

Evidence for a Semitic-Language (Hebrew or Aramaic) Original behind the Coptic Gospel of Thomas

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While no other document of New Testament Apocrypha has received greater attention and critical study in the last 70 years since its discovery than the Coptic Gospel of Thomas,² neither has any other document remained such a mystery to its students and critics alike. Academic consensus has been unable to agree on the most basic of issues, from its original language, to the interpretation of its many cryptic logia. Some have suggested a Greek, Syriac, or even Coptic original, but so far none of these hypotheses has facilitated the text in yielding up its secrets. This paper will present evidence that the original language was Hebrew (or Aramaic)³ based on some formerly unintelligible expressions that are actually very plain in meaning when understood from the hypothesis of being an overly-literal translation of a Semitic-language vorlage—one which notably lacks its original idiom.

The first feature of note is “πτηρ” which literally means “the all.”⁴ It occurs in logion 2, “...and he will reign over the All,” logion 67, “He who knows the all...” and logion 77, “I am the all; the all came forth from me, and the all attained to me” (Blatz translation).⁵ This is not a very clear expression, and hence many translators who aim for a more fluid rendering simply ignore the prefixed definite article π- (“the”) and translate it merely as “all.” Yet, when faced with what it means, commentators gravitate to metaphysical answers, as if “the all” were spookily implying a doctrine of Metaphysical Monism or Absolute Idealism, or they treat it as the by-product of a garbled translation. However, the former is not a good approach to understanding a difficult text,

¹ Thanks go to Michael W. Grondin and Ruairidh MacMhanainn Bóid for providing feedback to an earlier draft of this paper.

² December 1945, near Nag Hammadi, Egypt: for an account of discovery, see M. Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 5–6.

³ Quite possibly Aramaic (of which Syriac is an eastern dialect), since most of the evidence presented here for Hebrew could also apply with minimal modification.

⁴ Sometimes translated with the capital, “the All,” to emphasize its unusual expression: see B. Blatz, *The Coptic Gospel of Thomas*, vol. 1 of *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 110–33.

⁵ B. Blatz, *The Coptic Gospel of Thomas*, vol. 1 of *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 110–33.

and the latter requires explanation. Previous interpretations have had it both ways—i.e. treating the text as corrupt (ignoring the definite article) while also attempting to reach for an idiom or deeper meaning which is not present. While this can render a tolerably readable translation, the sense is no clearer than before, which is evident by the many excursions of commentators into philosophical and religious dogma not implied in context.⁶

Nevertheless, if one were to search for an appropriate language source for such an expression via literal translation, one would eventually find that it agrees with a very ordinary Semitic idiom: the added definite article is actually just how Hebrew (and Aramaic) say “everything”: Heb. הַכֹּל (Ara. كُلُّ شَيْءٍ, *ḥaḥ*), lit. “the all.” Of course, if one were to do an extremely literal translation from Hebrew into English (or another language), it would come out as “the all,” but it would be lacking its former idiom, making it prone to misunderstanding: e.g. imagine trying to order “one of everything” at a roadside bagel stand, but the vendor thought you were saying, “I want one of the all”—they would no doubt have some trouble determining that you wanted to buy one of each item sold, rather than one with all toppings added, or the day’s entire stock of bagels, or one of the “Everything” bagels, etc. Likewise, it seems clear that the Coptic has here been misunderstood as implying something extraordinary and difficult to put into words, oblivious that it is likely just an overly-literal translation of an ordinary Semitic expression, yet still interpretable as of no less significance. Some reconstructions can accordingly be given as follows:

2 ... ΑΥΩ ΥΝΑΡ̄ ΡΡΟ ΕΧΜ ΠΤΗΡΥ

... וְיִהְיֶה מֶלֶךְ עַל הַכֹּל
... אֲנִי אֶבְרָכְךָ בְּכָל חַיִּים

... and he will become king over everything.

67 ΧΕΠΕΤΣΟΟΥΝ ΜΠΤΗΡΥ...

מִי שֶׁיֵּדַע אֶת-הַכֹּל...
... מִי יֵדַע בְּכָל חַיִּים

Whoever knows everything...

⁶ Ivan Miroshnikov has well noted the tricky implications of engaging such doctrine: “Jesus is not the all in the absolute sense; rather, in some respect, he is the all and, in some respect, he is not.” See I. Miroshnikov, *The Gospel of Thomas and Plato: A Study of the Impact of Platonism on the “Fifth Gospel,”* vol. 93 of *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, ed. J. van Oort and E. Thomassen (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 271–72.

77 ΑΝΟΚ' ΠΕ ΠΤΗΡΥ' ΝΤΑ ΠΤΗΡΥ' ΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤ' ΑΥΩ ΝΤΑΠΤΗΡΥ' ΠΩΖ ΨΑΡΟΕΙ
 אֲנֹכִי הוּא הַכֹּל יֵצָא הַכֹּל מִקֶּרְבִּי וְגַם בָּקָע הַכֹּל אֵלַי
 אֲנִי אֲנִי הוּא הַכֹּל נִפְסָה הַכֹּל מִן סוּבִי אֲנִי אֲנִי הַכֹּל לֵאלֹהִים

I myself am everything: everything came forth from my midst, and even everything broke forth unto me.

Other examples of overly-literal and unidiomatic translations are much more surprising. Take for example logion 4: “The man aged in days will not hesitate to ask a little child of seven days about the place of life, and he will live; for there are many first who shall be last, and they shall become a single one” (Blatz).

Critics have struggled with the conclusion of this verse: it doesn’t seem to make much sense. The saying is evidently differentiating between two individuals and their expected outcomes. It is a status reversal, so in what sense do they become a “single one”? What would that mean? Many would be quick to jump at a connection to Plato’s Idealism and its unification of reality under the totality of the Forms, ultimately partaking in the ‘Form of the Good’—which, in some sense Idealists like Plato (and others, such as Material Monists, and most philosophers since Parmenides) are right that everything is really all one—but why would that make any sense here in the context of this logion? It doesn’t. It is rather another attempt at covering up a bad translation with even worse philosophy.⁷ The words typically translated as “single one” are a somewhat rare Coptic expression: “ογα ογωτ.” However, if that were the intended meaning here, the text defectively does not include the genitive proclitic Ν- (i.e. ογα νογωτ) as normally occurring in the Sahidic bible—e.g. Jo 8:17, Jgs 4:16, 2 Sam 17:22, etc.—and the database entries in the *Coptic Dictionary Online* for ογα and ογωτ instead refer “single one” to just this construction ογα νογωτ.⁸ Yet, even with the prefixed adjective linker (Ν-), the Sahidic of both John 5:44 and Romans 15:5 use ογα νογωτ reciprocally for “one another”⁹ in place of the

⁷ Worse exegeses than metaphysical ones have been made. Marvin Meyer suggested the popularity of sexual union in “homosexual or heterosexual intercourse,” which is implausible in the logion’s context of an old man and a little child: see M. W. Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 70. Additionally, theories of hermaphroditic Primal Man doctrine have been brought into vogue, which only compounds incredulity in context: see A. F. J. Klijn, “The ‘Single One’ in the Gospel of Thomas,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962), 271–78.

⁸ See TLA lemma no. C5191 (ογα νογωτ), in: *Coptic Dictionary Online*, ed. by the Koptische/Coptic Electronic Language and Literature International Alliance (KELLIA), <https://coptic-dictionary.org/entry.cgi?tla=C5191> (accessed 2022-05-28).

⁹ See G. W. Horner, ed., *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Southern Dialect, Otherwise Called Sahidic and Thebaic*, vol. 3 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1911), 78–79; also: G. W. Horner, ed., *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Southern Dialect, Otherwise Called Sahidic and Thebaic*, vol. 4 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1920), 148–49.

reduplicated Greek genitive plural ἀλλήλοις (cf. respectively the Syriac Peshitta’s ܐܠܠܗܝܐ, “one from another,” and ܐܠܥܠܐ, “one upon another”). If the suggested former meaning were an acceptable possibility, then why wouldn’t this latter be as well? Apparently the possibility has gone unnoticed. And yet still, a further difficulty for proponents of the “single one” interpretation is differentiating the expression from another which is also used to signify “single one” (ΜΟΝΑΧΟΣ) in logia 16, 49, and 75, but which can be used for “monk,” though not very distinguishable from “single one.”¹⁰ In sum, the logion is a complete mess both literally and exegetically.

Following the above mirror-translation method from Coptic into Hebrew and then seeing what idioms emerge, one can get a better idea of what went wrong. If we take the expressions “single house” (ἑὶ οἶκος) and “single pearl” (μαργαρίτης οἶκος) from logia 48 and 76 as a template for how the Coptic’s author could have handled such expressions of singularity—which in Hebrew would respectively be בֵּית אֶחָד (lit. “one house”) and מַרְגָּלִית אֶחָדָה (lit. “one pearl”)—then we would expect οὗτος οἶκος (“single one”) to correspond to אֶחָד אֶחָד (lit. “one one”). Indeed, this same expression (אֶחָד אֶחָד) for “single one” is found in the Babylonian Talmud’s evaluation of individuals in a famous discussion of hermaphrodites (see TB Arakhin 4b). However, this is a rather rare usage: elsewhere, such as in Zevahim 74a, the same expression means “one (by) one.” In fact, Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew (as well as other Semitic languages) ordinarily double up terms, pairing them into two-unit reciprocal constructions in order to denote relationships of symmetry and asymmetry between both sides¹¹—hence the biblical idiom, “one after another, one by one, אֶחָד אֶחָד־לְאֶחָד” Isaiah 27:12 compare Ecclesiastes 7:27.”¹² It seems evident that the Coptic has either mistaken one of these uses for another, resulting in a garbled reading, or once again it has attempted an overly-literal translation and is lacking the essential idiom. Since the text also omits the following synoptic inversion, “and the last shall become first,” it is most likely aping

¹⁰ See I. Miroshnikov’s discussion in *The Gospel of Thomas and Plato: A Study of the Impact of Platonism on the “Fifth Gospel”*, vol. 93 of *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, ed. J. van Oort and E. Thomassen (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 116–17.

¹¹ See Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, “Notes on the history of reciprocal NP-strategies in Semitic languages in a typological perspective,” *Diachronica* 31, no. 3 (2014): 337–78, doi 10.1075/dia.31.3.02bar.

¹² F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 25.

the Semitic expression without preserving its idiom of reciprocity: i.e. they will become “one another,” “one (after) another,” or simply “vice versa” (‘the last becoming first’ is implicit).¹³

Notably, this newly proposed reading offers some means for explaining the text as being related either originally or dependently to its expanded synoptic parallels (Mt 19:30, 20:16, Mk 10:31, and Lk 13:30). In further support for this reading, it should be noted that the only other instances of this ‘reciprocal’ expression in Thomas are found in sayings which likewise deal with a status reversal, either between men and women, or between members of numerical majorities and minorities (see logia 22 and 23). Accordingly, some reconstructions of logion 4 can be given as follows:

- 4 ὧΝΑΣΝΑΥ ΑΝ Ν̄ΟΙ ΠΡΩΜΕ Ν̄ΖΛΛΟ ΖΝ ΝΕΥΖΟΥ ΕΧΝΕ ΟΥΚΟΥΕΙ Ν̄ΩΗΡΕ ΨΗΜ ΕΥΖΝ
 ΣΑΨ̄ Ν̄ΖΟΥ ΕΤΒΕ ΠΤΟΠΟΣ Μ̄ΠΩΝΖ ΑΥΩ ὧΝΑΩΝΖ ΧΕΟΥΝ ΖΑΖ Ν̄ΨΟΡΠ ΝΑΡ̄
 ΖΔΕ ΑΥΩ Ν̄ΣΕΨΩΠΕ ΟΥΑ ΟΥΩΤ
 לֹא יִתְמַחֲמָה הַגִּבּוֹר הַזֶּקֶן בְּיָמָיו לְשִׂאֵל נֶעַר קָטָן בֶּן־שִׁבְעָה יָמִים עַל מְקוֹם־הַחַיִּים
 וַיַּחֲיֶה כִּי יֵשׁ רַבִּים רְאשִׁימִים שְׂיִהְיוּ אַחֲרָנִים וַיְהִיו לְאַחַד אֶחָד
 לֹא נִשְׁלַחֲמָה בְּרִיא הַשָּׂבָא כַּמְחַמָּה, לִמְחַל לֵלָא וְחַרָא כִּי חַבְכָּא נִשְׁתַּח
 הַחֲבִילָה הַנֶּשֶׁה אִשָּׁה הָאֵלֶּה שְׂחִתָּא סְחִתָּא הַנִּשְׁחָל אִשָּׁה אִשָּׁה לֵבָה נָה
 The man old in his days will not delay to ask a small child of seven days old about the place
 of life, and he will live. For there are many first who will be last, and they shall become
 one (after) another (i.e. “vice versa”).

One last piece of evidence can be given from logion 21 to help establish a thesis of Semitic originality. In answer to Mary’s question about what Jesus’ disciples are like, he makes an analogy that they are like little children dwelling in a field which is not their own, and that when the owners come, asking them to release their field to them, the children “are naked before them, in order to leave it to them and give them (back) their field” (Blatz). The saying makes no sense. Why would the children need to strip naked if they are giving the field back to its owners? It is absurd, yet most translators and commentators have followed along with just this assumption and reading, despite being unable to convincingly explain away its difficulty.¹⁴ However, if the

¹³ Curiously, George Howard discovered a reading omitting just this synoptic inversion in a polemical anti-Christian Hebrew text of Matthew: see G. Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 204.

¹⁴ Meyer ham-fistedly imposes a Metaphysical Dualist interpretation wherein by stripping naked the children “are liberated from their bodies”; however, this confuses the allegory with its own interpretation, as it is hard to imagine the children would be concerned with metaphysics in the first place: see M. W. Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 78.

problematic expression is back-translated into Hebrew it becomes evidently clear what the original meaning was. The prefix of the causative infinitive in Coptic (τρ-, or τρε-) would correspond to the Hebrew לְגָרוֹם, and when paired with the same verbal root כע (corresponding to עָזַב, which like Coptic also carries the sense of “to abandon”) as the owners’ request for them to “release” or “leave” the field, the expression “ΕΤΡΟΥΚΑΔΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΑΥ” would come out as לְגָרוֹם לָהֶם שְׁעִזְבוּהָ לָהֶם, meaning, “to make them abandon it to them.” Reconstructions of this portion of the logion can be given as follows:

21 ΝΤΟΥΥ ΚΕΚΑΚ ΑΖΗΥ ΜΠΟΥΜΤΟ ΕΒΟΛ ΕΤΡΟΥΚΑΔΕ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΑΥ ΝCΕ† ΤΟΥCΩΥΕ
ΝΑΥ ΔΙΑ

הֵם מִתְפַּשְׁטִים עֲרֻמִּים לְפָנֵיהֶם לְגָרוֹם שְׁעִזְבוּהָ לָהֶם וְלָתֵת לָהֶם אֶת-שְׂדֵהָם
מֵאַפְסֵהָ מֵאֵל בְּחֵלְסָא מֵהַמַּעֲשֵׂא לַחֲבֵרָה הַנַּעֲבָה לְהַחֲלִיף לָהֶם
מַעֲשֵׂא

They themselves (the youths) strip naked before them to make them abandon it to them and give them their field.

The reading now makes sense. The children essentially are mooning (attempting to offend) the owners of the field in order to get them to abandon it: i.e. they most certainly are not willingly giving back the field to its owners. In other words, the saying does not offer praise for Jesus’ disciples, but derision, warning Mary of their childish impetuosity.

From the above evidence, it can be seen that these difficult portions of the Coptic are likely due to a defective translation of a Hebrew (or Aramaic) original. This is probably the case with the entire text and its many other confused readings that have stumped scholars for nearly a century by now. Further evidences of Semitic originality exist in the Coptic text of the Gospel of Thomas (some of them far more astonishing than anything presented here), but for brevity’s sake the above examples can suffice. A full accounting will have to wait to be given, but it is there in the text, available for anyone curious enough to engage it through a method of mirror retro-translation as demonstrated above. Hopefully this short paper will only increase interest in such matters and spur others to investigate a hypothesis that has so far been neglected by Thomasine scholarship.¹⁵

¹⁵ As Simon Gathercole remarks, “Scholars have occasionally talked about Hebrew underlying particular words or phrases, but none to my knowledge have argued for a Hebrew composition *in toto*.” See S. Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2 of *Texts and Editions for New Testament Study*, ed. S. E. Porter and W. J. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 91.

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