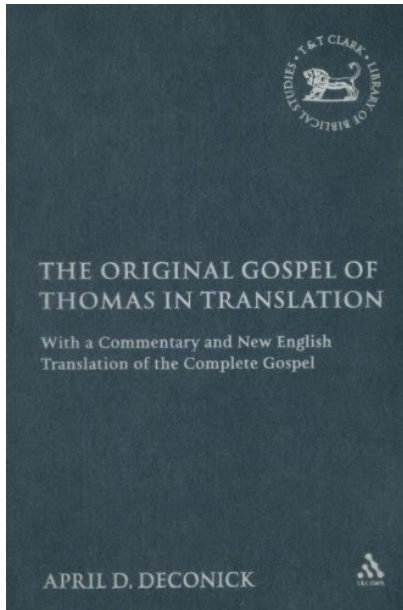


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DeConick, April D.

The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation: With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel

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The volume under review saw the light of the scholarly world only thanks to editorial circumstances. It has grown out of what was originally intended to be an interpretative appendix to April D. DeConick's 2005 book *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas* (see the RBL review by E. Noffke at http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5410_5704.pdf), so DeConick herself call the two books "sister volumes" (ix); had they appeared in the same year, one might even more fittingly call them "twins." Indeed, to understand and fully appreciate this commentary, it is essential to have the first volume in mind. It is there that DeConick develops the hermeneutical foundations for her work on the Thomasine tradition as well as her general theory about the composition of the Gospel of Thomas and the history of the Thomasine community as reflected in this text.

The commentary volume opens with a brief summary of the position developed in *Recovering* (1–42). The compositional history of the Gospel of Thomas began with a "Kernel" consisting of five short speeches (in Aramaic) from before or around 50 C.E. These speeches document a strong apocalyptic expectation of the imminent end of the world and final judgment held by a group of Jewish adherents of Jesus. Under the impression of crises such as the ever-growing number of Christians with a non-Jewish background and the "non-event" of the end of the world failing to happen, this group was

forced to revise and update its traditions; thus the Kernel was supplied with “accretions,” commenting additions to traditional logia, or completely new logia. This process took place around 50–120 C.E., until the Gospel of Thomas reached the form that was transmitted in writing, translated into Greek and Coptic, and is now available in the textual witnesses P.Oxy. 1; 654; 655; NHC II, 2. It is important to note this aspect of development, for DeConick’s work is sometimes perceived as if she wished to assign the *entire* Gospel of Thomas to a date around 50 C.E., which is clearly not the case.

This theoretical summary (2–24) is followed by two English translations: the Kernel (25–31); and the entire Gospel of Thomas (32–42). This doubling allows for a clear impression of how DeConick conceives both the original Kernel and the accretions, for in the translation of the entire Gospel of Thomas the accretions are printed in italics, which clarifies their interpretative function.

The commentary itself (43–298) is very clearly structured for each saying. It begins with a translation of the saying as it might have been in the Aramaic version, which includes textual emendations and corrections of “translation errors” (see below). Then follow the Greek (where applicable) and Coptic versions, each with a translation of its own. The commentary proper begins with a short note on whether this saying belongs to the Kernel or is an accretion. Next are some remarks about “Text and Translation Issues.” There one finds a number of valuable textual observations based on DeConick’s own inspection of the manuscripts. Yet there are also some remarks on translational issues that may give rise to criticism.: One factor in DeConick’s reconstruction of the Kernel are Semitisms that point to an Aramaic original. For identifying these Semitisms, she strongly relies on two—surely very learned and sharp-sighted—articles by A. Guillaumont from 1958 and 1981. Apart from the question whether all these alleged Semitisms are really evidence for a former Aramaic version, the reader might at times feel that the obvious difficulties in the Coptic text are just explained away as “translation errors,” especially when one knows of comparable discussions in the study of the Synoptic Gospels.

The heart of the commentary is the “Interpretative Comment,” in which DeConick expounds each saying with regard to its present position in the Gospel of Thomas and also with regard to parallels in early Christianity, especially in Syrian fathers and in Clement of Alexandria. When commenting on the Kernel sayings, she also unfolds how the meaning of the sayings changed with accretions creating a new context for the old logion. In her view, the Gospel of Thomas is to be seen as part of an encratite Christian tradition that was particularly prominent in Syria: after the expectation of an imminent parousia had failed, these Christians chose the way of the “immanent Apocalypse” (*Recovering*, 212–37), that is, of mysticism. Within this framework, the sayings are informed by Hermetic ideas, but there is no reason to understand the Gospel of Thomas

as a gnostic text (e.g., “In my opinion, there is nothing Gnostic about L[ogion] 109 except scholars’ *eisegesis*” [289]).

The next section is the “Source Discussion.” This is of particular interest when a saying has parallels in the canonical Gospels; the last fifty years have seen quite a heated discussion about whether or not the Gospel of Thomas presupposes the canonical Gospels or might contain independent “authentic” or “more original” sayings of Jesus. DeConick lists the views of protagonists in this discussion in a kind of *catena*, but the last paragraph characteristically tends to open with “In my opinion....” She mostly comes to the result that the relationship between Gospel of Thomas and the canonical Gospels is best explained in terms of independent oral traditions. This is most probably the consequence of her reflections on oral performance and oral tradition in *Recovering*; in the case of some Kernel, sayings it might also be necessitated by their early dating. Be this as it may, DeConick’s approach is an instance of a relatively new paradigm for assessing intertextual relationships that might help scholars avoid some “dead ends” into which a purely literary paradigm sometimes leads—although at times the recourse to orality looks a bit like an escape.

These three argumentative parts are followed by some helpful tools: a section that lists parallels to the saying in question from early Jewish, Christian, and Islamic literature in English translation; a section titled “Agreements in Syrian Gospels, Western Text and Diatessaron” (where applicable); and a select bibliography. The volume concludes with an appendix in which parallels between the Gospel of Thomas and the Synoptics are listed (299–316), a select bibliography of source texts and secondary literature (317–39), and an index of references (340–55) and of authors (356–57).

On the whole, DeConick’s large-scale study of the Gospel of Thomas addresses some very important questions, and it is a particular pleasure to see her interpreting the Gospel of Thomas without the label “gnostic.” Complex sayings such as Gos. Thom. 14 or 21 do indeed require an explanation in terms of a longer history of composition during which an older saying was recontextualized, and it is also worth asking how a saying that recommends James the Righteous One as leader of a Christian group (Gos. Thom. 12) could continue to be meaningful to the point of being preserved in the fourth-century codex found at Nag Hammadi.

Here, however, criticism enters as well: with regard to content, it seems quite advisable to assign Logion 12 to the earliest stock of Thomasine tradition, yet DeConick identifies it as an (albeit very early: 40–60 C.E.) accretion, for the formal reason that it is a piece of dialogue (81; see also *Recovering*, 65–66). This criterion appears somewhat artificial when used to sort out secondary passages and thus to reconstruct an “original” version—if it

does not already presuppose the character of the “original” version. The extremely early date for the Kernel does not seem to be absolutely compelling either. It is mainly based on a very confident interpretation of the narrative in Pseudo-Clementines, Rec. 1:17 about a collection of Jesus’ teachings (*Recovering*, 34–36); one may ask whether the Pseudo-Clementine corpus is really so reliable as a historical source for events and developments in mid-first-century Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, this commentary on the Gospel of Thomas is a valuable tool with many important observations and easy access to related source material and scholarly discussion—certainly much more than an appendix. Thus, apart from its standing as a scholarly study, it provides a most convenient starting point for further studies on the Gospel of Thomas. One need not agree with all of DeConick’s conclusions, but even a more critical reader will be happy to consult this rich yet concise commentary.