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## April DeConick Talks on Her Translation of Gospel of Thomas

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There's a new take on a lost book of the gospels in the Bible. WGLT's Charlie Schlenker talks with an Illinois Wesleyan University Scholar who has a new book on and is translating the Aramaic text of the Gospel of Thomas....

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TAG: To hear an extended interview with Illinois Wesleyan University Religion Scholar April DeConick (deh-KOH-nick), go to the newsroom section of wgl-dot-org.

Charlie Schlenker: Many biblical scholars take issue with the Gospel of Thomas, which we must note is not included right along there with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in your standard Sunday school offering. It was only rediscovered in 1945 in a manuscript found in Egypt. The prevailing word is that it's radical, representing new or lost Christianity or some early heresy for which it was purged. Professor April DeConick's new book, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*, takes a new approach.

April DeConick: Well what I attempt to do is to recover the earliest layer of sayings in the Gospel of Thomas and find that these earlier sayings in fact represent a sort of Christianity and Jesus—picture of Jesus that is very similar to the New Testament.

Charlie Schlenker: How so?

April DeConick: Particularly in terms of the view of the apocalypse, that the end of the world is very soon in coming and that one needs to prepare for God's judgment, which is right around the corner.

Charlie Schlenker: And this is right in with what Jesus was teaching at the time?

April DeConick: This is part of his Jewish message, which is that of a—we call him an eschatological prophet—someone who is teaching that the end of the world is very near and God's judgment is very near.

Charlie Schlenker: And when it turned out to be not so near, well after the time of Jesus himself—

April DeConick: Right.

Charlie Schlenker: What happened? How did the religion shift?

April DeConick: Well, in the Gospel of Thomas we find that it shifts by taking an internal perspective regarding the apocalypse and this, in essence, means that the experience of God, rather than becoming an end of the world event, becomes a personal event, a mystical event, and the people who wrote the Gospel of Thomas believed in a sort of mystical experience of God through vision of some sort and that they believe that this would transform them, that they would receive all the awards of paradise here while they still lived here on earth.

Charlie Schlenker: How do you think the Gospel of Thomas shifts the current understanding of Jesus?

April DeConick: Well I think what this book will do is there—is the—what’s known in scholarship as a quest for the historical Jesus and in this quest, recently, it has been the tendency of scholars to suggest that Jesus was not an apocalyptic thinker and that he was really a philosopher of sorts that didn’t have anything to say about the end of the world and this they base on the Gospel of Thomas’ perspective of Jesus, which if you look at the Gospel of Thomas as a whole, it is a mystical gospel which is not preaching about the end of the world, but that is because of the later sayings that have entered into it and have shifted its perspective. But originally it was an apocalyptic gospel and so this would suggest that Jesus, in fact, was a prophet who was very concerned about the end of the world and God’s judgment.

Charlie Schlenker: How then did the Gospel of Thomas get tossed away if it really was right in line with what else was being taught until these revisions started to creep in?

April DeConick: That’s a very good question. Along with this perspective of internalizing the apocalypse, the Thomasian Christians also thought that they needed to live this out in their lives and one of the ways they did this was by taking on celibacy as their lifestyle. They believed that by being celibate they were imitating the angels in heaven and their—the resurrected body, which, in heaven, they believed, there would no longer be a need for marriage or procreation. So in some essences, this sort of Christianity ends up dying out, or, if you want to look at it a different way, it becomes part of the monastic tradition in Syria.

Charlie Schlenker: How does the mystic component of the Gospel of Thomas actually survive in other parts of the gospels in other parts of Christianity?

April DeConick: It particularly survives in the Eastern Orthodox tradition and in that tradition, there is the teaching that one is progressively trying to transform yourself into the image of God. This is an image that you were originally created in and had diminished as a result of Adam’s fall, and one of the ways that you can achieve this image of God again over your lifetime is through contemplative activities and trying to have a vision—a great vision of God. This is taught particularly in the monasteries but it’s also part of popular Eastern Orthodoxy as well with their use of icons and that sort of activity.

Charlie Schlenker: You call the earliest layer of the Gospel of Thomas the kernel, about sixty of the one-hundred and fourteen or so sayings of Jesus, nearly 50% are original. What's in the kernel?

April DeConick: It is—consists of sayings of Jesus that looked to be from the Jerusalem Church, which is the first church consisting of Jesus' disciples and his family and other followers. It looks to have been an early gospel that was written in Aramaic that was carried to Syria by the Jerusalem missionaries and once it reached Syria, in the end, that church began experiencing what we call the **delay of the escatan**, or the delay of the end of the world. It looks like it was revised over a period of about sixty years in which the mystical aspect of the gospel became the priority.

Charlie Schlenker: Where do those sayings of Jesus—do they crop up in other books of the Bible as well?

April DeConick: They do. There are many parallels with Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They're in the, what I call, the kernel gospel, or this original Aramaic gospel. There are even sayings that are paralleled in Thomas and in Matthew, Mark, and Luke where we can see an Aramaic substratum and what I mean by that is that the—if you look behind the Coptic and Greek of the Gospel of Thomas and then you look behind the Greek of the synoptic gospels, we'll find a common Aramaic word that was translated in different ways into Greek, both into Thomas and into the synoptics.

Charlie Schlenker: How does that affect meaning in a couple key cases?

April DeConick: What it does in meaning is it will—you'll have an Aramaic word which can mean two things and so the Greek translator in the synoptics would take it to mean one of these things whereas in the Gospel of Thomas it would be taken to mean another thing. So the—there's a case of the word for "cellar", that is c-e-l-l-a-r. In the Gospel of Thomas it becomes translated "a hidden place" and in the synoptics it takes on a—yet another meaning, so—but both can be traced back to that.

Charlie Schlenker: Why has the experience of the early Syrian Christian Church become lost to Western scholars?

April DeConick: I believe that it has to do with the fact that we, as Western scholars, are so—we're brought up in the West, we're brought up with Roman Catholic tradition or Protestant tradition, which really emphasizes the cross, the atonement of Jesus, even in—within the Eucharist activity, it is a sacrificial meal in which one participates in the atonement. This is not the type of Christianity that we find in the East. It's not that the cross is absent but the Eucharist, for instance, is a meal in which one partakes of the Divine body and the Divine blood and in so doing, it acts, if you will, as a type of medicine almost that divinizes your body and so you have an experience of that one-ment with God or unification with God through that activity. The East emphasizes the incarnation of Jesus, the incarnation of the Divine with the human and so these are elements of Christianity that, of course, are present in the west but they are the focus of the east where the atonement is of the West.

Charlie Schlenker: What is valuable in this book for your average Sunday participant in a main-line Protestant or—denomination or Roman Catholic observant person?

April DeConick: One of the things that this book does I think is, if you will, say the Gospel of Thomas for Christians today. At the present time in scholarship, the Gospel of Thomas is understood to be a Gnostic gospel or heretical gospel, which means that Christians today don't have to pay attention to it. It also suggests that it doesn't tell us anything about early Christianity or about Jesus, and so this book is pretty radical in that respect because it means that it's necessary to take a look at this text, it does contain very early versions of sayings of Jesus, and it informs Christians of different perspectives of early Christianity, many of which are still being carried on today.

Charlie Schlenker: April DeConick, the author of *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*, she is currently completing a new English translation of the Gospel with a commentary as well. I'm Charlie Schlenker, WGLT News.