

Review:

DECONICK, April D. *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation. With a commentary and new English translation of the complete gospel.* London: T&T Clark, 2007. Paperback. ISBN-10: 0-567-04292-8. Pp 359.

“The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation” is the title of April DeConick’s (Biblical Studies, Rice University, Texas) latest book on the subject, a follow-up on her “Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas” (2006).

Titles overstate, as they intend to sell and not necessarily reflect the full contents. Those not familiar with the use of “Gospel” in certain branches of New Testament scholarship should realise that the Gospel of Thomas is not a literary unity. Unlike the New Testament Gospels, it is a modest collection of sayings that claim to go back on Jesus. Almost every one of the 114 sayings is introduced or accompanied by the words “Jesus said”. The original “Gospel of Thomas” has no introduction at all, no outline, plot or ending. Whether it is original is subject of debate. Who wrote it is anybody’s guess. An insert of later date, only one sentence of a much disputed textual nature, mentions a ‘Thomas’ or ‘Judas Thomas’ as its author and makes the Gnostic connection by inserting “secret” before the “words that the living Jesus spoke.” Not much to go on. The main conclusion of this book: the supposed Gnostic origins of the core contents of the Gospel of Thomas are probably non-existent.

Its Coptic papyri were discovered quite late, in the 1940’s, in the Egyptian sands of Nag Hammadi. By that time the local Arabs and Egyptians had two centuries of experience with producing ancient frauds, but despite its beautiful Coptic hand, the Coptic manuscript was accepted. It was the days of the ‘logia Quelle’-hypothesis, and the Thomas collection seemed just the kind of thing Q would have looked like. The verbal similarities between Thomas and the synoptic Gospels (p.299-316; 342-344) and John (p.344-345) are hard to deny. They roughly add up to 400 hundred Biblical references for a mere 114 sayings. Quite striking, if one takes considers that the actual translation of the complete “Gospel of Thomas’ takes up a mere 10 pages (spaciously printed over p.32-42).

The author sets out her research goal for this book:

“My translation of the complete Gospel of Thomas is not meant to be another translation of the fourth-century Coptic Gospel manuscript. Rather it incorporates the older Greek fragments into the translation, attempting to provide the earliest edition of the full Gospel possible based on the extant manuscripts” (p.9).

It should be noted that DeConick’s translation is not a literal rendering of the Coptic text. “As for my translation of the Coptic, whenever gender-inclusive translation does not compromise the integrity of the Coptic text, I have chosen to translate the masculine reference as indefinite or neuter. Whenever possible, I have tried to render idiomatic statements gracefully into English rather than literally” (p.11).

The author re-examined Greek fragments at several libraries. As a result she calls attention to the speculative character of substantial parts of the Greek. "My transcription and reconstruction of the Greek papyri varies significantly from Attridge's accepted one in Layton's critical edition. There were numerous instances where dotted letters in his transcription were not legible to my eye even under ultraviolet light, or at edges of lacunae or eroded surfaces" (p.11).

This points to what is arguably the primary contribution of this book; that it allows better insight for 'outsiders' into the text critical background of the 'Gospel of Thomas'. Much of the Greek text (little of which is available anyway) seems open for debate. Most of the Coptic text could be interpreted as a mixture of Biblical references, loose verbal quotes and wisdom sayings valued in circles that made use or contributed to the 'Thomas collection'. The latter are usually attributed, not to the original 'Gospel' but to "accretion". In other words, these represent a gradual growth of the collections as additions to the original were made. It seems that current paradigm presuppositions about the history of the New Testament documents keep the author from drawing more detailed conclusions about the core 'Gospel of Thomas' and orthodox Christianity.

Another point to highlight is that DeConick was responsible for the cover illustration as well as the contents. It is encouraging to find such creativity that reminds one of Tolkien (Lord of the Rings), the famous Oxford professor who also illustrated his own stories.

In the commentary on the text, the 'source discussion' is one of the parts that could have been strengthened. It usually bears a speculative character, without factual, textual proof at all. The great absentees in this discussion (fortunately not in the book, the discerning reader may make up his own mind) are the Gospels from the Christian canon. Had the author interacted with the early historical sources of Christianity in this discussion, the result would have led to a collapse of her wider underlying goal to revive *Traditionsgeschichte* (combined with loose concepts of *Gemeindetheologie*) in this particular brand of scholarship. Now, the author failing to involve her carefully presented philological data in this discussion, much of the argument amounts to circular reasoning and a lot of speculation.

In other words, this book would have been much more convincing had the author taken her textual results more seriously and based her theories on those, instead of speculations or the opinions of respected scholars. One of the obvious weaknesses of this book is the author's lack of confidence to arrive at independent conclusions on the basis of the textual facts.

Consequently, a significant number of times the source discussion is limited to one sentence that uncritically follows the view of a distinguished "authority". Quispel is particularly popular. E.g. p.280: "G. Quispel traces this saying's origin to a Jewish Christian Gospel." Or, p.284: "G. Quispel attributes this saying to the hand of the author himself." Also, p.288: "G. Quispel thinks that the author of the Gospel created this saying." A quick inspection indicates that this is a widespread weakness for Quispel throughout the volume (cf. p.232, 245, 246, 247, 248, 249, 251, 256, 262, 278, 280, 284, 288, 293, 294 (2 times for different logia), 297).

Although this Gnostic enthusiast no doubt qualifies as an eminent academic, the Utrecht professor worked on the Nag Hammadi library and passed away in Egypt in 2006, he should hardly be treated as an oracle in this matter. One would at least have expected that DeConick presented her reasons for accepting the views of Quispel and others.

Despite the uncritical quotations from secondary literature, the primary textual data force the author to largely dispense with ancient Gnosticism as the author of the Thomas collection. Because of the Biblical core data that comprise the kernel 'Gospel,' the author refers many of the earlier suggested links with Gnosticism to the realm of unfounded speculation, or wishful thinking on the part of those who were so inclined. DeConick: "My interpretation does not contain references to the Gnostic hermeneutic applied to the Gospel by numerous scholars for so many decades. Instead it focuses on providing an alternative hermeneutic which sees the Gospel as an example of early 'orthodox' Syrian religiosity" (p.x).

In conclusion, the main contribution of *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation* is in bringing together the available Greek & Coptic fragments that form the basis of the 'Thomas Gospel'-research. It also grants an insight into the tentative character of much of the scholarly results in this field. The literary data presented in this book make it less likely that the 'Thomas collection' is an autonomous Gospel-tradition that traces back to Jesus fully independently of Biblical literature. As a result the Gnostic connection is presented as a secondary, if not a missing link.

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