Character of the Bohairic of Deuteronomy. JBL 100: 630.
- 1984 Review of Das Matthäus-Evangelium im mittelägyptischen Dialekt des Koptischen. JBL 103: 658–59.
- 1998 Review of Karen L. King, Revelation of the Unknowable God: With Text, Translation and Notes to NHC XI, 3 Allogenes. JBL 117 (1998): 172–73. This review also appears in Review of Biblical Literature (http://www.bookreviews.org).

Other

1994 Free of Charge: Preaching the Gospel to Students of Theology.

Montreal: Presbyterian College. [Collected sermons]

Selected Unpublished Works

- "The Sethians and the Nag Hammadi Library." Pages 601–07 in *The Society of Biblical Literature One Hundred Eighth Annual Meeting Book of Seminar Papers* (Los Angeles). Vol. 2. Edited by L. C. McGaughy.8
- 1981 "Encratism and Gnosticism." AAR/SBLA. S66.9
- 1993 "The Redaction of Early Christian Texts and the Apocryphon of John." AAR/SBLA. 108.¹⁰

Introduction to the New Testament As Scripture and as Historical Source. [Class notes; monograph in progress]

"A Critical Evaluation of the Literary and Archaeological Evidence for Jewish Christianity."

2002 "Separating History from Theology: The Mission to Jews and Gentiles in Paul, Acts and Matthew." [Paper read at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies Annual Meeting, May 2002, Wycliffe College, University of Toronto]

Research in Progress

Collaborator in the preparation of a complete edition of the works of Shenoute (specifically *Canon 7*).

Selected Scholarly Responses to / Dialogue with Frederik Wisse's Research

- 1967 Epp, Eldon Jay. "The Claremont Profile-Method for Grouping New Testament Minuscule Manuscripts." Pages 27–38 in Studies in the History and Text of the New Testament in Honor of Kenneth Willis Clark, Ph.D. SD 29. Edited by Boyd L. Daniels and M. Jack Suggs. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press. Also as pages 211–20 in Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism. SD 45. Edited by Eldon Jay Epp and Gordon D. Fee. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.
- 1977 Richards, W. Larry. The Classification of the Greek Manuscripts of the Johannine Epistles. SBLDS 35. Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press.
- 1977 Richards, W. Larry. "A Critique of a New Testament Text-Critical Methodology: The Claremont Profile Method." *JBL* 96: 555–66.
- 1978 Bream, H. N. Review of Zum Hellenismus in den Schriften von Nag Hammadi. Edited, with Alexander Böhlig. Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt 15: 147–48.
- 1979 Richards, W. Larry. "Manuscript Grouping in Luke 10 by Quantitative Analysis." *JBL* 98: 379–91.
- 1980 Richards, W. Larry. "An Examination of the Claremont Profile Method in the Gospel of Luke: A Study in Text-Critical Methodology." NTS 27: 52–63.
- 1981 Save-Soderbergh, Torgyny. "The Pagan Elements in Early Christianity and Gnosticism." Pp. 71–85 in Colloque International sur les textes de Nag Hammadi. Quebec: Laval.
- 1983 Brooks, J. A. Review of The Profile Method for Classifying and Evaluating Manuscript Evidence. SwJT 26: 109–10.1983
 Hurtado, Larry W. Review of The Profile Method for Classifying and Evaluating Manuscript Evidence. SR 12: 469–70.

- 1983 Metzger, Bruce M. Review of *The Profile Method for Classifying and Evaluating Manuscript Evidence*. PSB 4: 130–31.
- Omanson, Roger L. Review of The Profile Method for Classifying and Evaluating Manuscript Evidence. RevExp 80: 619-20. This review also appears in JBL 103 (1984): 660-61.
- 1984 Kilpatrick, G. D. Review of *The Profile Method for Classifying and Evaluating Manuscript Evidence*. NovT 26: 86–88.
- 1987 Ehrman, Bart D. "The Use of Group Profiles for the Classification of New Testament Documentary Evidence." *JBL* 106: 465–86.
- 1995 Aland, Barbara, and Klaus Wachtel. "The Greek Miniscule Manuscripts of the New Testament." Pages 43-60 in The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis. SD 46. Edited by Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- 1996 Ehrman, Bart D. Review of Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, eds., *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II, 1; III, 1; and IV, 1 with BG 8502,2. JBL* 115: 775 76. This review also appears in *Review of Biblical Literature* (http://www.bookreviews.org).
- 1996 Richards, W. Larry. "Test Passages or Profiles: A Comparison of Two Text-Critical Methods." *JBL* 115: 251–69.
- Thurén, Lauri. "Hey Jude!: Asking for the Original Situation and Message of a Catholic Epistle." NTS 43: 451–65.
- 1997 Wilfong, Terry. Review of Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, eds. The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II, 1; III, 1; and IV, 1 with BG 8502, 2. CBQ 59: 179-80.
- 2003 Parker, David C. "A Comparison Between the *Text und Textwert* and the Claremont Profile Method Analyses of Manuscripts in the Gospel of Luke." *NTS* 49: 108–39.

Notes

- 1. Frederik Wisse, "Early Christian Literature and Natural Selection," *Grail* 11 (1995): 12.
- 2. Umberto Eco, Foucault's Pendulum, trans. William Weaver (New York: Ballantine, 1989; original Italian version, 1988), 384. Eco, a professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna, has continued to explore the blurred

lines between fact and fiction in his most recent novel *Baudolino*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando: Harcourt, 2002; Italian original, 2000).

- 3. Foucault's Pendulum, 139. When this is the case, a further methodological misstep is possible. Scholars are often skilled in explaining away discrepancies between their treasured historical hypotheses and the available evidence: "Our speculations about ancient affairs always seem to be able to overcome the objection posed by the available data. They are never truly at risk of being corrected or defeated by the facts. We allow so many variables and complexities in our theories that we can account for anything real or imagined. Miraculously our hunches always fit, or rather, we make them fit by explaining away any objections" (Frederik Wisse, "Historical Method and the Johannine Community," ARC 20 [1992]: 36).
- 4. E.g., "After the Synopsis: Prospects and Problems in Establishing a Critical Text of the Apocryphon of John and in Defining its Historical Location," in The Nag Hammadi Library After Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration, NHMS 44, ed. John D. Turner and Anne McGuire (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 142. See also "Historical Method," 41–42. The title for this article is derived from p.41 of the latter study.
- 5. "After the Synopsis," 142.
- 6. Though only a selection of book reviews are included.
- 7. Naturally there is overlap between these categories.
- 8. As listed in David M. Scholer, Nag Hammadi Bibliography: 1970–1994 (NHMS 32; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 176.
- 9. As listed in Scholer, Nag Hammadi Bibliography, 125.
- 10. As listed in Scholer, Nag Hammadi Bibliography, 308.