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## **Comments**

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# Seeing or Coming to the Child of the Living One? More on *Gospel of Thomas* Saying 37

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In a note published in *Harvard Theological Review* in 1995,<sup>1</sup> Gregory J. Riley suggests a new reading for a damaged portion of *Gospel of Thomas* 37. Previously, the saying was translated in this fashion:

His followers said, “When will you appear to us and when shall we see you?” Jesus said, “When you strip without being ashamed and you take your clothes and put them under your feet like little children and trample them, then [you] will see the child of the living one and you will not be afraid.”<sup>2</sup>

Riley questions the translation of the portion of the saying in Nag Hammadi Codex II, p. 39, at the end of line 34 (the last line), where the papyrus is damaged, and proposes that the reading “the[n yo]u [w]ill come” is preferable to “then [you] will see.” The proposed reading, if adopted, would significantly change the traditional interpretation of this saying, which has been understood to refer to enlightenment that comes from ritual participation in baptism or unction.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Gregory J. Riley, “A Note on the Text of *Gospel of Thomas* 37,” *HTR* 88 (1995) 179–81.

<sup>2</sup>Marvin Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) 39. Compare similar translations in Antoine Guillaumont et al., *The Gospel According to Thomas: Coptic Text Established and Translated* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959) 23; and Bentley Layton, ed., *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7, together with XIII, 2*, \* *Brit. Lib. Or.* 4926(1), and *P. Oxy.* 1, 654, 655 (NHS 20–21; Leiden: Brill, 1989) 1. 69.

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Garments of Shame,” *HR* 5 (1966) 217–38; Wayne A. Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity,” *HR* 13 (1973–

Riley's suggestion emerges from his examination of photographs of the Coptic manuscript of the *Gospel of Thomas* 37, particularly plate 49 published in *The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices: Codex II*.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of this examination, he proposes the reading ΤΟΤ[Ε ΤΕΤ]Ν[Ν]ΗΥ rather than ΤΟΤΕ [ΤΕΤ]ΝΑΝΑΥ as Bentley Layton and I read it.<sup>5</sup> (The key issue is whether Η or Δ is more probable as the penultimate Coptic letter on the line.) Riley defends his reading by claiming that his reconstruction makes more sense of the apparent ink traces and the space available on the manuscript.

Here I argue that Riley is mistaken in his interpretation of the evidence of the Coptic text, and that the reading that refers to seeing the child of the living one remains the more likely one. I base my argument on my own examination of the relevant photographs and the Coptic manuscript, as well as my assessment of the ink traces and the space available on the manuscript.

A quick glance at the Coptic text of *Gospel of Thomas* 37 on plate 49 of the *Facsimile Edition* makes it obvious how Riley could think Η more probable than Δ near the end of line 34. In the *Facsimile Edition*, a black horizontal line seems to link the vertical ink strokes that are visible. Yet, conversely, in the other photographs, the negatives, and the microfilm in the Nag Hammadi Archive housed in the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont Graduate University, there is no real evidence whatsoever for such a horizontal ink stroke near the end of line 34.

Furthermore, during a careful examination of the papyrus itself in October 1997, in the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo,<sup>6</sup> I was unable to see any evidence of such a horizontal ink stroke. I undertook this examination of the papyrus in natural, artificial, and ultraviolet light, with the aid of a magnifying glass. I was able to ascertain that the profile of the papyrus at the bottom right of manuscript p. 39 corresponds very well to the profile of the papyrus in the *Facsimile Edition* plate, with the possible exception of the black line seen only in that plate. In my exami-

74) 165–208; Dennis R. MacDonald, *There is No Male and Female: The Fate of a Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism* (HDR 20; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); April D. DeConick and Jarl Fossum, "Stripped Before God: A New Interpretation of Logion 37 in the *Gospel of Thomas*," VC 45 (1991) 125–50.

<sup>4</sup>The *Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices: Codex II* (Leiden: Brill [Department of Antiquities of the Arab Republic of Egypt, with UNESCO], 1974) pl. 49. In a footnote, Riley also states that he examined microfilm at the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont Graduate University, but it should be noted that the microfilm in question is of poor quality, and hence not particularly helpful. The Greek fragments of the *Gospel of Thomas* preserved in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri cannot help with regard to saying 37, since Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 655 breaks off before the line in question.

<sup>5</sup>Layton, *Nag Hammadi: Codex II*, 1. 68; Meyer, *Gospel of Thomas*, 38.

<sup>6</sup>I thank Madame Samiha Abd El-Shaheed, General Director of the Coptic Museum, and the staff of the Museum for allowing me access to the Coptic manuscript of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

nation of the papyrus, however, I was also able to see a tiny vertical papyrus fiber extending into the space (seen as a black line in the *Facsimile Edition*) between the vertical ink strokes in line 34. While this is not clearly visible in the published *Facsimile Edition*, this tiny fiber is clear as a white fleck in the original photograph reproduced as plate 49 in the *Facsimile Edition*. Hence, the space appearing as a black line in the *Facsimile Edition* must be simply the empty space, still seen today, where a bit of papyrus once broke off the page.

The discrepancy between Riley's observation and mine can be explained without great difficulty. The photograph used in the *Facsimile Edition* as plate 49, representing Nag Hammadi Codex II, p. 39, derives from the series of photographs made by the Center of Documentation in Cairo and provided to UNESCO in 1965–66.<sup>7</sup> The photographs in this series were taken against a black background, so that the color of the ink and the color of the background are indistinguishable on the photographs. In a conversation in February 1997, James Brashler, who worked in Stuttgart preparing the photographs for publication in the *Facsimile Edition*, explained to me how the black backgrounds of such photographs had to be painted out, and how readily mistakes could have been made. (Brashler admitted that the work often was done without an adequate Coptic transcription of the texts.)<sup>8</sup> In his review of *The Facsimile Edition: Codex II*, Bentley Layton has also called attention to these sorts of problems with plates in the published edition, and he concludes, "L'examen du ms., ou à tout le moins de bonnes épreuves photographiques exemptes de retouches, demeure essentiel."<sup>9</sup>

The black horizontal line Riley saw on plate 49 of the *Facsimile Edition*, then, is not ink at all but rather an unretouched portion of the black background of the photograph. There is thus no manuscript evidence for the horizontal ink stroke that would have made the reading of an Η probable.

Without clear manuscript evidence for the horizontal stroke of an Η, the ink traces and the available space on the manuscript support the Coptic transcription of Layton and myself. The second vertical stroke (of the two specified strokes) corresponds to the style of the scribal hand for writing the letter λ. The relative crowding of letters at the end of line 34 (which prompted Riley to prefer eight Coptic letters instead of the nine of Layton's and my transcription) reflects the scribal propensity to squeeze letters onto the ends of lines rather than opt for an awkward line break.<sup>10</sup> A perusal of the ends of lines on this Coptic page and adjacent pages in Codex II gives a number of good examples of this scribal tendency.

<sup>7</sup>*The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices: Codex II*, xvii.

<sup>8</sup>I have not yet been able to find out whether the collotype plates on which Brashler worked are still in existence and are available for examination.

<sup>9</sup>Layton, "Bulletin: Gnosticism," *RB* 83 (1976) 459.

<sup>10</sup>Compare also the discussion in Meyer, *The Letter of Peter to Philip: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (SBLDS 53; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981) 79.

In conclusion, the reading ΝΑΥ in *Gospel of Thomas* 37 remains the probable reading, much more likely than Riley's proposed reading, and the saying is best understood to present Jesus recommending enlightenment and clarity of vision. As this scholarly note itself may suggest, the advice recommending clarity of vision may apply not only to "the child of the living one," as the *Gospel of Thomas* would have it, but also to the very ink traces to be examined by scholars studying the *Gospel of Thomas*.