

The Fifth Gospel

The Gospel
of Thomas
Comes of Age



Stephen J. Patterson
James M. Robinson
Hans-Gebhard Bethge

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Stephen J. Patterson
and James M. Robinson

With a New English Translation
by Hans-Gebhard Bethge et al.

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For
Hans-Martin Schenke
in gratitude

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Introduction

The Nag Hammadi library is a collection of ancient books discovered in Egypt in 1945, near the modern-day city of Nag Hammadi. An Egyptian peasant happened upon them where they lay, sealed in a rough clay jar buried in the talus at the base of the cliffs that line the Nile River in upper Egypt. These papyrus books (or codices), thirteen in all, date to the fourth century. They are written in Coptic, a new way to write the ancient tongue of Pharaonic Egypt still in use when Christians first came to Egypt in the late first or early second century. These early Christians used the Greek alphabet (together with a few characters unique to Coptic) to create a written form of this language, into which Christian works composed in Greek could be translated for use among the local population. The Nag Hammadi texts all share this history: they are Coptic translations of Greek originals made by Christian scribes for use in Egypt.

Within the thirteen volumes of the Nag Hammadi library were found almost fifty previously unknown or lost texts. Most of them are Christian tracts, though there are a number of Jewish and Hermetic texts, and at least one Greek philosophical text — a fragment of Plato's *Republic*. Thus, the Nag Hammadi library ranks among the major manuscript discoveries of the twentieth century of relevance to biblical studies. By far the most important of these newly discovered texts is the second tractate in Codex II of the library: the *Gospel of Thomas*.

The *Gospel of Thomas* is an ancient Christian gospel known from antiquity, but thought to have been lost — that is, until the Nag Hammadi discovery. It is not like the more

familiar gospels found in the New Testament, for it presents no story of Jesus, no accounts of his birth, life, death, or resurrection. Rather, it is a collection of 114 sayings ascribed to Jesus, each introduced with the simple formula, "Jesus says." A good number (about half) of these sayings were already known, since they are found also in the canonical gospels, principally in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Of the remaining sayings, a few were known from an occasional reference or odd quote found scattered in the literature of early Christianity. But the vast majority were entirely unknown before this remarkable discovery.

The Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* from Nag Hammadi is our only complete version of this gospel. As with most of the Nag Hammadi texts, the Greek original is lost, save for a few fragments discovered as part of another famous papyrus find in Egypt, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. Thus, when one speaks of the *Gospel of Thomas* today, it is usually to the Coptic version that one is referring. As with all ancient manuscripts, this single copy of *Thomas* has many errors and flaws — misspellings, omissions, holes in the papyrus — which scholars must try to correct and fill in before a proper translation can be made. In the case of New Testament texts, for which we have dozens of early manuscripts, this sort of critical work is facilitated by comparing different manuscripts with one another to arrive at the best original reading. In the case of *Thomas*, scholars must do this work without the advantage of comparison, since only one copy exists, and that a translation. It is much more difficult, painstaking, speculative, and sometimes simply impossible.

The first critical edition of the *Gospel of Thomas*, together with an English translation by the well-known British scholar R. McL. Wilson, appeared in 1959, just in time for the Christmas rush. It promptly sold over forty thousand copies! This very popular version of *Thomas* became the scholarly standard for many years to come. But it was produced before scholarship had advanced very far in understanding the textual problems in the manuscript and the many translational difficulties posed by the text. Since then

scholars have continued to study *Thomas*, making advances that have made it possible to produce new and better texts and translations of this important document of early Christianity.

We are pleased to offer in the present volume a translation of *Thomas* that we believe represents the culmination of the best scholarship on *Thomas*, gathered over many years in the same center of research that produced the initial translation of *Thomas* — Berlin. Out of that early flurry of activity there emerged a team of scholars with the disarming self-designation: Berlin Working Group for Coptic Gnostic Writings (Berliner Arbeitskreis für koptisch-gnostische Schriften). Originally founded by Hans-Martin Schenke, it is led today by Schenke's former student Hans-Gebhard Bethge. The Berlin Working Group continues to be the most important center for the study of the Nag Hammadi texts. It is therefore not surprising that, as the fruit of more than a generation of concentrated work, they have produced a critical Coptic text of the *Gospel of Thomas* superior to any previously available. Furthermore, their translations into German and English provide the most reliable access to the sayings themselves. Their original Coptic text and translations are available in the latest editions of Kurt Aland's *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (15th ed., 1996, 2d corrected printing, 1997), published by the German Bible Society.

The English translation presented here is an updated and editorially improved version of the 1996 Berlin Working Group's version, created by the coauthors of the present volume in consultation with Hans-Martin Schenke. In offering it to an English-speaking audience, we hope to make this text available to the novice and to the experienced scholar alike, as a way of encouraging further interest in this important text.

There are a number of standard sigla used in the translation to indicate various editorial decisions of the Berlin team:

- () Parentheses surround a word or words not in the Coptic text itself, but which an English reader needs in order to catch the tone of the original.
- < > Pointed brackets surround a word or words where the translation involves a correction of an error in the manuscript.
- [] Square brackets indicate places where a hole in the manuscript had led to the loss of one or more words. Often the team is able to supply the missing word(s) by conjecture; other times the hole must be left blank.
- { } Bracès indicate that the translators have omitted something that occurs in the original manuscript on the assumption that it is in error.

In addition to this translation of *Thomas*, we have provided two essays for persons possibly unfamiliar with this new gospel or with the events that led to its discovery and publication. The first (by Patterson) is a general introduction to the *Gospel of Thomas* as it appears now fifty years after its discovery. The second (by Robinson) tells the story of that discovery, recounts the subsequent work of bringing the new gospel to light, and assesses how the Nag Hammadi discovery has changed the landscape of New Testament scholarship. These essays will initiate the general reader to the discussion of this new text and will indicate avenues for further investigation. For those interested in reading more about *Thomas* and the Nag Hammadi library, we have provided a brief annotated list, "For Further Reading."

More than fifty years have now passed since the discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas*. With this new text and these essays it is hoped that we will help to set the stage for another fifty years of scholarship and inquiry every bit as productive as the first fifty. In presenting them we wish to acknowledge especially the work of the Berlin Working Group for Coptic Gnostic Writings, whose current members include, in addi-