



Plisch, Uwe-Karsten

The Gospel of Thomas: Original Text with Commentary

Translated by Gesine Schenke Robinson

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Ever since the discovery of the full text of the Gospel of Thomas as the second text in Codex II of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1946, the Gospel has aroused enormous interest and generated a huge volume of secondary literature, and there is little sign that this flood of literature is ceasing. However, perhaps surprisingly, full detailed commentaries on the text of the Gospel of Thomas are not very numerous. Detailed studies on different aspects of the text and/or individual sayings abound, especially on the issue of the relationship of the Gospel of Thomas to the canonical Gospel tradition, but complete commentaries on the full text are relatively rare. Plisch's commentary offered here is thus very welcome as supplying a lacuna in the scholarly literature on the Gospel of Thomas.

The starting point for the book was the work of the Berline Arbeitskreis für koptisch-agnostische Schriften (led by Hans-Gerhard Bethge), who prepared versions of some of the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas for inclusion in a revised edition of Aland's *Synopsis* of the canonical Gospels and also prepared a German translation of the whole text in the volume *Nag Hammadi Deutsch I*. From this, the present commentary on the whole text has grown, the whole being translated (to a very high standard) by Gesine Robinson.

Plisch provides a relatively small introduction, dealing with all the standard issues one would expect to find covered in such a section of a commentary. He deals with the transmission of the text, the extant manuscripts, the possible time of composition, the issue of authorship, the literary form of the Gospel of Thomas, and its theological profile. The treatment is compact but thorough. No extravagant claims are made, and Plisch is generally cautious and uncontroversial in relation to Thomas scholarship. For example, he opines that the time of composition is probably unknown, but in any case the “author” (or perhaps editor or compiler) has used a number of different traditions; hence one cannot date each tradition on the basis of its presence in the present text of the Gospel of Thomas. The disparate nature of the present text is the result of individual sayings being put together with various principles in mind, but often in relation to “catchwords” linking various sayings on the basis of a common word used. Thus each saying, or tradition, must be considered on its own merits. The origin of the various sayings may be quite diverse: some may be very old, while others may be the result of later editing.

In a brief discussion of the “theological profile” of the text, Plisch argues that, although the Gospel was probably read and used by gnostics, there is nothing distinctively gnostic in the present text as it stands: for example, there is no clear reference to a gnostic myth of origins and nothing to suggest a distinction between the creator God and a redeemer God. The Gospel of Thomas shows a strong ascetic ethos of world-rejection, especially in relation to money and wealth; but this does not necessarily make the text gnostic.

For the commentary, Plisch prints the Coptic text (mostly from the form as it was printed in the edition in Aland’s *Synopsis*). Where the Greek fragments survive, the Greek text is printed underneath. Slightly more controversially, Plisch also gives a Greek “retroversion” of the Coptic text “whenever it has a parallel in the New Testament” (35, in part following again the pattern in Aland). An English translation of the Coptic text is also provided before giving a commentary on each saying. (In the cases where the Greek fragments survive, Plisch gives both a Greek retroversion of the Coptic as well as the witness of the Greek fragments.) Plisch is hardly out of line with mainstream scholarship in presuming that the “original” text of the Gospel of Thomas was written in Greek, but whether the provision of such a retroversion of the Coptic has a place here is somewhat debatable. (And, for example, in cases where the Greek and Coptic exist but differ from each other, it is by no means clear that the differences are due to a *Greek* version lying behind the present Coptic text; the differences could just have easily have arisen when the text was translated into Coptic.) Further, the existence of a “parallel in the New Testament” is clearly taken fairly loosely; for example, sayings 12 and 13 (the mini-dialogue between Jesus and the disciples about leading apostolic figures) have no obvious parallel in the New Testament and yet are given a Greek retroversion here. Other sayings

(e.g., saying 38) that might be regarded as just as close to New Testament traditions are not given a Greek retroversion.

The commentary on each saying is again fairly compact. Plisch deals very helpfully with particular points in the Coptic where the text as it stands is obscure, and he successfully elucidates problems in a way that is clear and accessible for those who are not Coptic experts (e.g., 35: “The prime concern of the commentary is the understanding of the text of the *Gospel of Thomas* as it is at hand”). Thus he discusses possible corruptions and suggested emendations of the present Coptic text, as well as other instances where the Coptic text is obscure for whatever reason. This part of the discussion will be particularly valuable for those who are not Coptic specialists.

In relation to the substance of the sayings, Plisch pays particular attention to the parallels in the canonical Gospels and provides a compact analysis of the similarities and differences between the versions, though usually without giving any categorical judgment about, for example, relative priority. For example, in saying 65 (the parable of the wicked husbandmen), Plisch elucidates clearly and concisely the way in which the version in the Gospel of Thomas has elements that seem to be more primitive than all the Synoptic versions (e.g., in lacking any clearly allegorical features in the story), but equally has some features that seem to be result of later editing (e.g., the musing by the master after the mistreatment of one of the slaves, saying to himself “perhaps they did not recognize him”). No clear verdict is given here, but the evidence is clearly set down for the reader to see what the issues are and what is the (varied) evidence. For the most part, however, Plisch inclines to a view of independent use of similar traditions rather than any direct dependence. Certainly any theory of direct dependence is unlikely if it is envisaged that “Thomas” had a copy of one (or more) of the canonical Gospels open in front of him as he wrote. Nevertheless, a theory of independent use of common traditions still leaves open the stage of the tradition in question as used by the Gospel of Thomas and whether this presupposes the use made of the tradition by one (or more) of the canonical Evangelists.

Elsewhere Plisch draws on extensive knowledge of early Christian, and gnostic, literature to illuminate many of the sayings. Although his overall claim is that the Gospel of Thomas is generally not a “gnostic” text, Plisch is fully aware that one or two sayings do come very close to what many would call “gnostic” in what they say. (But, as Plisch clearly argues, the very variegated nature of the collection of sayings here means that one cannot generalize from one or two sayings to making judgments about the Gospel as a whole.) Thus, in saying 50 (with the reference to questions such as “where are you from?” as well as the specific mention of “light” here), Plisch sets out clearly the gnostic parallels (as well as other parallels in nongnostic texts). So, too, in commenting on saying 52 (with

its apparent rejection of the value of the Jewish tradition), Plisch sets out parallels from elsewhere in gnostic and other literature.

There is no question that this is an important addition to the literature on the Gospel of Thomas and will be very valuable for all those doing any kind of detailed work on the text as well as for those with more general interests in the Gospel of Thomas. All will be grateful to have this commentary widely available to consult.