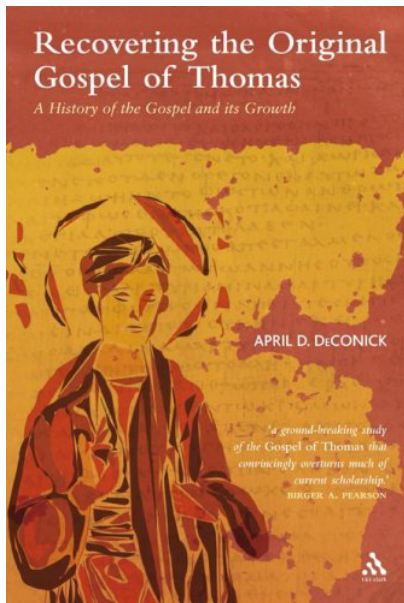


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DeConick, April D.

Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth

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April DeConick has indeed written a great book, a sound step forward in research on the Gospel of Thomas, a new path to be further inquired into and developed on this apocryphal Gospel, which is surely the most investigated and, actually, the only one that seems to “hide” some keys to a better understanding of Christian origins.

To date, the Gospel of Thomas has been valued mainly by those scholars who wished to picture the historical Jesus as a teacher of wisdom and self-consciousness, a popular preacher, a wise man whose image was changed by his disciples after his death into that of an apocalyptic prophet of judgment and doom. A well known and effective popular writer of this line of scholarship is, for instance, Elaine Pagels. But many other scholars reject this approach both because it forces the historical data we have on Jesus and because it is founded on a debatable interpretation of the Gospel of Thomas that, above all, decontextualizes the historical Jesus. That is why most scholars see this apocryphal Gospel as suspect but also with the uneasy feeling that somehow “something good” is hiding in it. DeConick’s book will free the Gospel of Thomas from these suspicions and bring it back to the center of the research on the historical Jesus and of Christian origins.

Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas begins with a methodological chapter that investigates the “New *Traditionsgeschichtliche* Approach,” a key chapter in order to understand her approach and the results of her research. Here she defends the thesis that the Gospel of Thomas must be understood primarily with the tools we use to study the transmission of ancient oral traditions. In her view, an original sayings Gospel developed in connection with the living oral tradition, and it is possible to restore its original core (the Kernel, as she names it), “because it was not rewritten into a narrative or theological discourse as was the case of the Synoptics and John. Nor is it a reconstructed text developed out of a source hypothesis like *Quelle*” (36). These premises are necessary to understand her approach to the Gospel of Thomas, because she mainly follows the new *traditionsgeschichtliche* approach to determine the accretions to the original Kernel and, in this way, to discover the (hypothetical) original saying Gospel.

In the second chapter she presents a valuable *status quaestionis* where she concentrates on the different approaches thus far developed to untangle the mystery of the Gospel of Thomas. Comparing to the previous literate, oral-literate, and redaction models, DeConick develops her version of the “rolling corpus model,” which gives a major role to the oral transmission of the teachings of Jesus:

What does it mean to understand Thomas as an orally-derived text? What this means to me is that the “text” not only mainly developed in the process of oral reperformance, but also that, even when written versions of it may have been scribed, an oral consciousness dominated the process. Saying this, however, does not exclude the possibility that a new written source may have become available to the community and that elements from it may have accrued in the Kernel, updating this “original,” or better “initial,” scribing of the traditions. But I have come to recognize that this accrual more likely took place during a reperformance or a scribing of that reperformance than as a conscious literary redaction. (57)

The reasoning smoothly follows in the third chapter, where DeConick begins her identification of the development of the Gospel of Thomas’s composition. The first to be identified are the so called “accretions,” the layers that were gradually added to the original core. She identifies those accretions in the so called “Question and Answer Units,” in the dialogues between Jesus and his disciples, and in the sayings with interpretative clauses, which reflect the need of Thomas’s congregation to give an answer to new problems they had to face. Using the characteristic vocabulary (here reported in Coptic and sometimes in translation) of the logia so identified, such as Jesus’ title “the living one” or the verb “to know” used in a soteriological sense, she is able to identify some characteristic themes (speculation about the primordial Adam; disdain for the world and admiration for the divine Self; belief that the kingdom is fully established on

earth) and then to further identify other sayings that she believes are part of the accretions as well. To this group she adds also some sayings she considers anachronistic to the hypothetical setting of the Kernel.

These sayings are further grouped according to the problems they face: leadership of the community, discipleship, Jewish law, Christology, soteriology, and eschatology. These topics reflect what she identifies as the answers to the three major crises the Thomas community had to confront: the death of the eyewitnesses; the delay of the eschaton; and the accommodation of Gentile converts to the congregation—problems typical of the other contemporary Christian communities as well.

What is left is, with a reasonable probability, the core of the Gospel of Thomas, its “original” and most ancient part. This Kernel was accrued first by the sayings about James’s leadership (presumably when the community had moved to Syria prior to James’s death in 62), then by those sayings that denote a shift to a more Gentile community. This newly shaped community answered the eschatological crisis, changing from the original apocalyptic approach to a more mystical one (presumably during the years 60–100) and finally moving to a more encratic and hermetic approach to faith and Christian behavior (approximately between 80 and 120). This first part of the book closes with a useful diagram showing the distribution of the logia through the different strata of the Gospel of Thomas.

The second part of the book is devoted to a better definition of the Kernel, which in chapter 4 is identified and described as a sayings Gospel made of five discourses: (1) on the eschatological urgency; (2) on the eschatological challenges of discipleship; (3) on the exclusive commitment to Jesus; (4) on the selection of the “worthy few”; and (5) on the imminent kingdom of God. Each speech begins with admonitions and closes with “a saying about the Eschaton or its demands, serving to underscore the gravity of the discourse and the urgency of the message” (114). According to DeConick, the Kernel was a sort of handbook for Christian preaching “written to preserve Jesus’ teachings and aid the memory of the leader of the community” (117). Interpretation would follow the remembrance of Jesus’ words. The image of Jesus that we receive from this Kernel is that of a prophet, one of a long line of prophets rejected by their people, thus fitting very well the picture we can reconstruct from other sources of the Jewish Christianity of Jerusalem.

Chapter 5 develops the main theological feature of the Kernel: its eschatology, which will be eventually developed in a mystical (“vertical” or “atemporal”) approach to faith. Here DeConick also uses the supposed primitive “Son of Man” Christology in order to date the Kernel in the 50s (see later the discussion on this point).

The third part (chs. 6–9) examines the accretions in order to attempt to determine the development of the Gospel of Thomas through the decades following the migrations of the Jerusalem community to Syria, where it found its final setting. First of all, DeConick analyzes the development of apocalyptic eschatology into mysticism (“the collapse of the Apocalypse”), going in some measure against the stream, given that today many U.S. scholars prefer to present a sapiential Jesus who was eventually “apocalypticized” by the early Christian congregation. I fully agree with her statement that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, since it is more consistent with the historical data we possess.

When it became clear to Thomas’s community that the kingdom of God was not coming as expected, its members realized that they had to understand this concept in another way: it had already come among them; it was a present reality. “Their interpretative revision shifted the apocalypse from an imminent cosmic event to an immanent mystical experience” (165) The encounter with Jesus was considered the beginning of an inner transformation into the original Adam (before the sin in Eden).

This reasoning leads to the following chapter, where DeConick analyzes how the community began to understand itself as the restored Eden, where the refusal of sexuality was considered the only way to restore the original androgenic Adam. Encratism became the rule of this community’s ethic. In chapter 8 this development is described as a “mystical revival,” where Hermetism is used as a key to understanding it. The “immanent Apocalypse” described in chapter 9 is considered the last development of Thomas community.

Chapter 10 is a summary of DeConick’s theses. A bibliography and indexes of references and of authors close the book, which should have in a short time a companion volume containing the translation of the Gospel of Thomas with a commentary.

On the whole, the volume is very well organized, and, even if sometimes a bit repetitive, DeConick’s theses are carefully developed: every statement is founded on good knowledge of scholarship, on an attentive analysis of the sources, and set with care in the context of first- and second-century Christianity and Judaism (as also the bibliography shows). What I also like is the honesty of her statements: she makes clear since the beginning that hers is not the “latest breaking revelation of the truth on Christian origins” (as some other scholars like to introduce their books) but a tentative analysis of the sources, with the limits and the percentage of probability typical of every serious scientific research.

Some paths of research are still open to further examination, such as the relation of the Thomas Gospel with the Johannine literature, a more developed analysis of the role of knowledge in Thomas’s Gospel, and its relationship with Q. They will, one hopes, be

developed in the promised companion volume with the translation and commentary on the Gospel of Thomas. It could also be underlined that the role of Hermetism in Christian history, especially in connection with Gnosticism, is still a “young” field of research that needs further improvement, and its presence in Syria must be further analyzed.

The issue of the Son of Man also must be discussed a bit further. DeConick considers that Jesus used the title “son of man” rather to mean “I” or “a man”; only with Q in the 60s of the first century was this expression first used as a messianic title. She sees in the fact that Paul does not use it the proof that this was not considered a messianic title up to the 60s. I am not convinced that Jesus did not use this expression, at least in some instances, as a messianic title: we know from the Book of the Parables (1 Enoch) that “son of man” was clearly intended as a messianic title at Jesus’ time, and there is a good chance that this book had ties with Galilee. I think it is more reasonable to suppose that Jesus used a messianic title than that Christians introduced it later. Paul did not use the expression “Son of Man” simply because of his audience: Diaspora Jews and Gentiles could not understand it.

In the whole this is a very good book that sets the stage for a new chapter in this field of research. Time and new studies will tell if DeConick’s is a sound thesis and if it will be accepted by scholarship. So far, I think she offers us a challenge that must be accepted. I hope to read the promised commentary soon.