In the 1950s Swiss collector and patron of the arts Martin Bodmer acquired a magnificent collection of ancient Egyptian papyri in Greek and Coptic, the tremendous historical value of which was soon acknowledged. Most biblical scholars are familiar with these “Bodmer Papyri,” which gave New Testament textual study a new boost, in particular Bodmer Papyrus II = Ψ66 (dated to around 200), Bodmer Papyrus VII–IX = Ψ72 (third–fourth century), and Bodmer Papyrus XIV–XV = Ψ75 (early third century).

As Robinson explains in his introduction (4–5), the term Bodmer Papyri (BP) used for this particular manuscript discovery soon came to have a narrower sense than the simple reference to all papyri in Bodmer’s collection that were published successively by the University of Geneva in the series Bibliotheca Bodmeriana from 1954 onwards (conveniently listed in appendix 2). In fact, the manuscript discovery, described by Robinson in great detail, includes some papyri outside of the Bodmer collection, in particular a large number located in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin but attributed by Robinson to the same provenience.

The fact that papyri from the same original discovery are scattered among different collections and published by editors in disparate volumes, even in the original Bibliotheca
Bodmeriana series, where various parts of the same codex could be published separately (10–11), underscores the importance of Robinson’s achievement in investigating all the details surrounding the discovery and tracking down the provenience and integrity of this treasure trove. The knowledge of the provenience of the BP might enable us to place the manuscripts and their users in a historical, sociological, and linguistic context. Robinson’s thesis is that the BP once belonged to a monastery of the Pachomian Order near Dishnā in Upper Egypt, not far from Nag Hammadi. According to Robinson, the manuscripts are referred to in Egypt as “the Dishnā papers,” since they were sold in that town.

This, however, does not mean that they were produced in the monastery near Dishnā. As Robinson explains, the “provenience” of a book may refer either to the place where it was produced, or where it was discovered (16–17). Internal evidence (the features of the manuscripts) may point in various directions. For example, the hand of P.Bodmer II (Greek) reflects a professional scribe at a scriptorium, whereas the hands of P.Bodmer III and IV (Coptic) seems to be the work of an awkward scribe making a private copy (29). Robinson is therefore wisely occupied primarily with “provenience” in the second sense, the location of the discovery.

It was Rodolphe Kasser, Professor of Coptic Language and Literature at the Faculty of Letters of Geneva, who first got in contact with the Cypriote antiquities dealer Phokion J. Tano, who had sold the papyri to Bodmer. Tano revealed to Kasser, sometime between 1969 and 1971, that the papyri came from a village near Nag Hammadi, in Upper Egypt. Incidentally, the gnostic Nag Hammadi materials came from the same dealer.

Subsequently Robinson found out that the manuscripts had passed through the hands of numerous intermediaries before they arrived at Geneva in six different batches during 1954–1956 (40–46). During this approximate time, Tano sold another bulk of papyri, about half the size in number, to Sir Chester Beatty in Dublin (54–80). Significantly, they included fragments from manuscripts in Bodmer’s possession, for example, one fragment of the codex with John’s Gospel (P.Bodmer II), and another fragment of Phileas’s Apology (P.Bodmer XX), a circumstance that points to a shared provenience, at least of these batches. Concluding his account of items in the Chester Beatty Library, Robinson points out that the nomenclature “Bodmer Papyri” for these manuscripts of shared provenience is misleading, at least in quantitative terms (in terms of quality it is more appropriate).

In a third chapter Robinson accounts for further papyri in Mississippi (83–93), Cologne (93–99), and Barcelona (99–107). For example, the University of Mississippi acquired two significant biblical manuscripts in Coptic from a dealer named Sultan Maguid Sameda. The first is Mississippi Coptic Codex I (the Crosby Codex, later named the Savery Codex, now the “Crosby-Schøyen Codex”), a single-quire codex in Sahidic variously dated to the
second, third, or fourth century containing Jonah, 2 Maccabees, 1 Peter (the oldest copy of this book), Peri Pascha of Melito, and an unidentified homily, perhaps for Easter or a hymn. The second codex, Mississippi Coptic Codex II, was found to be half of the same codex as P. Bodmer XXII; the two parts of the codex, published together in 1964 (as P. Bodmer XXII), contain Jer 40:3–52:34, Lamentations, Epistle of Jeremiah (= Bar 6), and the book of Baruch (fourth/fifth century; 83–89). In addition to these two manuscripts, Robinson describes further fragments of codices in the Mississippi holding, which turned out to be connected to other papyri in Cologne and Barcelona. Beyond doubt, these manuscripts came from the same discovery. Robinson accounts for other manuscripts in Cologne, Barcelona, and other locations that may belong to the BP. All of the relevant items are conveniently listed in appendix 2 (185–96).

In the fourth chapter Robinson traces the BP on Egyptian soil, where the manuscripts, according to Robinson, are known as “the Dishnā Papers.” This account builds on Robinson’s extensive detective work during 1975–1981 as he interviewed several people involved in the discovery and subsequent transactions. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the items passed through several middlemen before the Cairo dealer Phokion Tano (now called “Phoqué”) acquired them (108–27). Robinson discovered that it was Hasan Muhammad al-Samman who made the discovery on 26 July 1952, when he found a jar containing books near the foot of the mountain Jabal Abu Mana, 5.5 km northwest of the town Dishnā in Egypt (between ancient Panopolis and Thebes).

Robinson then attempts to correlate the two stories, one mainly derived from publications and European scholars, the other based on interviews in Egypt. He refers to various pieces of confirmatory evidence, such as a note in the registry of the Chester Beatty Library that the Chester Beatty Ac. 1389 (Joshua) had been “bought from Phocion J. Tano…” and another indicating the provenience of Ac. 1390 (a school exercise in Greek and part of the Gospel of John in Sub-Achmimic): “Small village Deshna just after Naghi Hamadi about 2 hours before Luxor by train. Probably from a library of a monastery. Found in a jar in a cemetery” (127). Hence, Robinson concludes, “There are traits shared between reports given in Egypt about the Dishnā papers and those given in Europe and America about the Bodmer Papyri that make it evident that both reports have to do with the same material” (128).

In the final chapter Robinson introduces another “ingredient in the story of the Bodmer Papyri,” as he explains that materials of the Pachomian monastic order are found in all the main repositories of Bodmer Papyri and that the discovery site at Jabal Abu Mana was located close to an ancient Pachomian headquarters in Phbow (modern Faw Qibli). Apparently a local legend of Faw Qibli, reported to Robinson in 1980, suggested that monks had hidden the books of the monastery library at the mountain (Jabal Abu Mana)
for safekeeping before a contemporary ruler destroyed the monastery (134). Robinson gives a detailed account of the Pachomian items of the collections, which include unique copies of Pachomius’s letters (135–50).

The first appendix (151–84) is a revised version of Robinson’s “The Pachomian Monastic Library at the Chester Beatty Library and the Bibliothèque Bodmer,” published in Manuscripts of the Middle East 5 (1990–1991): 26–40. Much of the content is repetition, but there is a useful inventory of the discovery, presumed to be the remains of a “Pachomian Monastic Library” (169–72). Here we also learn of the many disagreements between Robinson and Kasser through the years, the latter maintaining that Robinson’s investigations “were based on no more than village rumor rendered irrelevant by the passing of 25 years” (175).

The second appendix, a very useful list of Papyrus Bodmer publications (185–96), is followed by four sections provided by editor K. C. Hanson: a list of “Collectors, Dealers, Scholars, and Institutes” (197–202), a glossary of technical terms” (203–4), a bibliography including publications up to 1993 (205–11), and an index of names (213–16).

Stories of manuscript discoveries are always exciting, and this account of one of the most valuable treasure troves of biblical and other manuscripts is no exception. In my opinion, Robinson convincingly establishes the connection between manuscripts in the Bodmer and Chester Beatty libraries as well as a number of other collections, primarily Mississippi, Cologne, and Barcelona. Although Robinson’s investigations in Egypt are likely to be influenced by rumors and exaggeration and the exact extent of the “Dishnā Papers” is impossible to establish, his main proposal of a common discovery is thoroughly backed up with documentation and hard evidence from the manuscripts themselves.

On the other hand, the book is poorly edited and betrays many traces of several layers of revision and scattered updates, not only by Robinson, who “composed the book two decades ago” from several earlier publications and new material, but, more recently, also by K. C. Hanson, who edited and published the book (vii). The resulting unevenness is all the more annoying in a book that presents the reader with many names, dates, and details about the manuscripts, which are repeated back and forth, sometimes with variation, which creates confusion.

For example, we are told in the introduction (6) that the Vatican Library was given P. Bodmer XIV–XV (P75) in 2007, a piece of information that may give the reader a sense that the book is brought up to date. In the next sentence, another manuscript is mentioned, “the Savery Codex (then the Crosby Codex of the University of Mississippi),”
and later we learn that “the codex has remained unpublished” (91). An attentive reader will notice that this codex is actually known as the “Crosby-Schøyen Codex MS 193” (it changed ownership in 1988), and the edition was published in 1990 (the current name and edition appear on 151 n. 2 and in the bibliography). In this connection, I should mention that the codex does not contain the Letter of Jude, as claimed in an article in the New York Times cited by Robinson (84).