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IWU Professor's Book Offers New Understanding of The Gospel of Thomas

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Rather than representing a "new" or "lost" Christianity or some late Gnostic heresy, The Gospel of Thomas is one of the earliest texts from the first Church run by Jesus' family in Jerusalem and pre-dates the literary sources used by the synoptic Gospels, according to a new book by an Illinois Wesleyan University professor.

April DeConick, associate professor of religion at Illinois Wesleyan, is the author of *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*, published by Continuum.

In her new volume, DeConick adopts a new approach to understanding the document, which contains 114 sayings attributed to Jesus. Since the discovery of the manuscript in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, scholars have debated not only when the Gospel of Thomas was recorded but also its relationship to the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament.

DeConick argues that the Gospel of Thomas was intended to be "a storage site, a memory aid for early Christian preachers wishing to recite the sayings of Jesus." Based on her study of oral traditions, she contends that Thomas was neither a singly-authored text nor even one that was redacted in typical literary fashion.

In addition, she says that the text was originally written in Aramaic, which was Jesus' native language, and suggests that the Gospel of Thomas probably came from Syria, which had first been evangelized by the Aramaic-speaking Christians from Jerusalem.

"I think previous problems with examining the Gospel of Thomas are based on misunderstanding the oral tradition," said DeConick. "Oral studies show that a singer, or somebody who is transmitting the tradition, does not remember things verbatim but will remember the key point and a few phrases or words. Then, they will use their own words, change the subject, even alter the meaning to meet the needs of the audience."

As a product of such oral tradition, the Gospel of Thomas, in its current form, includes all the accretions that were made as the earliest Christian preachers performed and re-performed in front of various audiences.

But DeConick has identified what she calls the "Kernel" of the Gospel - those original sayings to which changes were made over time. This "Kernel" comprises what she says appear to be five speeches of Jesus, all of which began with a declaration from Jesus to "listen up" because he has mysteries to share with his followers, those who sought the truth.

In fact, the "kernel" sayings all have a clear apocalyptic message. These earliest preachers believed that the end was very near, and all of the sayings in the "kernel" underscore that belief, according to DeConick.

"They were very certain that they were living in the very end times," DeConick said. "The ethic of how they were living was end-time living: don't worry about raising a family, don't

worry about food and clothes, just get out and convert as many people as possible so that when God's judgment comes as many will be saved as can be. I think that was the mentality that is shown in these original sayings."

Once the end of the world did not materialize, those preachers who were performing the "Kernel" began to refocus their apocalyptic expectations. Instead of teaching about a cosmic end, the preachers refocused their message to mystical beliefs and practices. This led to the accretions that have caused the Gospel of Thomas to be misunderstood, DeConick says.

DeConick believes that the Gospel was first used in the years 30-50 C.D. From the years 60-120 C.E., the rest of the sayings were added to the Kernel as the Christians in Syria "began facing the fact that the World was here to stay, at least for a while.

"In the end, I believe that the Gospel of Thomas supports our traditional picture of Christianity," said DeConick. "Scholars from the West don't know Syrian Christianity very well because we were raised in Western traditions. I think that is why people thought that it was something radical. I think the text is actually quite orthodox as a form of Syrian Christianity."

DeConick is currently completing a new English translation of the Gospel of Thomas with a commentary.





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