It is warm today. During the daytime it was already very hot, but in the evening it is even worse. My colleagues have left me and have gone to town to enjoy the pleasures of the Arabic kitchen. I am sitting alone in the room of my hotel with a photocopy of the Coptic text before me. Gradually the letters combine themselves to words and make sense. Every now and then the beginning: ‘Jesus said’ does occur. This is a collection of Sayings of the Lord, there is no doubt. While I am reading and trying to make connections in time and place, I wonder whether this can be an unknown and yet authentic word of Jesus. For the first time in history a complete text of Sayings has come to light which could possibly enhance our knowledge of this enigmatic personality. And I realise that I am the first to read this new evidence after so many centuries and to make a provisional translation of the Gospel of Thomas.

Soon afterwards, in the fall of 1956, the war of the English and the French against Egypt broke out. We had to fly the country, the good American warship Thuban brought us to Naples and we returned home.

One Sunday afternoon I was sitting in my study. My wife does not want me to work on Sunday. Without working I took a book from the shelf and turned over the pages. It was a novel called the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, which was said to contain Judaic Christian traditions, highly heretical stuff. By chance my eyes fell on a passage in which it was said that the Pharisees and the scribes had been entrusted, had received, the key of the Kingdom, which is Gnosis, but did not give it to those who wanted to enter (III,18,3). In a flash it occurred to me that the same was to be found in logion 39 of the Gospel of Thomas. As a matter of fact the Greek version contained in the already known Oxyrhynchus Papyrus offered two

letters ελα. They had been supplied as ἐλεγε, he said, but obviously stood for ἔλα[αβον], they received: “Jesus said, The Pharisees and the Scribes have received the keys of Gnosis and have hidden them, they neither entered and did not admit those who wanted”. This was exactly the text of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies.

I became somewhat excited and concluded that then the Gospel of Thomas must contain part of the Gospel tradition of the Judaic Christians, the descendants of the primitive congregation of Jerusalem and could not possibly depend upon the synoptic Gentile Gospels Matthew and Luke or their common source, a Greek collection of logia called Q. And so the battle of Thomas began.

At that time most scholars supposed that the Pseudo-Clementine writings were a late novel without any historical value. The Judaic Christians, the descendants of the Hebrew faction in the church of Jerusalem, were held to have disappeared completely after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. There was a general tendency to consider extracanonical tradition as derived from the Gospels of the Church.

Moreover, quite a few scholars preferred to call Gnostic everything that did not agree with the text of the New Testament or their own kerygmatic theology. They called the Gospel of Thomas Gnostic. It was mainly on this issue that the debate focused: is the new text Gnostic, or rather ‘encratitic’, ascetic? There can be no doubt whatsoever that the Gospel of Thomas is ascetic. It attributes to Jesus the view that whosoever still acknowledges his father and his mother, is to be called the son of a harlot (105). And the Encratites, a Christian faction which rejected sex, alcohol and the eating of meat, said in so many words that marriage is a form of fornication. The Gospel of Thomas, according to a probable conjecture, teaches to hate your mother, because she gave you death (101).

The Encratites held that procreation is evil, because birth inevitably leads to death. According to ‘Thomas’ many are standing at the door, but only the bachelors will enter the bridal chamber and go to heaven (75).

This is exactly the essential difference between Encratites and Catholics: the former forbade marriage and sexual intercourse, the latter condoned it. The central figure of the Gospel of Thomas is the mona-choς, the single one, who has made the two one, who has transcended the differentiation of the sexes and made the male and the female to a single one, so that the male is no longer male and the female no