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Book Reviews

André Gagné (translation, introduction and commentary). *The Gospel According to Thomas*. Apocryphes, Collection de poche de L'AEELAC 16; Turnhout: Brepols, 2019. Pp. x + 274. €40,00. ISBN: 978-2-503-58490-4.

The volume under review provides for the educated reader, who is interested in the early Christianities and the documents discovered near Nag Hammadi (around 1945, Egypt), a detailed and comprehensive introduction (5–42), a new translation (43–71) and a fresh commentary (73–240) to the Gospel according to Thomas. The reader can find at the end of the volume several guiding titles for further study (241–245), as well as indexes for subject, sources, and modern authors (247–274). André Gagné (Concordia University, Montreal, Canada) completed this work for the collection *Apocryphes, Collection de poche de L'AEELAC*, published by Brepols (Turnhout, Belgium).

In the introduction, the author situates his general insights and evaluations of the previous scholarship on what has become, in the last seventy-five years, the in-famous assemblage of fragments attributed to “the living Jesus” (43). Because Thomas is traditionally designated as “the collection of sayings,” the author tacitly assigns the text to a specific literary genre. Furthermore, Gagné accepts and disseminates the supposition that Thomas is presented to the potential reader as academics classify it in accordance to modern approaches on mixed genres (7). Gagné believes that the main word or concept that determines this assemblage of fragments, namely “gospel” (8–9), is not restricted to “a” story of Jesus’s life, instead conceives it in a broader perspective.

Moving on to the existent differences between “the Coptic version” of Thomas and “the Greek fragments” (P.Oxy. 1, 654, and 655) identified as being variants of the Coptic Thomas, the author arrives at the question: “How can one explain the differences between these two versions?” (13). One cannot imagine that Thomas has identical versions. Why would one do that? Thomas’s plural historical moments had not yet developed the same mindset through

which one thinks about the modern published text: being a fixed entity (image of thought) and having an author who can be acknowledged as such. All the other in-between scholarly assumptions or educated guesses which are present in the research on Thomas mask the fossilized post-Enlightenment tradition of research dedicated to the non-canonical documents.

However, being already inscribed in the above-mentioned tradition, the author refrains from offering an analysis about how it is profitable to develop a practice in order to read these fragments. Alternatively, one can inquire if there is today a profitable and unbiased way to read these assemblages of fragments. The author of this volume communicates his view from the inside of a particular disciplinary practice, which emphasizes and translates his position within the theoretical realm. The (re)construction of the scholarly approaches to Thomas is intentionally (dis)played in a neutral manner. The selection of what appears to be the “significant” scholarly work on Thomas highlights this strategy with surgical precision.

The translation offered by Gagné is new, clear, and flows nicely. In his translation, the author chooses to use “hidden” and not “secret” when he speaks about the fragments of Thomas. However, from the beginning of the volume, the reader remains without proper explanation for any of his terminological choices. Even if he deliberately chooses to avoid explanations, it is only legitimate to question and inquire about the missing arguments of such a position. One could ask how he arrived at this form, or why the other translations are not presented at all for a heuristic and useful comparison. He does not introduce his translation in order to show what the differences are in relation to the other translations, how they are different, and for what kind of reader this is a new translation.

The commentary is not a repetition of utterances identifiable in all the other commentaries to Thomas offered until now. The working strategy is obviously different, as the author avoids repetition as well as the previous scholarly traps. The main question about this commentary concerns the views expressed on Thomas. How one reads Thomas is not pre-described within this commentary. The experimental play of how one arrives in the situation to comment on Thomas or how one manages to comment upon an assemblage of fragments is not rigorously defined.

One can say that the commentary runs felicitously as a canonical and conventional commentary until the last saying of Thomas. However, the author says nothing about the *subscriptio* of Thomas: “The Gospel according to Thomas” (239). How one could or should understand this *subscriptio*? He avoids the perennial debate about the ‘originality’ of the title of Thomas. This

leaves the commentary in a positive state of incompleteness. The commentary is not engaged so much with the technique of cross-referencing of the New Testament writings or those existent within the cultural continuum to which Thomas belongs. Rather, it is restricted to emphasizing and building upon the newest scholarship available for the educated reader.

The commentary plays with the gospel's invitation to interpret Jesus' sayings (which Gagné assumes means that the interpretation lies with the reader) and scholars' assumptions that the gospel contains "catchwords" that are associations between fragments and topics. For Gagné, it is clear that the reader is involved within the game of hermeneutics: "[t]he *Gos.Thom.* puts forth a peculiar hermeneutic strategy whereby the interpretation lies not within the text but *within the reader*. The reader constructs the meaning of the text by establishing a network of sayings through various catchwords and themes scattered throughout the collection" (75). This means that Gagné's commentary abides by the opening statement imposed by Thomas. The reader can propose interpretations to the fragments of Thomas, since it is the "readers/hearers" of Thomas who have created the meaning of Thomas (87).

The main idea of this commentary resides in the proposal of an intra-textual perspective, through which one, together with the author, arrives to ideas such as singularity, multiplicity, plurality, becoming, and recurring vocabulary. The author of this book underlines that Thomas succeeds in creating its own "heresiological category," as well as the process through which Thomas undermines multiplicity in favor of singularity where the main role is assigned to the reader. Then he develops the idea that Thomas's de-contextualization and unconventionality urges the readers of the present volume to consider that these are parts of the deconstruction of conventional wisdom, already at work within the process of delivering alternative meanings to the canonical context. Unfortunately, the volume ends abruptly with no proper conclusions. Maybe it is in this omission that the reader is given the space to assign his or her own conclusions based on his or her own parallel reading of Thomas.

Gagné's three-fold enterprise, from introduction, to translation, and finally to the commentary of Thomas, is the latest attempt in the process of circumcising this assemblage of fragments. It seems to have become a scholarly tradition that every few years an enterprise such as the one under review appears on the market of Thomas scholarship. Although one can ask what arguments are behind all these repetitive texts dedicated to Thomas, it would be better to question if there is any originality, creativity and fecundity of ideas engaged in these plural inquiries. This book as a textual aggregate (introduction, translation and commentary) dedicated to Thomas, arrives to us as a scholarly product

relatively neutral to the ideological ties that have continuously strangled and circumcised Thomas in their attempts to strengthen the process of domestication of Nag Hammadi writings.

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