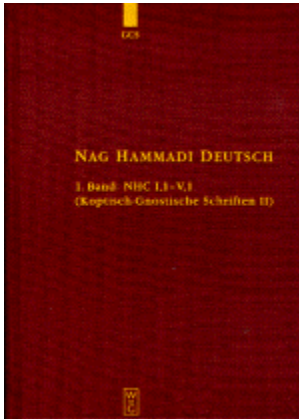


RBL 9/2002



**Schenke, Hans-Martin, Hans-Gebhard Bethge, and Ursula Ulrike Kaiser, eds.**

***Nag Hammadi Deutsch, 1. Band: NHC I, 1-V,1 (Koptisch-Gnostische Schriften II). Eingeleitet und übersetzt von Mitgliedern des Berliner Arbeitskreises für Koptisch-Gnostische Schriften***

Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte. Neue Folge 8

Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001. Pp. 397, Cloth, € 98,00/SFr 157,00, ISBN 3110172348.

James M Robinson  
Claremont Graduate University  
Claremont, CA 91711

This impressive volume, containing a German translation of the first half of the Nag Hammadi codices with introductions and notes, is the best one-volume treatment that has yet appeared in any language, a striking instance of the tenacity of the German scholarly tradition through thick and thin.

Berlin has, for over a century, been the leading center of scholarship in the fields of Gnosticism and Coptology. Technically speaking, the present volume is a continuation, within the overarching series *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten (drei) Jahrhunderte* (1897–), of the subseries *Koptisch-gnostische Schriften*, whose first volume, containing the Askew and Bruce codices, was edited by Carl Schmidt in 1905. It was published in Leipzig under the auspices of the *Kirchenväter-Kommission* of the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences. The most recent fourth edition appeared in 1981 under the auspices of the *Kommission für spätantike Religionsgeschichte* of the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin. The reunification of Germany in 1989–1990 has led to still another reorganization: the present second volume of the subseries *Koptisch-gnostische Schriften* is number 8 of a *Neue Folge* of the whole series, sponsored by the

Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences in agreement with the Patristic Commissions of seven German Academies of Sciences. Forthcoming soon will be the other half of the Nag Hammadi codices, as volume 2 of Nag Hammadi Deutsch, volume 3 of Koptisch-gnostische Schriften. The series is now no longer published by the Akademie-Verlag in Berlin but rather by Walter de Gruyter of Berlin and New York.

The Berliner Arbeitskreis für koptisch-gnostische Schriften was organized on an informal basis in east Berlin by Hans-Martin Schenke together with his students. Beginning already in 1958–1959, translations by Johannes Leipoldt and Schenke of all of Codex II that was available at the time appeared in the *Theologische Literaturzeitung*. These were followed, on the basis of transcriptions I supplied, by Schenke's working circle in 1973–1978, followed by a series of dissertations. The plan to publish their translations as volumes 2 and 3 of Koptisch-gnostische Schriften was announced by Schenke at the founding meeting of the International Association for Coptic Studies in Cairo in 1976. So the present volume has been underway for more than a quarter of a century.

The work of the Berlin group, initially aided by the sharing of material from the UNESCO photographs of the Nag Hammadi codices that I secured and transmitted to Berlin in draft transcription and translation (prepared by the English language team I organized), has in more recent years been aided by the French language Nag Hammadi project at the University of Laval, in Quebec, Canada: La Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi. This was launched on the basis of the same draft transcriptions and translations but has gone well beyond them, with fresh collations on the basis of the originals in Cairo, to produce critical editions of each tractate with commentaries. Not only has Schenke himself been a visiting scholar at Laval, but also the leading Coptologist of the Berlin group, Wolf Peter Funk, has joined permanently the Laval team, where he has provided a major resource for the French edition.

As a by-product of the main Laval project, he has organized a Concordance des textes de Nag Hammadi, which is a series of massive volumes containing computer-based analytic concordances of each codex. Since the Coptic spelling in Nag Hammadi

texts was not yet standardized when the texts were originally translated from Greek into Coptic and then copied and recopied in Coptic, the root of a given word in a tractate, and hence its meaning, was at times ambivalent. But the sophisticated concordance project has brought much clarity to this situation, resulting of course in corrections in translations made prior to the development of the concordance. This is only one of the pervasive ways in which the new Berlin translation is more scientific than were translations prior to this scholarly tool becoming available.

Characteristic of the Berlin group is considerable confidence, not to say boldness, in the filling of lacunae. The result is a more readable translation but also at places a more uncertain text than meets the eye. The debate over this policy has proven to be something of a personality trait distinguishing leading translators, from those such as Bentley Layton and Steven Emmel hesitating to fill lacunae to John Turner and Hans-Martin Schenke proposing rather extensive restorations of lacunae. One of particular interest is the very fragmentary opening of the *Apocryphon of James* (NHC I,2), which seems to begin to the effect that James writes “[...]thos.” The restoration in the *editio princeps* had conjectured “[pa]thos” or “[sympa]thy,” but Rodolphe Kasser suggested the name of the early Gnostic “[Cerin]thus,” a suggestion followed by Schenke and hence the present edition: “[James it is] who [writes to the pupil Cerinthus.]” Unfortunately, many Greek words end in *-thos*. So when I (in my capacity as American delegate and Permanent Secretary of UNESCO’s International Committee for the Nag Hammadi Codices) organized a Technical Sub-Committee to restore the fragmentary leaves at the Coptic Museum of Cairo in the early 1980s, I sought (in vain) for a fragment that would confirm this very logical restoration (for the justification of this restoration, see 13–14 n. 10).

Another instance of improvement in the restoration of lacunae is Saying 65 of the *Gospel of Thomas*. Here, at the opening of the parable of the Vineyard, the present translation prefers to read in the lacuna a reference not to a “[good person],” as had been customary, but rather to a “[usurer]” (175 and n. 144), a restoration long advocated by Stephen J. Patterson. This only strengthens the case, advocated in the 1965 dissertation of John Sieber and supported ever since by such well-known interpreters as Joachim

Jeremias, Patterson, and John S. Kloppenborg, that Saying 65 is an instance of the *Gospel of Thomas* having access to a tradition independent of, and older than, that in the canonical Gospels. The familiar allegorical interpretation in the canon of the owner representing God is clearly not presupposed in the owner being a usurer. But the introduction (162) presents the absence of allegorizing interpretations in the *Gospel of Thomas* as secondary.

The *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1; III,1; IV,1; and BG 8502,2) is here presented in a German translation by Michael Waldstein (formerly of Notre Dame University) that is (with the help of Uwe-Karsten Plisch, who, however, is not mentioned on p. 95) an improvement in many linguistic regards over Waldstein's and Frederick Wisse's Brill edition published in 1995 in The Coptic Gnostic Library, a subseries of Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies (reprinted in 2000 in volume 2 of Brill's five-volume reprint of The Coptic Gnostic Library). Therefore, the English critical edition should be used in the light of this improved German translation.

English-language scholarship has been most interested in the *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II,2), and hence most readers will turn primarily to this section of the volume. But in the introduction to this text (152–63) the typically German position is simply presupposed, in criticism of the typically American position (obliquely rejected as “hypotheses about hardly verifiable ‘trajectories’ within the Jesus tradition” [155]). At times this produces contorted presentations on the part of Jens Schröter, author of the introduction to the *Gospel of Thomas* and one of its translators (see p. ix).

Schröter favors a late, second-century dating on the basis of “clear echoes of gnostic thinking” (155) so that there is little relevance of this newly accessible Gospel for studies of the New Testament, much less of the historical Jesus. Rather, Schröter concludes (163) with the observation that “it is justified to speak here of ‘Jesus tradition on the way to Gnosticism.’ ” Helmut Koester's appeal to the sole son-of-man saying in the *Gospel of Thomas* (Saying 86) as documenting an original nonapocalyptic usage of the idiom “son of man” is dismissed with the comment: “The expression ‘son of man’ in Saying 86 has also nothing in common with the usage in the synoptic Gospels, but rather

designates Jesus as the exemplary human” (162 n. 29). This ignores completely the fact that this is actually a saying occurring also in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 8:20; Luke 9:58), indeed in Q (9:58). The resultant problem posed by Koester of the nonapocalyptic usage being early rather than late is here simply avoided by misstating the facts. (Koester is cited frequently *in malam partem* in the footnotes.)

This distancing of the *Gospel of Thomas* from the earliest tradition and hence from the quest of the historical Jesus becomes most obvious in the case of Saying 36, where the fourth-century copy of the Coptic translation is put in the text, whereas the early third-century copy of the very fragmentary Greek original in P. Oxy. 655 is relegated to a footnote. This may be technically justifiable in that the volume is a translation of “Nag Hammadi,” in the series Coptic Gnostic Writings, but it is of course contrary to standard editing procedure for critical editions of ancient texts to be based on a late copy of a translation rather than on an early copy in the original language, wherever it may be available. (It is conceded that P. Oxy. 655 consists of “fragments of older versions of this writing in the Greek language” [153].)

In the present case, the substantive value in playing down the Greek original is evident from the debate published in a series of articles (not mentioned in the bibliography or introduction) between Schröter and myself together with Christoph Heil. For Heil and I have revived the discovery of T. C. Skeat, who in 1938 used ultraviolet light to read the erasures of Codex Sinaiticus at Matt 6:28: He found there not “how they grow” but (with almost identical spelling in Greek) “they neither card,” producing a much more reasonable reading and a better parallel in the case of the lilies to the three chores that “trusting” ravens do not perform. Skeat made this discovery of the correct reading of the erasure in Codex Sinaiticus by finding the same reading in the very fragmentary P. Oxy. 655, which today is universally accepted as the early third-century copy of the *Gospel of Thomas* (though in the debate itself Schröter avoids this concession). This, however, suggests that the *Gospel of Thomas* contains a reading that is not only independent of the canon but in substance prior to the canonical Gospels, since it is not yet corrupted, whereas the canon and even Q already contain the corruption.

Such a conclusion is, of course, unsettling, and its avoidance is readily understandable on theological, canonical grounds. It is not surprising that it is criticized with very awkward reasoning (159): The presence in P. Oxy. 655 of “Who might add to your stature?” is used to argue for a second-century date, since it is seen “in Q research usually as a supplement to the Q composition, so that P. Oxy 655 seems to present here a later stage of the tradition.” It is indeed to be recognized as a secondary ingredient in Q 12:25, yet its presence already in Q makes clear that here any reference to it being “later” would have to mean that it is nonetheless as old as the redactor of Q around 70 C.E. Hence, as documentation for sayings of Jesus go, this is really very early and cannot legitimately be used in support of a second-century date.

At times, paleographical, papyrological considerations are suspended for the sake of the theological argument. For example, at one place (170 n. 98) the translation of the Greek text “And if you have no garment, what [do you then want to put on]?” presupposes filling a lacuna at the end of a line in a way no trained scribe would have made a line division. Skeat has forcefully pointed out that this conjectural restoration would put the consonant  $\delta$ -, as the beginning of a syllable, at the end of a line, and the rest of the syllable  $-\acute{\epsilon}\nu$  at the beginning of the next line, producing the reading  $\mu[\eta\delta]-\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ . (In a letter to me of Sept. 12, 1998, Skeat decisively criticized this reading: “Although it is not totally unknown for scribes to make mistakes, they are so excessively rare that they ought not to be postulated in any reconstruction of the text.”) As a result, Schröter has conceded in the debate with Heil and myself that this reading, common in earlier editions, is not to be accepted (though postulating an alternative,  $\pi[\acute{\omicron}\theta]-\epsilon\nu$ , where the same scribal error is presupposed). Yet this rejected restoration is retained in the translation (where “no” should be put in square brackets to indicate the lacuna, for by the omission of the brackets the problem is entirely hidden). Indeed, this impossible restoration of the lacuna is important to produce the “gnosticizing” interpretation of Saying 36, as pointing to the ascetic (“gnostic”) rejection of the body in Saying 37, according to Schröter. This in turn is based on the assumption that P. Oxy. 655 is an ongoing dialogue in a narrative Gospel,

the mistaken view of the original editors that was once for all (one would think) put to rest by the discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas* in Nag Hammadi Codex II, showing P. Oxy. 655 to be a collection of separate sayings, namely Sayings 36–39 of the *Gospel of Thomas* (explicitly denied by Schröter in the debate with Heil and myself).

Nonetheless, with the exception of such deficiencies with regard to the *Gospel of Thomas*, the present work does provide the best available presentation of the first half of the Nag Hammadi codices. One can only look forward with great anticipation to the forthcoming publication in a second volume of the rest of the Nag Hammadi codices (and of BG 8502).