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The Gospel of Thomas

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The dry desert conditions in Egypt are ideal for the preservation of papyrus and other ancient writing materials. Two discoveries of papyri at two different sites in the Egyptian desert (Oxyrhynchus and Nag Hammadi) bear particular relevance to the Gospel of Thomas. Nearly 100 years ago Grenfell and Hunt discovered at Oxyrhynchus and published some fragmentary Greek papyri containing several sayings attributed to Jesus (Grenfell and Hunt 1897 and 1904). Although most of these sayings curiously did not have counterparts in the sayings already known in the canonical New Testament, these early Greek fragments were initially acknowledged simply as sayings unattested in the canonical tradition and unparalleled in other early Christian literature. They captured the imagination of scholar and layperson alike; their origin was unknown, but their significance was generally recognized.

Then, over 50 years ago, thirteen codices (ancient books constructed from papyrus sheets) were discovered at Nag Hammadi (Robinson 1979). These codices were written in Coptic, a dialect of Egyptian. Among the Coptic codices found in this collection (commonly called the “Nag Hammadi Library”) were a number of different tractates of great interest to scholars studying the literature of early Christianity because the codices contained a number of tractates entitled “gospels” (such as the “Gospel of Peter,” the “Gospel of Truth,” and the “Gospel of the Egyptians”) as well as a tractate (the second tractate of Codex II) entitled at the end “The Gospel According to Thomas.” Scholars eventually linked the earlier unattested Greek fragments discovered at Oxyrhynchus and the Coptic tractate entitled “The Gospel According to Thomas” discovered at Nag Hammadi. The earlier Greek sayings of Jesus were nearly the same as some of the Coptic sayings from the Gospel of Thomas. From that time forward, the Gospel of Thomas

became a permanent fixture in the search for understanding the origins and development of primitive Christianity. The desert of Egypt had preserved some Greek fragments and a complete Coptic version of a lost Gospel of Thomas.

Although these discoveries of Greek and Coptic sayings of Jesus attributed to the Gospel of Thomas were dramatic and exciting, the existence of such a gospel had long been known. Ancient Christian testimonia witnessed to knowledge of a gospel by this title and to ancient knowledge of some of the sayings that now are known to be part of the Gospel of Thomas (Attridge 1989:103–12). Modern knowledge was dependent upon these later testimonies until these dramatic discoveries made in Egypt's desert. The discovery of new gospel material, especially that of the Gospel of Thomas, inaugurated an international quest in the general public and among scholars to understand anew the origins and development of Christianity.

The discovery of the complete Coptic version of the Gospel of Thomas caused a great stir for three primary reasons. First, New Testament scholars had theorized for many years that behind Matthew's and Luke's revision of the Gospel of Mark stood a collection of sayings, known simply as the Synoptic Sayings Source Q (Kloppenborg 1987:1–40 provides a good history of the issue). This theory, known as the "two-source hypothesis," explains the literary relationship among the three synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) and it maintains that the earliest narrative gospel was Mark's. Matthew and Luke used the majority of Mark's gospel as the basis for their own gospels, and then added one other major source (called the Synoptic Sayings Source Q) in addition to some of their own traditions about Jesus, to supplement Mark's narrative frame. The Synoptic Sayings Source Q that Matthew and Luke used was considered a collection of sayings of Jesus without any narrative frame. The content of this Synoptic Sayings Source Q could only be established by comparing the sayings common to Matthew and Luke and by then reconstructing the common text; the genre of collections of "sayings of Jesus" remained theoretical. With the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas in Coptic, scholars finally had an actual document in the same genre as had been theorized, an existent gospel composed only of sayings of Jesus in a collection of sayings. Although the Gospel of Thomas is not believed to be the source that Matthew and Luke used, the fact that many of the sayings from it directly paralleled sayings known from the common Synoptic Sayings Source Q added strength to the argument that such a source could have existed. The

two-source hypothesis was in this way strengthened and renewed by the discovery.

Second, prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library, gnosticism could be studied primarily by reading the writings of those orthodox church writers (known as heresiologists) who described and copied parts of larger “heretical” works in their own anti-heresy literature in order to criticize supposed heretical beliefs. With the discovery of the presumed “gnostic” library at Nag Hammadi, church historians, historians of theology, and historians of religion finally had real and ancient gnostic documents that were not preserved by being embedded in heresiological treatises but that were both carefully copied and even more carefully preserved at a time when heterodoxy was being persecuted. These “heretical” writings would provide scholars with an original voice against which to evaluate the heresiologists’ assessment of gnosticism.

Finally, people (both among the academic and general public) who were interested in alternative Christianities, gnosticism, and syncretistic religions, as well as people who were either tired of or bored with the traditional view of Jesus were captivated by the voice present in these sayings. Many thought that they could hear immediately the words of Jesus without the intermediary of the institutional church and its orthodox theologians.

It has been over 50 years since the discovery and interest in the Gospel of Thomas has not waned. Of all of the Nag Hammadi documents, this gospel has received the most interest and been the subject of the most writing. It has been at the heart of a general debate about the historical Jesus, the status of the canonical view of Jesus and his sayings, and religious journalistic speculation. It has also been heatedly debated by European and American scholars.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

The Gospel of Thomas is a tractate preserved in two ways: a fragmentary set of Greek papyri; and a complete Coptic text written in a “particularly fine script” (Turner and Montefiore 1962:11). The physical evidence (that is, the actual papyras and codices) dates from about the year 200 CE for the Greek and the middle of the fourth century CE for the Coptic. The scholarly consensus holds that these two sources provide evidence for an earlier gospel written originally in Greek in Syria (Koester 1989:38), most probably emergent from the

Greek-speaking Jewish-Christian community (Quispel 1957; MacRae 1960) in Syrian Antioch (Desjardins 1992).

So what is this gospel that has been discovered in two different places, two languages, two versions, and from two different times? The answer to that question is not easy. The Greek fragments found at Oxyrhynchus and the Coptic version found at Nag Hammadi have both similarities and differences. The Coptic sayings comparable to the Greek do not seem to be a direct translation of the same Greek text, and the Greek seems to witness to another version of the gospel than the one on which the Coptic translation is based. So there is not really a singular gospel, but two divergent textual traditions. This situation makes a precise and well-delineated description of the Gospel of Thomas problematic, because the Gospel of Thomas may refer to a number of different elements in its textual history.

To answer the question about the exact referent, Edward Rewolinski (1996) has outlined clearly the various layers of the possible texts that may make up the gospel. These layers at once make the problem more complex and more simple: complex, in that the layers show the stages of the tractate's development; simple, because it allows me to locate a specific layer or phase of development for this commentary.

There are seven layers at least. First, there are the original sayings of Jesus that probably circulated orally and were repeated by various followers of Jesus in their own ministries. These sayings constitute the original field of possible sayings from which those in this particular gospel could have been selected. Second, there is the author of this particular collection of the sayings of Jesus who collected and then wrote the sayings down and published them. Not all the sayings of Jesus were recorded, rather the author or collector selected from those available. The second layer offers an opportunity both for an intentional selection of sayings from among the oral texts and for the adjustment of these sayings to suit the author's purpose and perspective. Third, the author's collection of sayings was probably used by various people and communities who would have read them, perhaps used them liturgically, and produced other copies of the gospel. In this process those people and communities probably adapted the sayings to their life-situations. This was a common practice in ancient Christian literature, especially in gospel literature, and it can safely be assumed to have occurred here and at any other stage in the transmission of the gospel. Fourth, these community adaptations of their text of the gospel would effect another text: the communities that produced the texts of the gospel would reproduce the text currently *in*

use in their communities and pass them on to others who would not know in what way the texts had been adjusted. Therefore, the subsequent text would reflect the particular community's changes and show how they made their own adjustments to fit their own life-situation. Fifth, there is the last Greek scribe who influenced the text of the gospel in transcribing it (as in the fragments discovered at Oxyrhynchus); changes often occurred each time a scribe produced another copy. A number of scribes (in Syria as well as Egypt) transcribed their text of the gospel; the Oxyrhynchus fragments provide the physical evidence of at least parts of the gospel for which we have witnesses. Sixth, there is the Coptic translation of the text. In all likelihood, more than one person translated the gospel into Coptic. Translations involve an interpretative process because the translator renders into another language (here Coptic) what he or she understands the original text (here Greek) to mean. The process of translation itself, then, provides another version in Coptic of the Greek text that came into the hands of the Coptic translator. And seventh, there is the last Coptic scribe who produced the text that was hidden in a jar in the fourth century only to be discovered at Nag Hammadi nearly fifteen centuries later.

Each one of these layers could safely be called the Gospel of Thomas, but clearly each one refers to a different production, version, or edition of the gospel that the author wrote. The gospel could refer to the original core of sayings, the author's originally published collection, the Greek editions used by any number of communities, the Greek edition to which the Oxyrhynchus fragments witness, one of the Coptic translations, or the final Coptic version that was discovered. For the purposes of this commentary, the Gospel of Thomas refers to the authorial level only as it can be discerned through the physical evidence of the Greek and the Coptic texts that have survived: in other words, this commentary looks to the text that the author originally created, but only to those versions that exist in one fragmentary Greek version and one (presumably) complete Coptic version.

The tractate that we call the Gospel of Thomas actually has two possible descriptions within the tractate itself (see Robinson 1971a; Meyer 1990). The Prologue calls it "The Secret Sayings that the Living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded." This designation would indicate that the tractate consists of a collection of secret sayings spoken by Jesus and recorded by Didymos Judas Thomas. The title found at the end of the tractate (as is customary in these documents) reads "The Gospel According to Thomas." Here the tractate becomes

an example of the literary genre “gospel,” and receives a title parallel to the canonical gospels in structure, namely a gospel “according to” an identified disciple authority in parallel to Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. This second designation creates problems, because the content of this gospel differs from those other texts in the genre in that there is comparatively little narrative material in the Gospel of Thomas (see Wilson 1960:4; but also Koester 1990a:80–84). Despite what it might be called, the tractate consists of a collection of sayings of Jesus.

The sayings are not in any particular order (Koester 1989:41–42): they are not organized by themes or topics; they are not organized with any discernible theological direction; they do not exhibit any particular logical or cohesive overall structure that holds them together (see Wilson 1960:4–10; Patterson 1993:94–102). The sayings are bound together by a diminutive narrative structure consisting mostly of the phrase “Jesus said.” Some evidence exists that the sayings were originally preserved in oral communication (Haenchen 1961–62; Cameron 1986:34), because there are words that link certain sayings in sequence (a list is provided in Patterson 1993:100–2), even though that sequence does not display any theological or literary connection beyond the linking words themselves.

Not all the sayings are unique to this collection. There are three classes of sayings in the Gospel of Thomas: those that have a parallel saying in the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke); sayings of Jesus attested elsewhere in early Christian literature, but that have no parallel in the canonical tradition of gospels; and hitherto unattested and unknown sayings of Jesus (MacRae 1960). Some of these sayings have parallels to other literature of the period, both religious and philosophical (Baker 1964 and 1965–66; Quispel 1981). Some sayings have distinct parallels to material in Paul’s Corinthian correspondence (Haenchen 1961; Davies 1983:138–47; Koester 1990b:51–52; Patterson 1991). Most all of the sayings are attributed to Jesus, although other people (disciples, for example) also speak and ask questions of Jesus.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

The Gospel of Thomas, as a collection of sayings of Jesus, does not purport to be a systematic or even an organized theological tractate. A collection of sayings by nature cannot fulfill expectations of a systematic presentation of discursive theology, so that any description of its

theology must emerge from the oblique references in the sayings. The theology of a collection of sayings must be constructed, that is, from such indirect and opaque elements as inferences, innuendo, connotations of words, analysis of metaphors, and other elements both non-theological and non-discursive. In constructing from these elements, the theology remains fragmentary: not every theological question that an ancient or a modern reader might ask will be addressed in a satisfactory or consistent manner. It must be made clear, however, that the Gospel of Thomas does indeed present a recognizable and articulated theology, but both the mode and the content of that theology differs from other theological discourses. The theology of the Gospel of Thomas, moreover, presents even greater challenges because some of its content (the sayings parallel to canonical sayings) is familiar from the canonical tradition. This familiarity with other scriptural traditions tends to emphasize the normative status of the canonical tradition and to underscore the deviations and differences from that tradition in this gospel. Even with these difficulties it is possible to construct some elements of a theology characteristic of the Gospel of Thomas.

I would characterize this theology as a performative theology whose mode of discourse and whose method of theology revolves about effecting a change in thought and understanding in the readers and hearers (both ancient and modern). The sayings challenge, puzzle, sometimes even provide conflicting information about a given subject, and in so confronting the readers and hearers force them to create in their own minds the place where all the elements fit together. The theology comes from the audience's own effort in reflecting and interpreting the sayings, and, therefore, it is a practical and constructed theology even for them. In communicating through a collection of sayings, moreover, the topics move rapidly from one to another with little meaningful connection between them. The sayings cajole the audience into thinking, experiencing, processing information, and responding to important issues of life and living without providing more than a brief time to consider the question fully. The audience's forced movement through and interpretation of rapidly changing topics and issues bases the theological reflection in cumulative experience emergent from their responses to the stimuli of the sayings. That is why it is performative theology: the theology emerges from the readers' and hearers' responses to the sayings and their sequence and their variety.

The community that forms around the collection of sayings is one created by the association of the readers and by their mutual experience

of finding the interpretation of the sayings. The community developed in this gospel is not one analogous to a parish, or a church, or any other organized group of people with a structure and a charter. Rather, this community is a loose confederation of people who have independently related to the sayings and found their interpretation, who have begun to perform the actions that inaugurate the new identity, and who have become capable of seeing other people who perform similar activities. The community, in short, is a by-product of the theological mode, a loose conglomeration of people of similar mentality and ways of living, but who do not necessarily live together as an intentional community. This introductory overview of the theology of the gospel will focus upon this performative aspect.

The person of Jesus

In the gospel, Jesus pronounces a number of sayings to his disciples. Actually, it is more complicated than that. In these sayings, the narrator presents Jesus as a character speaking to an audience, and at one point ([Saying 111](#)) the generally diminutive narrative voice breaks out of its hidden presence and asks “Does not Jesus say...?” as a direct address to the implied audience of the gospel. The narrator indicates that these sayings come from Jesus (“Jesus said”), so that the narrator adopts the voice of Jesus as its own. Jesus is the character the narrator has created to transmit the sayings.

This narrativized Jesus pronounces sayings. He functions primarily as a voice, and the gospel provides little information about his identity, his intellectual or emotional life, or any significant biographical information about the major events of his life. One time in the sayings, Jesus describes his emotion at the empty world full of spiritually blind people ([Saying 28](#): “My soul ached for the children of humanity”), but beyond that readers are not admitted into Jesus’ emotional structure. Moreover, Jesus’ mother and brothers are mentioned ([Saying 99](#)), although Jesus generally rejects the legitimacy and centrality of family bonds ([Sayings 55](#) and [101](#)) in favor of a redefined society ([Saying 99](#)) which is the group comprised of those who hear his sayings. The gospel affirms that Jesus appeared in the flesh to do his work in the world ([Saying 28](#)), and that he did not understand himself to be a philosopher, an angel, or a teacher ([Saying 13](#)). The most significant theological factor about the Gospel of Thomas is that it contains no information about the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The only mention of the crucifixion occurs in an indirect reference to his disciples carrying a

cross as does Jesus ([Saying 55](#)). Beyond these few elements, Jesus' life remains opaque.

The preceding examples provide a negative appraisal of the person of Jesus from the absence of biographical information. A more positive appraisal may be constructed from Jesus' function as the chief speaker in the narrative. The gospel presents Jesus as "the living Jesus" (Prologue) who is "the living one in (the audience's) presence" (Sayings [52](#) and [91](#), my parentheses). This gospel portrays Jesus as immediately accessible to the hearers of the sayings; his voice is that of a fully engaged speaker and guide who speaks the sayings to his followers ([Saying 38](#)). The readers of these sayings, then, connect not to the narrative of Jesus' life (as in the canonical gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John), but to his living presence as a person speaking directly to them.

Jesus entered the world as a fleshly being precisely in order to assist people to change their way of living ([Saying 28](#)). Consequently, Jesus' mission revolved about presenting hidden mysteries (Sayings [17](#) and [62](#)), reorganizing the meaning of discipleship (Sayings [3](#), [31](#), [34](#), [61](#), [101](#)), calling people who live in the world to a sober and full life ([Saying 28](#)), enabling people to drink from the bubbling well of his spiritual direction (Sayings [13](#) and [108](#); also see Sayings [45](#) and [114](#)), encouraging people to manifest their interior and spiritual selves ([Saying 70](#)), and leading the worthy to rest (Sayings [50](#), [51](#), [60](#), [90](#)). This mission may be best summarized in Jesus' saying: "Look to the living one as long as you live, otherwise you might the and then try to see the living one, and you will be unable to see" ([Saying 59](#)). The immediacy of Jesus' active speech underscores the urgency of the message to choose another mode of life.

Jesus is also constructed as a mystagogue ([Saying 17](#)), a revealer of sacred knowledge to seekers, who discloses the mysteries to those who are worthy ([Saying 62](#)). This mystagogic Jesus describes himself as the light, the "all" found in every place, the one who is the origin and destiny of all creation ([Saying 77](#)). As a bearer of secret wisdom (Prologue), Jesus is portrayed as a divine figure who not only permeates all life, but enables true vision to occur ([Saying 37](#)), and who guides people to the fulfilling of their deepest desires ([Saying 51](#)). Moreover, Jesus' presence becomes merged with the seekers so that there can be no distinction between Jesus and those who follow him ([Saying 108](#)).

Performances

Exploring what Jesus tells his readers to do in these sayings provides the most productive way of understanding Jesus' mission. Jesus instructs the readers in a new way of living, and his instructions advocate certain actions or performances that are appropriate to that new lifestyle. Jesus' sayings function at the heart of the new life; this means that the interpretation of the sayings is the key to the reformation of life. [Saying 1](#) encapsulates this central performance: "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death." Jesus' voice, and the content of his speaking, define the means of becoming a new person (Sayings [38](#) and [52](#)) and guide seekers to various discoveries that transform life (Sayings [5](#), [80](#), [91](#), [110](#)).

In addition to these more sublime instructions, Jesus also provides very practical guidance. His followers are advised: to reject pious acts such as fasting, praying, almsgiving, dietary restrictions (Sayings [6](#) and [104](#)), and circumcision ([Saying 53](#)); to have no worry about food and clothing ([Saying 36](#)); to renounce power ([Saying 81](#)) and wealth ([Saying 110](#)); to lend money to people who will not repay it ([Saying 95](#)); to endure persecution, hatred, and hunger (Sayings [68](#) and [69](#)); to practice privately the death-dealing relationship with the outside world ([Saying 98](#)); to love the other members of their community (Sayings [25](#), [26](#)); to hate father and mother, sisters and brothers (Sayings [55](#) and [101](#)); to manifest their interior and saving worth ([Saying 70](#)); to work on the reformation of their own life before helping others ([Saying 26](#)); to drink from Jesus' mouth so as to be united with him ([Saying 108](#)); to strip off their clothing without shame and to stomp upon them ([Saying 37](#)); to fast from the world and to observe the sabbath as a sabbath ([Saying 27](#)). This list exemplifies the specific performances these sayings advocate for the construction of an alternative way of living. They show the breadth and variety of factors involved in Jesus' message. The readers, both by performing these actions and especially by interpreting the puzzling sayings that Jesus speaks, become new people capable of living a new kind of life, and the contours of that new personality are carefully developed through Jesus' advocacy of specific actions.

Subjectivity

This new person (the subject, or subjectivity) that Jesus promulgates in these sayings may be constructed more specifically. The distinction between the newly envisioned identity and the dominant opposing

identity finds its expression most dramatically developed in two major areas: gender and singularity. This person has become in essence a third gender, a person no longer fitting in the cultural categories of male or female, but one who is now a fully integrated person with a body whose parts are replaced by newly understood parts in a sort of ascetical reconstruction of the meaning and significance of each member of the physical body ([Saying 22](#)). This third gender does not simply transcend the old male and female genders, but transforms both completely into a third gender identity that revolves about that integration. Jesus metaphorizes this integrated personality as that of a “single one,” a solitary, a person who lives alone and who combines the characteristics of old and young ([Saying 4](#)). This integral person lives in unity with other solitaries in a recreated or redefined family environment ([Saying 16](#)). This single person is elected to live as a solitary ([Saying 23](#) and [49](#)) and as a solitary is capable of miraculous powers over the physical world ([Saying 106](#)). The metaphorized “single one” makes concrete and defines the new third gender that replaces the former dual-gender paradigm.

The sayings further characterize this subjectivity. The person envisioned in these sayings is immortal: the seeker will not taste death ([Sayings 1, 11, 18, 19, 111](#)) and will reign forever ([Saying 2](#)) as a person of superlative gifts and power. The subject advanced by Jesus benefits from a form of pre-existent existence ([Saying 19](#)) that originates in light and returns to the light ([Sayings 24](#) and [50](#)) and that manifests an eternal and invisible image ([Saying 84](#)). This person lives in the world in a detached manner as a passerby ([Saying 42](#)) or even as an homeless itinerant ([Saying 86](#)) and yet clearly understands the distinction between the world posited in these sayings and the surrounding mundane world ([Saying 47](#); see also [Sayings 56, 110, 111](#)). This subject works hard at finding the interpretation of the sayings, but finds the difficult work a source of life ([Saying 58](#)). Jesus’ sayings construct a sort of divinized person united to Jesus through his mouth ([Saying 108](#)) who is of higher status than Adam ([Saying 85](#)) and who is worthy to enter into the most intimate relationship with Jesus in the bridal chamber where all the other solitaries live ([Saying 75](#)). The ultimate goal for this person is to find the rest ([Sayings 50, 51, 60, 90](#)) that comes from having learned the secret and hidden realities of life ([Sayings 5](#) and [6](#)).

The opponent, or the opposite type of subjectivity, also receives attention. These opponents are considered drunk and empty people ([Saying 28](#)) who are strong, but who can be defeated by the seekers ([Saying 35](#)). They live in a world that the seekers must reject ([Saying](#)

[110](#)) because it is analogous to a carcass ([Saying 56](#)). These opponents ought to be interpreted not as a specific group of people, but simply as all others who do not engage in the search for meaning that these sayings promulgate.

In contrast to this opponent, these sayings work at constructing a new and alternative subjectivity. Through reading the sayings of the Gospel of Thomas deliberately and consecutively, the readers gradually come to understand not only the new identity to which the sayings call them, but also the theology, anthropology, and cosmology that support that new identity. Although the contours of this subjectivity may be generally (and cursorily) described, they cannot ultimately become clear without a careful and close reading of each saying in the context of all the sayings in the collection. A number of scholars have developed summaries of this gospel's theology (see Gärtner 1961; Kaestli 1979:389–95; Davies 1983; Koester 1990a:124–28; Patterson 1993:121–57), but ultimately no summary will be able to capture the interactive and intellectually challenging process of hearing the sayings pronounced by Jesus and finding their interpretation. One can only understand the theology developed through these sayings by beginning the difficult task of searching and finding their interpretation. This attentive reading is, after all, the suggested strategy presented by the gospel itself.

THE DATE OF THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

Assigning a date to the Gospel of Thomas is very complex because it is difficult to know precisely to what a date is being assigned (see Rewolinski's description page 4). Scholars have proposed a date as early as 60 CE and as late as 140 CE, depending upon whether the Gospel of Thomas is identified with the original core of sayings, or with the author's published text, or with the Greek or Coptic texts, or with parallels in other literature. The physical evidence (the Greek fragments from 200 CE and the later Coptic codex) does not really help, because these versions provide more information about the actual production of the texts, rather than about the publication of the first Gospel of Thomas by its author. The fact that these two versions also differ from one another indicates that changes in the gospel occurred at some intervening time during both the production of the texts and their translation. Moreover, it is difficult to provide a date for a collection of sayings, because a collection, like any list, can be changed over time without any evidence of addition or subtraction being visible to later

readers. A collection may thus contain material much older than the first collecting of that material, and it may include material that later scribes considered sufficiently important or consistent to add.

An eclectic series of factors, then, must be considered in order to assign an accurate date to the tractate we have received as the Gospel of Thomas. Those factors include the following: comparing the Gospel of Thomas to other early Christian literature; an analysis of the way in which the gospel communicates through sayings of a wise person; that is, an analysis of the mode of discourse in the gospel and its genre; an attempt chronologically to locate the gospel in the context of the production of early Christian literature; and finally, a comparison of the gospel to other synchronous literature of the period. In the end, I argue that the Gospel of Thomas was composed during the first decade of the second century (100–110 CE), and that this gospel (together with the synchronous Gospel of John and Letters of Ignatius) form part of a common theological discourse at the turn of the first century.

The first means of dating the Gospel of Thomas emerges from a comparison to primitive and formative Christian literature. Parallels with other New Testament literature (especially the Synoptic Sayings Source Q) and sections of authentic Pauline literature suggest that parts of the material collected in these sayings comes from the period of Christian origins and reflect some of the earliest written forms of the sayings of Jesus from around 60 CE (Koester 1990b). The parallel parables seem to indicate that the version preserved in the Gospel of Thomas comes from the earliest, and least edited, level of the sayings of Jesus (see Turner and Montefiore 1962:40–78; Cameron 1986). Other comparisons with the Synoptic Sayings Source Q indicate that many sayings in Thomas come from a source equally as early as that source (Cameron 1986; Patterson 1993:18–71; cf. Schrage 1964). The occasional Pauline parallel indicates that some of the material reflects primitive Christian concerns (Koester 1990b:50–53). The dating of the Gospel of Thomas by means of the oldest core of sayings suggests an early date of 60–70 CE.

The later date (140 CE), one which I find more problematic, is suggested by comparing the content of the sayings with the theological content of later forms of gnosticism. Gnosticism is a theological and spiritual movement that advocates salvation through a particular knowledge (“gnosis”) provided by a savior, in the content of theology, and through specific mythologies of creation and redemption. Gnostic theology is often characterized as dualistic with regard to the relationship of the physical to the spiritual (see Rudolph 1977; Filoramo

1990). Historically, gnosticism as a Christian movement is documented in the second century CE (Wilson 1960:14–44); however, as a religious tendency or phenomenon, gnosticism is suspected to exist in other religious and philosophical writings of the first century BCE and the first centuries CE (see Bianchi 1967: xxvi–xxix). Valentinian and Sethian Gnosticism give evidence for the fully developed systems of gnosticism, while some wisdom traditions of Second Temple Jewish writings, some Greco-Roman philosophy, and Paul’s early Christian communities provide evidence of the developing gnostic movement (see Bianchi 1967; Layton 1981). These early Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman gnostic movements have been seen as precursors to the fully developed Christian gnosticism of the second century CE. The scholars who want to identify the theology of Thomas as “gnostic,” begin with the assumption of its gnostic nature and then proceed to justify that characterization through establishing parallels with the theology and mythology of later and fully developed gnosticism (Grant and Freedman 1960; Schoedel 1960; Gärtner 1961; Cullman 1962). These scholars employ the categories of the known anti-gnostic literature and correlate them to the newly discovered Gospel of Thomas (see Gärtner 1961). Almost every one of these scholars acknowledges, however, that the Gospel of Thomas does *not* contain any of the known systems or theologies of gnostic writers (see Wilson 1960:11), and yet they will insist that the document comes from the same period of historical theology. In the end, the terms “gnostic” and “gnosticism” have become increasingly difficult to use because there is such a wide discrepancy between the theological statements of the heresiologists who have defined the categories and the texts of supposed gnostic documents that the terms no longer aid interpretation. Recent surveys of scholarship provide important guidance to understanding this problem (see Fallon and Cameron 1988; Patterson 1992; Riley 1994). The application of a mid-second century CE date to the gospel fails to convince: there simply is no evidence for the fully developed gnostic systems in the Gospel of Thomas.

James Robinson (1971a) and John Kloppenborg (1987) developed a more productive comparative-literary strategy that has been followed by a majority of scholars working on the Gospel of Thomas today. This strategy identified the genre of the Gospel of Thomas and of the Synoptic Sayings Source Q as a collection of sayings of a wise person, and then it located both the Gospel and the Synoptic Sayings Source Q within the stream (or trajectory) of writings in that genre beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures, continuing with the intertestamental literature,

and ending with early Christian literature. Kloppenborg has located the genre and the form of these collections in the wider context of the ancient Near East.

Some background information will help explain the import of these observations. The genre of the sayings of the wise and the larger tradition of wisdom arose among the court scholars, or professional scribes, of the ancient Near East (see Wills 1990:22–38). These ancient scholars used short, pithy sayings as a means both to teach the skills of writing and to instruct the scribes in the mores of the court. When these wisdom collections were gathered together and published they became the nucleus of social and ethical formation for people living in any community. In the Hebrew Bible, the best examples of this genre of literature are *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes* (“the church’s book” because it was so popular among Christians; the teacher is *Qoheleth*). These biblical books (and many other Jewish and Christian ones as well) attest to the gradual organization by theme so that the wisdom of the ages would be more readily learned and applied. In the Hellenistic Jewish period (c. 250 BCE until 70 CE), this literature flourished, and the numerous early Christian translations into demotic languages (such as Syriac, Armenian, Coptic) indicate its popularity among Christians. Later in the Christian period, monks continued to produce literature in this genre, culminating in the *Sayings of the Desert Masters* (see Ward 1975). The specific genre of the sayings of the wise, as well as the wisdom tradition itself, has a very long history in Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman literature.

By locating the Gospel of Thomas within this stream of wisdom literature as a collection of the sayings of Jesus, the wise person, both Robinson and Kloppenborg have provided the parameters that determine the precise intellectual location of the gospel (see Patterson 1993:94–110). The gospel’s location in this tradition does not produce a precise date, but it does provide the information with which to begin to compare this gospel to other wisdom literature and other collections of the sayings of the wise.

The first important point of comparison relates to the earliest of the witnesses to formative Christianity, the letters of Paul. The wisdom orientation of the gospel connects with a discourse about wisdom found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (see Robinson 1971b:42–43; Koester 1980:248–50; Patterson 1991). Again, Helmut Koester (1990a: 50–53) identified the similarities between the Gospel of Thomas and 1 Corinthians. Paul argues against the understanding of Christianity as initiation into a mystery, as his opponents seem to have understood

baptism (1 Corinthians 1–4). Koester argues that Paul countered the hidden mysteries of his Christian opponents with a proclamation of the crucifixion as the hidden mystery (1 Corinthians 2.1). More important for the Gospel of Thomas is the mere presence of this conversation in the 50s CE, because it mirrors the understanding of Jesus and his wisdom found in the Prologue of the Gospel of Thomas: “These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke....” The mode of discourse in Thomas’ Prologue replicates the “mystery” language of 1 Corinthians. That kind of wisdom discourse among followers of Jesus begins in the 50s CE (as Paul’s letter indicates) and continues well into the middle of the fourth century (as the *Sayings of the Desert Masters* attests). Now, however, there are two important elements (the wisdom tradition and Paul’s letters) that pull the date of the Gospel of Thomas more toward the last quarter of the first century (for a summary of the arguments see Fallon and Cameron 1988; Patterson 1993:113–18).

A correlative way of dating the Gospel of Thomas is to attempt to place this tractate into the context of the production of literature in the formative period of Christianity prior to the third century. John Dominic Crossan (1991:427–34) has stratified the Jesus material according to chronology. The First Stratum, 30–60 CE includes (among others) the authentic Pauline letters, various fragmentary Oxyrhynchus papyri (P. Oxy. 1224) not in the Gospel of Thomas, The Synoptic Sayings Source Q, a Miracles Collection attested to in Mark and John, an Apocalyptic Scenario, a Cross Gospel now found in the Gospel of Peter, and the earliest layer of the Gospel of Thomas. During this period the material in the Gospel of Thomas that is parallel to these other early sources was recorded. Crossan’s Second Stratum, 60–80 CE, includes (among others) the Gospel of Mark, a Dialogue Collection (now found in the Dialogue of the Savior (Nag Hammadi Library tractate III, 5), the Signs Source for the Gospel of John, and some material in the Gospel of Thomas. Crossan’s Third Stratum, 80–120 CE, includes (among others) the writing of the Gospel of Matthew (c. 90 CE), Luke (also c. 90 CE), and the first edition of the Gospel of John (c. 100, but no later than 125 CE for which we have the earliest extant papyrus attestation). Crossan’s Fourth Stratum, 120–150 CE, includes the redaction of John’s Gospel, the writing of Luke’s second volume commonly called Acts, the Pastoral Epistles and the Catholic Epistles (among others).

For purposes of comparison, I would like to adopt Crossan’s stratification and focus (after some comments on the earlier ones) on the Third Stratum, the period in which the first edition of John’s gospel was

produced. The First Stratum contains important information about the early Jesus followers of a wide variety: those who collected sayings, others who were oriented toward the miracles, still others fascinated by the apocalypse, and others in the Pauline community who were living out a new form of universal Judaism. These communities in various ways related to a living Jesus, one speaking in the sayings, one immediately available in the miraculous manner of Moses' deeds to save the people of God, one present in the meal, one manifest in the community that formed his Body and that transgressed boundaries of gender, race, and class. This stratum, in short, is characterized by a wide diversity of forms and understandings of Jesus, those identified with him, and manners of living out the diversity in community.

I agree with Burton Mack (1988:318–24) that Mark was the one, in Crossan's Second Stratum, to write the document that held all the diversity together. The narrative of the biography provided the skeleton upon which a wide variety and even disparate sorts of Jesus material could be placed. This narrative strategy put limits on the often conflicting and immediate understandings of Jesus from the earlier generation, and produced a more acceptable biography of a secret messiah in the prophetic tradition. In order to get all the disparate parts to fit together, Mark had to place narrative controls on the material he was presenting and organizing.

In the third period, Matthew, Luke, and John begin to offer criticism of Mark's earlier project. Matthew and Luke in different ways argued that the material placed in the Markan narrative account was insufficient: it was too scant in relationship especially to the sayings of Jesus (which Mark for the most part avoided) and to some other particular material which they themselves knew (some of which appears in the Gospel of Thomas). They wanted to complete the Markan picture with the addition of a strong tradition of Jesus as sage from the extant collection of his sayings. In accepting the narrative structure of Mark, however, Matthew and Luke had to submit to his controlled presentation of Jesus. The emergent structure of the community, organized around the biography of Jesus and the appointed disciples, remained, but now supplemented with a few other traditions and with a great body of sayings of Jesus variously organized. Their revision of Mark moved the churches of their time and place back toward the origins of the Jesus movement in the relationship of a listener or seeker to a sage.

John, at a slightly later time, knew the earlier work of the synoptic gospels and was not interested in pursuing their theological agenda.

Rather, he “understood his task to be the fresh interpretation of the Jesus traditions current in his own church in the light of the passion narrative” (Koester 1992:28). Koester interprets John’s project as benign, as a reinterpretation. I would argue that John *rejected* the Markan strategy even as revised by Matthew and Luke as a betrayal of the original mode of living among the early Jesus people and the earliest understanding of Jesus as the living voice in the community. John’s efforts, then, functioned as a radical and early renewal movement intended to return to the original ways of the first Christians by pushing the strategy of his immediate predecessors more strenuously. John envisioned the origins of Christianity as a time of open community, without authorized leadership, when Jesus spoke to the community openly and enigmatically at the same time (for a description of that early community see Schüssler-Fiorenza 1983:160–241; Crossan 1991:227–426). John’s effort in writing his gospel was to return to that formative and original understanding of the Jesus movement. Like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of John has been identified with the gnosticizing tendency of this community in formative Christianity (see MacRae 1960).

The writings of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, are synchronous with the Johannine project. Ignatius composed his letters between 100–118 CE (Schoedel 1985:4–7) while traveling as a martyr from Antioch to Rome. Along the way, Ignatius wrote letters to the churches of Smyrna, Ephesus, Magnesia, Philadelphia, Tralles, and Rome and to an individual, Bishop Polycarp. These letters contain incomparable information about Ignatius’ theology, understanding of the church and ministry, sacraments, and his relationship with Jesus as a martyr (see Schoedel 1985:1–31). Ignatius’ project revolved about a complex and rich understanding of the way in which Christ was present in the community. By invoking the charismatic and organizational traditions of Paul (Koester 1982:II, 281–87), Ignatius promoted the hierarchical organization of the church on the model of the imitation of Christ and his first followers. This imitation of Christ was actually two-fold: the community in structure was to imitate the structure of Christ surrounded by his apostles and followers, and the imitation of the passion and death of Christ modeled the life of those condemned to death as martyrs. Just about the time that John attempted to renew his community by a return to the original and earliest modality of understanding of Jesus’ relationship to his followers, Ignatius attempted to guide the church into further hierarchical reformation by the promulgation of the church offices of bishop, presbyter, and deacon as a

means of replicating the presence of Christ in the community—a presence made manifest in the proper celebration of the eucharist and also in martyrdom as sacramental participations in the life and immortality of Christ. This pattern of revelation based upon an immediate access to Jesus either through martyrdom or through the structures of the church, and the centrality of the passion and crucifixion of Christ, mirror the activity of John's gospel.

In the early second century, then, between about 100 and 110 CE, there is evidence for understanding a watershed period of Christian living focused upon an intense interest in articulating the way Jesus is present and related to the community of his followers. On the one hand, Ignatius continues the development of a hierarchically organized church that refigures the dominant position of the major disciples around Jesus promulgated in the synoptic gospels; on the other hand, John attempts to circumvent this hierarchical and sacramental system in the composition of the gospel that includes extensive dialogues of Jesus with his followers and that denies the sacramental system. The ideal type for John is the beloved disciple; the ideal type for Ignatius is the monarchical bishop.

I argue that at this particular junction there is a third option promulgated by the publication of the collection of sayings of Jesus as the Gospel of Thomas. Although there are no direct literary parallels between the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of John, their common thematic elements (such as light, life, truth) have long been noted (Brown 1962–63; Quispel 1969; Davies 1983:106–16). Helmut Koester (1990a:113–24, especially 119) has convincingly argued that these two gospels share a common tradition which they interpret in very different ways, while Gregory Riley (1995) is persuasive that the communities represented by Thomas and John were communities in a competitive relationship. Two elements emerge as important here: first, the Gospel of Thomas has material that comes from the earliest traditions of the sayings of Jesus; second, the Gospel shares theology and perspective with the Johannine community (although that common material is often very different, and even polemical). The Gospel of Thomas, then, connects to early Christian literature in two ways: some of its contents parallel the material in the Synoptic Sayings Source Q, from primitive Christianity; some of the way in which that material is developed parallels the work of the Johannine community.

I maintain that the author wrote the Gospel of Thomas at this point (100–110 CE), at the same time as John's gospel and Ignatius' letters, as part of the debate about the renewal of the church and about the way

that Jesus relates to the community of his followers. All three of these texts situate the believer in intense relationship with Jesus, each revolving about a different center. John's gospel connects the early sayings with the passion narrative, but with a discursive Jesus who speaks as a living, discursive voice in the midst of the community. Ignatius articulates a vibrant and mystical understanding of the church, the eucharist, and martyrdom as means of connecting internally and socially with the immortal life Jesus provides. The Gospel of Thomas connects the hearer and seeker to the very voice of the living Jesus speaking in the midst of an interpreting community. The living Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas and of the Gospel of John have similar positions in relationship to their respective communities as revealers of sacred wisdom. This revisioning of the relationship of Jesus to community in the first decade of the second century CE has often been identified with a gnosticizing tendency within formative Christianity, so that at various times in the history of scholarship John, Thomas, and Ignatius have been scrutinized as gnostic writers. This tendency, however, does not primarily relate to a gnostic theological construction, but to a renewal movement emergent at this time to reconsider and reformulate the relationship of Jesus to the churches as a foundation for Christian living.

On the basis of this analysis, then, I place the composition of the complete Greek version of the Gospel of Thomas somewhere in the years 100–110 CE influenced by the same dynamics that produced both the Gospel of John and the Letters of Ignatius. Wilson (1960:146–47) has already noted this constellation of Johannine theology and Ignatian chronology as a likely milieu for the production of the Gospel of Thomas (see also Davies 1983:18, 100–2). It is certain that some of the material of the Gospel of Thomas comes from the First Stratum (30–60 CE) and there is always the possibility that one of the copyists of the Coptic version included sayings other than those contained in his archetype. With both these provisions, I would date the Gospel of Thomas to 100–110 CE.

In the context of John and Ignatius, the Gospel of Thomas probably appeared to be somewhat “old fashioned” in its approach. I say this because, on the one hand, the gospel presents very early material and a goodly number of sayings that are found in the Synoptic Sayings Source Q; on the other hand, the Gospel of Thomas works with those sayings in a way more similar to John's gospel, but without the development of extended dialogues or discourses. Another way of articulating this is to recognize that contemporaries of the author of the Gospel of Thomas were working with the tradition in different ways: like Thomas, John's

gospel looked to the sayings, but developed them into discourses; like Thomas, Ignatius reformulated the earlier image of the church as a closely knit community around Jesus as a model of contemporary ecclesiastical structure around the bishop. Both these contemporaries move in different directions with the traditions, while the Gospel of Thomas continues the tradition already used by Matthew and Luke a few decades earlier to revise Mark. The Gospel of Thomas simply presents an older tradition of relating directly to Jesus through a collection of his sayings. Its “old fashioned” appearance, then, is based upon first its use of a genre of writing that had already been subsumed into the Markan outline by Matthew and Luke and second its refusal to advance the sayings genre by the development of discourses as John had. Certainly by the middle of the second century CE, the genre of wisdom literature as collection of sayings among Christians appeared anachronistic (Davies 1983:13). The Gospel of Thomas would sound even more out of date as the ecclesiastical orientation of the Fourth Stratum took shape. Even John’s gospel would fare poorly when the dominant ecclesiastical structures of Acts, the Johannine redactor (that is, the ecclesiastical writer who added material to an earlier version of the gospel), and the Pastoral and Catholic Epistles were to emerge. In the end, both John and Thomas were superseded by the Ignatian model of church in which there was little room for the intimate, interpreting communities of these sayings-oriented gospels.

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS AND ASCETICISM

I argue, then, that in the first decade of the second century C E three different and conflicting interpretations of the Christian’s individual life were promulgated and competing. Three different and alternative Christian identities emerged at the same time as a last attempt at renewal before the hierarchical structures of the church became dominant. The Gospel of Thomas promotes an engaged and immediate experience of the living Jesus gained through the interpretation of the sayings ([Saying 1](#)). The Gospel of John promotes a similar Christian person but modified by reference to the passion and death of Jesus: these revelations connect with the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Koester 1992:28). Ignatius promotes a Christian person in imitation of the life (in the church) of Jesus and participation in his death. Thomas’ kind of person alone hearkens to the days of immediate presence of Jesus without any need to engage in imitation either of Jesus or of the

disciples; John and Ignatius work with the passion and attempt to reduplicate the experiential basis of that immediacy (John through the discourses; Ignatius through the participation in the death of Jesus through martyrdom), but Thomas is satisfied simply to present the interpretation of the sayings as the only necessary experience (Mack 1993:181).

Another way of talking about this way of promulgating a new identity within a religious movement is to analyze it as asceticism. The word “asceticism” itself derives from the preparations that athletes performed in order to be capable of rigorous athletic competition. By extension, I understand asceticism to include all the actions, called performances, that are required to build a new identity, called a subjectivity (Valantasis 1995a). When John, or Thomas, or Ignatius begin to describe a new kind of person and to promote a different identity within the larger confines of Christianity, they also must speak of the means of activating or creating that new identity so that members of this smaller community may learn how to make that identity real.

At the heart of asceticism is the desire to create a new person as a minority person within a larger religious culture. In order to create a new person, there must be a withdrawal from the dominant modes of articulating subjectivity in order to create free space for something else to emerge. A redefinition of social relationships must also emerge from the new understanding of the new subjectivity, as well as a concurrent change in the symbolic universe to justify and support the new subjectivity. These are all accomplished through a rigorous set of intentional performances (Valantasis 1995a).

All three of these turn-of-the-century writings reflect ascetical interest: in relationship to three different models, they attempt to construct an identity alternative to the dominant and prevailing one. John’s subject receives the revelations of Jesus in the discourses, but awaits a correlative transfiguration or glorification through the death and resurrection of Jesus (Koester 1992:28). Ignatius finds the new person at once obedient to the bishop as to Christ and promotes a charismatic understanding of leadership as immediately expressive of Jesus’ presence to which the believer must submit. The Gospel of Thomas promotes an interpreting and questioning subject who connects with a living Jesus by engaging with his words and sayings through which interpretation the believer finds the eternal life which all three (John, Ignatius, and Thomas) propose. Each of these texts exhibit in their own way the ascetical agenda appropriate to the kind of spiritual or religious formation that they propound.

Reading these texts, and especially the Gospel of Thomas, as ascetical texts offers an important lens through which to categorize and analyze both the content and the mode of communication within them. The main focus of the Gospel of Thomas revolves about instruction to a reader who in all likelihood functions as a member of a group of readers formed from among other readers. The sayings in the gospel provide a means of instruction to the reader by encouraging the reader to interpret them ([Saying 1](#)). These sayings construct and reconstruct the understanding of the identity of the readers/interpreters, they suggest alternative ways of living in society, and they develop an understanding of the world and the wider environment that supports the new way of living. This process constitutes an ascetical system within the text. Reading the text as an ascetical text helps modern readers to understand the import and significance of the way of living promulgated in the gospel; that is, it constitutes a convenient strategy for reading the gospel in order to discover on its own terms what kind of person and what kind of identity the text posits and constructs. As a reading strategy it also assists in understanding how social relationships change for this new identity, and how theological and philosophical systems have been developed to support it.

The ascetical nature of the Gospel of Thomas has long been recognized (Grobel 1961–62; Turner and Montefiore 1962; Quispel 1965; Frend 1967; Koester 1990a:128; Patterson 1993:166–68). Early literature, however, identified this asceticism with the negative aspects, with “enkrateia” or the arts of self-control (Quispel 1965; Frend 1967; Richardson 1973; Kaestli 1979): they identified the acts of self-denial as being in themselves ascetical. These negatives included, as one scholar put it, the renunciation of wealth, family, and sexuality (Kaestli 1979:393). The ascetical orientation of the gospel, moreover, was read as a counterpoint to the gnostic orientation of the sayings, so that the Gospel of Thomas was read as either being “enkratite” *or* gnostic (see Frend 1967; Richardson 1973). This choice, in fact, misleads because a text may be both ascetical and gnostic (Richardson 1973:68). My perspective on asceticism looks not only at the negative performances (rejecting wealth or sexuality), but primarily toward the positive articulation of the new subjectivity that the gospel presents (“becoming a single one,” for example). This positive perspective promotes a constructive reading of the text, so that all performances (whether negative or positive) are interpreted in the context of the larger project of creating an alternative identity within a larger and more dominant religious environment.

It may just as well be that, with the emergence of the hierarchical structure of the church as normative, asceticism, with its intense orientation toward the development and articulation of an individual subjectivity, became marginalized and problematized so that not only gnostics, but also professional ascetics emerged as counterpoints to hierarchical structure. This may be seen to be the case beginning with the “widows” in 1 Timothy 5.3–16, and continuing through Athanasius’ battle with the ascetic followers of Arius and Hieracas (Elm 1994). What became problematic was not gnosticism, but unmediated and non-hierarchical practices (Brakke 1995) whether educational (as with Hieracas and Athanasius) or spiritual (as with the orthodox monks and Valentinian gnostic Christianity). The Gospel of Thomas certainly falls within the category of ascetic text, and its history in Coptic even identifies its production with a Pachomian ascetic community. Its ascetical orientation may have proven problematic to Christian leaders of the mid-second century and later, but its content shows little, if any, evidence of later gnostic mythology and theology.

The ascetical reading of the Gospel of Thomas provides a more neutral position from which to articulate its theological tendencies and to develop an understanding of the tractate in its own language: the articulation of the specific performances (primarily revolving about interpretation of the sayings), the particular subjectivity (often called “the single one”), the redefinition of familial relationships, the construction of a community awareness through mutual engagement with the sayings, and the positing of a smaller (perhaps esoteric) society within a larger and less aware cosmos. These elements reflect the ascetical and formative dimension of the Gospel of Thomas and they do not necessarily arise in the traditional categories of theological and scholarly research, but rather emerge from a close reading of the text on its own terms in order to move toward the definition of suitable categories for study from within the text itself.

MY PERSPECTIVE ON THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

This ascetical reading strategy sets the stage for what I have attempted to achieve here. This commentary aims to appreciate the Gospel of Thomas as an example of one variety of an authentic Christianity which seems to have emerged at a critical crossroad of formative Christianity—the same crossroads that produced the Gospel of John and the Letters of Ignatius. I do not intend to make it fit into any of the later categories of orthodoxy or heresy, but to treat it as exemplary of one

understanding and articulation of Christian living that was sufficiently important that it was preserved in antiquity and is studied in modern times. Through a close literary reading of the entire text, I aim to develop the theological perspective of the various sayings without bias (again) to later categories of orthodoxy or heresy. This strategy distinguishes the readings that follow from most of the precedent commentaries (Grant and Friedman; Ménard; Kasser; Fieger, for example).

Moreover, I am not interested in constructing the trajectory of Jesus' sayings, nor in writing a history of Jesus, but in constructing the perspectives and theology of the Gospel of Thomas. My focus rests not on the Jesus in these sayings, but in the theological and literary tendencies of the sayings themselves. There are two implications of this: first, that I read the entire corpus and not simply those that have parallels in the Synoptic Sayings Source Q and Paul; and, second, that I focus directly and primarily on the material as it is preserved in the tractate that has survived. That means that I am only interested in this gospel, and not how this gospel relates to other gospel materials or to other writings of early Christianity. There have been many scholars who have noted parallels both canonical, intertestamental, historical, biblical, philosophical, and gnostic; and their works may easily be consulted through any one of the major current surveys of scholarship (see Fallon and Cameron 1988; Patterson 1992; Riley 1994). My aim in writing this commentary is simply to present a consistent, literary analysis of each saying in the order in which they appear in the tractate.

I have not set out to provide a complete survey of pertinent scholarship. Nor have I attempted to engage the entire history of scholarship in argumentation for my perspective on the text. The interested reader may easily access the history of scholarship as well as capable summaries of recent research in review articles which have already been acknowledged. I have incorporated only the scholars whom I have found helpful in opening the text of the Gospel of Thomas to careful reading and study. These scholars, though not always ones with whom I agree, will be acknowledged as the commentary proceeds.

Some studies, however, deserve particular mention here. I have not attempted to reduplicate the recent and thorough work of Stephen Patterson (1993) in his *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* which explains the relationship of the gospel to the Synoptic Sayings Source Q; his work carefully argues the independence of Thomas and thoroughly explicates the interaction with those synoptic sources. Three works in particular commend themselves for the comparative study of the parables of Jesus

in Gospel of Thomas and the synoptic gospels: John Dominic Crossan's *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (1973), Charles Hedrick's *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (1994), and (in a more literary theoretical vein) Dan O.Via's *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimmsion* (1967). These scholars fully explore the relationship of Thomas parables to the synoptic as well as explicating the meaning of the parables in general and in relationship to Jesus.

I have taken the lens provided by the author of this gospel seriously. If a community exists behind these sayings (Lincoln 1977; Riley 1995), it consists of those who have taken the interpretation of these sayings as their primary duty. Since it is an interpretative process that creates the community, that community need not articulate a homogeneous and singular theology. The sayings genre leaves ample room for diversity, disagreement, alternative and resistive interpretations, and even subversive readings by people within the various groups of readers who may not agree with one another. Moreover, these sayings could be used in a variety of organized communities: fourth-century monks could have found in them rich ascetical teaching; gnostic Christians would have found profound esoteric meaning; orthodox Christians might have thrilled to hear the parables without allegorical interpretation. Many people in many different kinds of communities could, and did, read these sayings and interpret them, but they cannot be assumed to share one common theology, perspective, or even interpretation of the sayings.

In my consistent reading, I have focused on the collection of sayings as a complete text. I have not looked toward the development of the material over the course of the period from roughly 60 CE until the dating of the Coptic manuscript, but I have looked at the material as a complete collection from the first decade of the second century CE. I presume that they would have been read as a collection, not as isolated sayings. The sayings, therefore, may be understood to refer internally to one another: a reader may assume that a statement made earlier may be alluded to later in the collection. The text, that is, takes precedence over the individual saying. My intention here is to construct the world from within the text and its sayings. In a sense, my commentary was designed to lay the foundation for subsequent research in the biblical and theological intertextuality of the Gospel of Thomas.

I have especially avoided the designation "gnostic" and any explicit articulation of gnostic myths or theologoumena. The precise meaning of such terms, and their significance for understanding, has become even more clouded since the mid-1970s. There seems no longer to be

either a consensus about the definition, nor the referent, nor even the chronology and content of gnosticism. The gnostic character of these sayings needs the same sort of re-evaluation as the entire study of gnosticism in early Christianity. I have tried to explain the sayings without invoking either that body of research or that body of mythology.

Only occasionally have I introduced the language of asceticism into my explanation (even though I believe it to be an ascetical text). The elements of my definition (such as performances, dominant and minority groupings, the construction of a subjectivity, attention to alternative social relationships, and attention to the construction of a symbolic universe) have provided an important lens through which the sayings have been read, but I have resisted making it the heart of my own reading.

I have begun with the Greek fragments from Oxyrhynchus. These have recently received little attention in the scholarly literature, and they have been virtually ignored by the popular press in their discussions of the Gospel of Thomas. I present these Greek fragments as a “Window on Thomas” to assist people from outside the theological disciplines as well as the general public to engage with the sayings of Jesus and their particular perspective on a limited corpus before proceeding to the fuller Coptic text. The Coptic text develops those literary and theological themes in greater detail.

The importance of the Gospel of Thomas to early Christianity is actually only beginning to be understood. The previous work has brought us all to the point that there is some need for a fresh start, a new and vigorous reading of these sayings. This commentary will, I hope, help to clear the way of old detritus, while also opening new avenues of interpretation. In the end, I hope my commentary establishes this gospel as a serious and articulate historical-theological source that not only deserves our respect, but also deserves to become part of the unofficial canon of texts studied to create a history of primitive and formative Christianity before the Christianization of the Roman empire.