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Finding Thomas

Professor of Religion April DeConick's search for the true Gospel of Thomas brings insight into what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus.

Story by CANDACE SCHILLING



Between frequent visits to her office by her Illinois Wesleyan students, DeConick finds a few minutes to continue work on her next book. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

In the 1940s, an Egyptian peasant named Muhammad had a simple errand: to find fuel for his mother's cooking fire. When he opened a large clay pot buried in the sand, he did not see priceless ancient texts. He saw kindling.

April DeConick, Illinois Wesleyan associate professor and chair of religion, says we do not know how much material went up in flames before the town scholar explained they were valuable. After passing through the hands of various antiquities dealers, a total of 52 early Christian texts in 13 leather-bound books arrived at the Coptic Museum in Cairo in the 1950s. Some texts were familiar, but 40 were new discoveries in the clay pot, which scholars believe may have been buried centuries ago to avoid destruction by a fourth-century bishop in Alexandria who had ordered the destruction of all texts except ones he endorsed.

One of those buried texts was a puzzling collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus and named the Gospel of Thomas because of its opening line: "These are the secret words that the Living Jesus spoke and that Judas Thomas [i.e., the Apostle Thomas] wrote down." DeConick read an English translation of Thomas, given to her by her mother, for the first time as a college junior in the 1980s. "I was fascinated to discover sayings of Jesus that I had never heard before, such as, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is inside of you and outside. Whoever knows himself shall find it.'" She also noted alternative versions of Jesus' traditional words found in New Testament gospels, such as "'Come to me, for my yoke is mild and my lordship gentle. You will find rest.'"

Excited by her discovery, DeConick carried the book to her religion professor. When he dismissed Thomas as "heretical" and "a waste of time," the professor did not quench his student's interest — he amplified it. DeConick was determined to learn more.

Early Christian texts were not written in English, but in multiple languages such as Greek and Coptic, an ancient Egyptian language. To learn about Thomas, DeConick needed an understanding of ancient languages and history. "Out of frustration as much as excitement, I decided to major in early Christian studies to gain the tools I needed to make sense of it all."

Rather than starting with contemporary theories, DeConick says she likes to go directly to a text. "I like to listen to what the text is telling me," she says. Today, DeConick knows the Coptic language so well she offers a course in it. Graduate work at the University of Michigan carried her to Greece and Turkey and led to a Ph.D. in 1994 after acceptance of her dissertation on Thomas, later published as a book. A second book on the gospels of John and Thomas followed in 2001.

Research for her most recent book, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*, returned her to the subject that first drew her to biblical studies. A companion

volume, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, will be released later this year.

DeConick is not the only scholar intrigued by the Gospel of Thomas. Academic works about Thomas as well as popular books aimed at the general public have been published for years. However, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas* explains the mysteries of this lost gospel in ways that surprised even DeConick, setting this book apart from its predecessors.

According to DeConick, older texts such as Thomas can provide powerful clues about early Christian communities and their philosophies. Such information, while valued by historians and scholars, can be meaningful to anyone interested in the beginning of the Christian faith, she says. Once scholars can estimate when a text was written, history can tell us what life was like at that time, and can also offer ideas about what might have influenced ancient authors, from political or religious forces to cultural issues.

Like DeConick's college religion professor, many scholars have labeled Thomas as heretical — that is, written later in time and outside the mainstream of the early church. In contrast, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas* presents startling new theories about when Thomas was written, and how. According to DeConick's research, Thomas was written in phases, but the original portions of the gospel were composed between 30 and 50 A.D., making it among earliest examples of Christian literature, arriving even sooner than the Pauline Letters, written between 50 and 60 A.D., and decades before the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.

To arrive at this conclusion, DeConick started with a simple question: How do you get information in a community whose members neither read nor write?

Cultures that use only verbal communication transmit their history and other messages differently than literate cultures like ours. Studies have been conducted since the early 1900s about the way messages are shaped by this type of verbal-only culture, but biblical scholars are just beginning to fully connect this research to their work with ancient literature. DeConick is one of these scholars.

DeConick's decision to investigate the origins of Thomas as an oral text was inspired by a question from one of her Illinois Wesleyan students. During a classroom discussion about Thomas, Mark Lamie '01 asked why the gospel contained a saying condemning the Jewish practice of circumcision, while also praising James, a Jewish-Christian leader who was in favor of it. DeConick set off to explain this apparent contradiction.

When DeConick began exploring studies of verbal-only cultures and “social memory” (the way stories are preserved over time) she realized they complemented her approach to Thomas as a gospel which expanded as the community grew, its needs changing as new problems emerged.

Speakers in verbal-only cultures had no scripts to memorize when passing on the stories and lessons of the past. Word-for-word memorization was not a goal in this type of society, and it would have been almost impossible. Instead, participants in these early communities used speeches “as a memory device,” DeConick says, learning those speeches through repetition as well as by asking questions.



DeConick encourages students in her classes to find their own answers to the questions she raises. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

In *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*, DeConick stepped beyond earlier theories about the limited impact of a verbal-only culture on ancient Christian literature. Instead, she identified Thomas as a “speech gospel,” a storage site for old speeches and new ideas from a changing community.

DeConick used several steps to separate the original material from any additions. Some materials contained questions about issues that would have been unlikely to surface in the time of Jesus. She looked for sudden subject changes, interpretative clauses, and other clues that material was new. Once identified, newer materials gave her a vocabulary of more modern terms; she went back over the materials to see which other sayings contained newer vocabulary or themes.

Her research was assisted by visits to libraries at Harvard, Oxford, and the British Museum to study fragmented sayings, written in Greek and discovered in 1890 in Egypt. Although the Greek fragments are not direct ancestors of the Coptic manuscript found in the clay pot in the 1940s, “they are older versions of the Gospel of Thomas,” DeConick says.

Her painstaking investigations led DeConick to the conclusion that the Gospel of Thomas had grown fluidly over time as the community grew and needed new interpretations of old sayings, such as rules on circumcision among an increasingly Gentile group of Christians.

As the first Christian missionaries spread into the Gentile world — including Egypt, where the Thomas manuscript and fragments were found — early Christianity quickly became very diverse. According to DeConick, communities such as those that embraced the Gospel of Thomas (called Thomasines by scholars) formed around the teachings of specific disciples and other Christian leaders.

“There were many ways to God,” she says. “There wasn’t one orthodox way, one right way. And I would hope that Christians or other religious people seeking an alternative to contemporary orthodoxy might look at this literature with an eye for their own spirituality.” While the contemporary view of faith focuses on adherence to certain beliefs and creeds, when Thomas was written, faith was defined more simply as “living your relationship with God,” says DeConick, who plans to release a popular, non-academic version of her book that will include a chapter about what this research could mean for Christians today.

Some of these early communities could be considered the spiritual ancestors of modern denominations, such as the way followers of Peter grew into the Catholic Church. Far from being a heretical gospel written later in the Christian tradition, the mystical elements of Christianity exhibited in Thomas probably represent the same thinking that grew into Eastern Orthodoxy. An increased understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy is a necessity for biblical scholars according to DeConick, and she hopes her research will open the doors for anyone in the West to consider that theology. “I know many Christians today would be interested in the notion of that mystical relationship with God, which ideally is a daily experience” in Eastern Orthodoxy.

For DeConick, continued study of Thomas and the diverse nature of early Christianity has enriched her faith. “One of the things that means a lot to me personally is Thomas’s position that the human being is not completely lost, and is not beyond its own redemption. In other words, in the Gospel of Thomas you have to work for your redemption. It’s not something that Jesus just came and did for you, and it’s all done and over with. ... You have to actively work to be a good person, and this is an important part of your salvation. You have God within, and that God-spark can guide you.”



DeConick stopped at the Pyramids of Giza during her trip to Egypt last year to study the original manuscript of the Gospel of Thomas, housed at the Coptic Museum in Cairo.

Christians unconsciously searched for a way to explain or justify specific, end-is-near messages from Jesus. “These [apocalyptic] traditions get rewritten quickly,” she says. “But they preserve it, which shows it’s noteworthy.”

As this group of Thomasine Christians began to reshape their worldview, they “attempted to bring the apocalypse within.” Believing the world had, in fact, ended and the new kingdom was already in place, the community began emphasizing androgyny, celibacy, and other characteristics ancients assigned to angels. By no longer procreating, they believed they were “stopping the cosmos” and bringing the world to an end in the present, she says. The Thomasines tried to create a utopian kingdom on earth by living like the angels.

In the course of her research, DeConick identified five distinct speeches which she believes to be the earliest, “original” Gospel of Thomas in its written form. These speeches all relay firmly apocalyptic messages, including selection of the worthy few and the imminent kingdom of God. Her discovery that these earlier parts of Thomas are apocalyptic contradicts some scholarly work which asserts Jesus spoke in the earliest literature in the voice of a sage rather than an eschatological prophet focused on the End of the World.

For decades, trying to determine what Jesus “actually” said has been a fashionable pursuit for biblical scholars. Methods for separating actual quotes from sayings later attributed to Jesus vary. She says some scholars used a “dissimilarity principle” to theorize that we can’t be sure that sayings addressing Jewish themes originated with Jesus since they were popular topics discussed by other Jews in his time, such as the End of the World. Instead, those scholars focus on the notion that he introduced only fresh, unique ideas. “That’s a very silly position,” says DeConick, “because Jesus was Jewish. So Jesus ... has to be talking about things that are Jewish.”

DeConick points out the first Christians knew Jesus and walked with him, so they would probably not make drastic changes to his words or identity. Traditions tend to develop in “baby steps.” If, as DeConick postulates, Thomas contains the earliest documentation of those words, “as historians if we can actually pinpoint what his self-identity is, I think it would have been an eschatological prophet.”

DeConick recognizes a certain irony in this conclusion. As she writes in *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*, she began to study the Gospel of Thomas because she was, she says, “enchanted with H. Koester’s arguments for an early, non-apocalyptic Thomas and J.D. Crossan’s arguments for the Sage Jesus. ... At the

While embracing a mystical connection to God, the Thomasines faced a more tangible dilemma, according to DeConick, related to the belief that Jesus had prophesied the End of the World, or “eschaton.” Early Christian communities such as the Thomasines believed this eschaton was rapidly approaching, but as years and then decades passed those groups were forced to reckon with the fact that the world had not ended as prophesied.

The responses of modern religious groups to unfulfilled prophecy could have also occurred in the Thomasine community, DeConick believes. When a prediction such as a savior’s imminent return does not come true, a group will often say the original prophet or message was correct; it was their own interpretation which was flawed. They will rewrite their philosophies to bring them in line with this newest interpretation, fixing potential mistakes.

She believes such additions to Thomas occurred when early

time, I never suspected that, years later, after intense training and dedicated study, I would find myself in the uncanny position of unraveling what I had hoped to build upon as a scholar in my own right.”

What remains to be seen is how DeConick’s book will change the minds of other early Christian scholars. She says it may take some time to find that out. “Once material becomes visible, I think there’s a good eight to 10 years of ‘lag time.’” That lag is due to the fact that graduate students who come across new books are more likely to bring them into discussion than groups of scholars who may be more entrenched in older theories.

Still, there are indications that DeConick’s book will make an impact. Kevin Sullivan, assistant professor of New Testament at Marquette University, was an adjunct professor at Illinois Wesleyan from 2002 to 2004, while the book was still in its research phase. Sullivan points out that DeConick had already made important contributions to scholarly understanding of this gospel before the publication of her new book. “Those familiar with her previous works will not find her careful analysis and wonderful insights shocking. Those her assertions may shock are scholars who cling to older and incorrect understandings of Thomas.”

Stating that DeConick’s book “must be read by all scholars dealing with the Gospel of Thomas,” Sullivan points to Birger A. Pearson’s favorable review of the book at the November meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. Pearson — who is professor emeritus of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara — supplied *IWU Magazine* with a copy of his review.

Although he disagreed with her interpretation of some individual sayings, and also with aspects of her arguments on the history of Thomasine traditions, much of Pearson’s review focused on the groundbreaking nature of DeConick’s work. “If DeConick is right [that ‘an early philosophical form of Christianity is a romance of the modern (or post-modern) mind’] — and I am convinced that she is — much of current scholarship on Thomas ... has to be completely rethought. April DeConick, with her new book, has completely demolished it. ... In my opinion, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas* is right up there among the most important books ever published on that gospel.”

When asked how the book has been received, Pearson said, “It’s too early to tell. I suspect it will generate some controversy.”

If that happens, DeConick says she will have fulfilled a goal she had as a graduate student, when she dreamed of “writing a book that would make a difference.” At the same time, she keeps her research in perspective. Because the early Christians would have used the Jewish scriptures to interpret Jesus, his life, and death, DeConick says in some sense who Jesus was and what he actually said will always be in question.

That conclusion likely wouldn’t make much difference to the people whose sacred text was buried in a clay pot centuries ago. As DeConick writes in *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*, “The Christians responsible for the Gospel of Thomas were a charismatic community, believing that Jesus, through his spirit, continued to communicate with its members. One must imagine that, for them, not only were all of the sayings in their original gospel sayings of the Prophet himself, but every saying that was added to their gospel over the course of time as well. The ‘historical’ Jesus for them was the ‘living’ Jesus who was ever-present in their community.”