

THE BELOVED
DISCIPLE
IN CONFLICT?
REVISITING THE
GOSPELS OF JOHN
AND THOMAS

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Contents

<i>Tables</i>	x
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
1. Introduction	1
2. John and <i>Thomas</i> in Conflict—about What?	14
3. The Figure of Thomas in the Gospel of John	47
4. Jesus' I-Sayings in <i>Thomas</i> and their Relationship to Johannine Traditions	68
5. The Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John	116
6. The Beloved Disciple and Thomas	149
7. The Beloved Disciple in Context	165
8. Conclusion	199
 <i>Bibliography</i>	 209
<i>Index of Ancient References</i>	227
<i>Index of Biblical and other Ancient Names</i>	243
<i>Index of Modern Scholars</i>	245

Introduction

One noteworthy change in recent scholarship on the *Gospel of Thomas* has been the shift from comparing this text to the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) to studying its relationship to the Gospel of John. For decades, scholars were primarily concerned with the question of whether the traditions of Jesus' sayings in *Thomas* could be independent from, and earlier than, those in the synoptic gospels. Scholars are divided into two groups: those who see in *Thomas* the earliest gospel, written around the 50s CE, and those who regard it as a relatively late compilation, from 150 CE or later.

At the same time, the relationship of the *Gospel of Thomas* to the Gospel of John attracted far less attention. Most scholars would agree that the Gospel of John offers a later theological interpretation of Jesus. Thus, as long as the essential question in Thomasine scholarship was whether the *Gospel of Thomas* provided the earliest layer of the sayings of Jesus or not, contacts between *Thomas* and John were of secondary importance.

This, however, is perhaps not the only reason why the relationship between John and *Thomas* was a neglected issue

for such a long time. There is no denying the fact that *Thomas* is, in many respects, closer to the synoptic traditions of the sayings of Jesus than to the Gospel of John. There are numerous close verbal parallels between *Thomas* and the synoptic sayings tradition,¹ and they employ similar literary forms, such as parables, short stories concluding with Jesus' wise answers (*chriae*), and brief discussions with the disciples ('school discussions'). These forms are largely absent in John; the dominant literary form for its sayings tradition is that of a long thematic discourse (for example, John 3; 5–8; 10).

Nevertheless, the relationship between John and *Thomas* has occupied a more prominent place on the scholarly agenda in the last ten years. What has launched a new wave of interest in their relationship is the theory that the two gospels are in conflict with each other. Several American specialists on *Thomas*, including Gregory Riley, April DeConick, Elaine Pagels, Harold Attridge, Stephen Johnson, and Richard Valantasis, have argued for this theory, although they offer significantly different explanations as to what exactly occasioned this conflict.

The theory of a conflict between John and *Thomas* presupposes a shift in Thomasine scholarship from questions pertaining to the historical Jesus to issues related to the community in which the *Gospel of Thomas* was produced

¹ For the parallels between the synoptic gospels and the *Gospel of Thomas* see, for example, the thorough listing by Helmut Koester, Introduction to the *Gospel According to Thomas*, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7 together with XIII, 2**, *Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1)*, and *P.Oxy. 1*, 654, 655, vol. 1 (ed. Bentley Layton; NHS 20; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 38–49.

and used. For many of the scholars mentioned above, *Thomas* is no longer primarily a hoard of possibly authentic sayings of Jesus, as it was for an earlier generation of scholars, nor is its relationship to gnosticism of primary importance. Instead, they approach *Thomas* as bearing witness to an early Christian community that had a distinctive profile of its own on theological issues. Considerable efforts have been made by these scholars to elucidate the intellectual background of Thomasine Christianity, including Hermetic and Jewish mystic traditions (DeConick), contemporary Greco-Roman thought (Riley), and Hellenistic Jewish exegesis of Genesis (Pagels).

Despite having added several fruitful insights to Thomasine studies, the theory of a conflict between John and *Thomas* has also generated criticism. I have been on the critical side of this discussion since 1995. In chapter two, section three I will offer an updated version of my earlier critique of the conflict theory in which I take into account more recent versions of this theory—above all, the new studies by DeConick and Pagels. My impression is that, regardless of methodological precision and the introduction of new historical aspects into the discussion, these new studies have not managed to make the conflict theory any more persuasive than it was originally. Although the theory of a conflict would make the relationship between John and *Thomas* seem more exciting than it would be otherwise, I am still not convinced that the scholars mentioned above have managed to bring forth decisive arguments for the possibility that the communities behind John and *Thomas* were engaged in a mutual debate. Their studies, I believe, have

helped us to see more clearly where *Thomas* and John differ from each other, and have thus clarified the distinct theological profiles of these gospels. Nevertheless, I have so far failed to see any compelling reason to interpret these differences as signs of a mutual conflict between Johannine and Thomasine Christians.

In addition to my earlier comments, critical voices concerning the conflict theory can now be heard from Ron Cameron, Larry Hurtado, Karen King, Enno Edzard Popkes, Philip Sellew, and Risto Uro.² King, in fact, has put very succinctly the point which I have tried to make concerning the relationship between John and *Thomas*: ‘too often the recognition of early Christian multiformity has led scholars to posit “communities in conflict.” The mere fact of theological difference is not, however, sufficient to posit a conflict relationship.’³ Even if John and *Thomas* have conflicting views, as they certainly do, this does not show yet that they

² Ron Cameron, ‘Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of the Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins’, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 11 (1999), 236–57, esp. 239–44; Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmanns, 2003), 474–79; Enno Edzard Popkes, “‘Ich bin das Licht’”—Erwägungen zur Verhältnisbestimmung des Thomasevangeliums und der johanneischen Schriften anhand der Lichtmetaphorik’, in *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditionsgeschichtlicher Perspektive* (ed. Jörg Frey, Udo Schnelle, and Juliane Schlegel; WUNT 175; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 641–74, esp. 666, 674; Philip Sellew, ‘Thomas Christianity: Scholars in Quest of a Community’, in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer; Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 11–35, esp. 27–29; Risto Uro, *Thomas: Seeking the Historical Context of the Gospel of Thomas* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 25.

³ Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 284–85.

were in a situation of conflict. It is also possible, and for me this seems to be the more plausible solution, that the two gospels were part of more general discussions about certain issues and took different stances on them without knowing each other's positions at all.

Notably, the theory of a conflict between John and *Thomas* is almost completely restricted to American scholars, whereas European scholars have remained remarkably inactive in this discussion.⁴ This may be due to the belief, still widely held among the latter, that the *Gospel of Thomas* is both Gnostic and considerably later than the gospels in the New Testament. If so, the whole idea of John being written in response to *Thomas* would not make much sense. For the reasons mentioned later in this study, I would like to emphasize that I neither subscribe to the very late dating of *Thomas*—which would make this gospel by and large irrelevant to New Testament scholarship—nor do I think that *Thomas* is a 'Gnostic' text in any meaningful sense of the term. In fact, my estimation is that *Thomas* and John are roughly contemporary with each other. Although it is impossible to date either of them with absolute certainty, the dating at the turn of the first century has much to recommend itself for both gospels.⁵

Even though I do not subscribe to the theory that John and *Thomas* were in conflict, I believe that they share a

⁴ Popkes' careful study on the metaphor of light in John and the *Gospel of Thomas* is a noteworthy exception; cf. Popkes, 'Erwägungen'.

⁵ Cf. Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas* (London: Routledge, 1997), 13–19, 21; Uro, *Thomas*, 134–36. This conclusion is supported by some of my text analyses; see chapter four, section nine below.

number of common ideas that are worthy of closer examination. It may even be that these ideas have unnecessarily been overshadowed by, and neglected in, the recent attempts to construct a direct conflict between John and *Thomas*. Differences in literary style aside, John and *Thomas* do share many ideas that make their symbolic worlds look quite similar to each other. John and *Thomas* are, as Riley has correctly pointed out, ‘much closer to each other in spirit than either is to the Synoptics.’⁶ Their common ideas include the following:

- Jesus is portrayed as pre-existent and associated with the origin of all things (*Gos. Thom.* 77; John 1:3; 8:58).
- Both gospels speak of Jesus’ incarnation and contrast it to human ignorance (*Gos. Thom.* 28; John 1:9–11, 14).
- Words of Jesus are linked with a promise of immortality, resulting either from understanding (*Gos. Thom.* 1; 19) or obeying them (John 8:31, 51–52).
- Discipleship is based upon election (*Gos. Thom.* 49–50; John 6:70; 13:18; 15:16,19).
- Both gospels anticipate persecution, either spiritual or physical, of Jesus’ followers (*Gos. Thom.* 68–69; John 16:1–4).
- The world is denounced in both gospels (*Gos. Thom.* 21; 56; 80; John 14:30; 15:19; 17:16).
- Both gospels bear witness to a dualism of light and dark (*Gos. Thom.* 24; 61; John 1:5; 8:12; 9:4; 11:9–10; 12:35).

⁶ Gregory J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 3.

- Both gospels represent ‘realized eschatology’ (although the term itself has proven problematic).⁷ In other words, present aspects of salvation outweigh the future ones, and concepts traditionally connected with future events are used in a non-apocalyptic fashion. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, the ‘kingdom’ (*Gos. Thom.* 3; 113), the ‘end’ (*Gos. Thom.* 18), and ‘the repose of the dead’ (*Gos. Thom.* 51) are present realities. In John, realized eschatology can be seen, for example, in how the resurrection of the dead (John 5:24–26; 11:24–27) and the final judgement (John 3:18–19, 36; 5:27; 12:31) are interpreted.⁸
- Both gospels display similar attitudes towards the Hebrew Bible:⁹ they affirm that studying the scriptures may distract one from recognizing Jesus (*Gos. Thom.* 52; John 5:39).
- Jews are characterized by their misunderstanding. In John, this is a recurring feature (e.g., John 6:41, 52; 8:48, 52–53). In *Thomas*, Jesus blames the disciples who have misunderstood him by saying that they ‘have become like Jews’ (*Gos. Thom.* 43).

⁷ Karen King notes that, with regard to the kingdom language of the *Gospel of Thomas*, it is not quite accurate to speak of ‘realized eschatology’ since the gospel employs the term ‘kingdom’ in a non-apocalyptic way; cf. Karen L. King, ‘Kingdom in the Gospel of Thomas’, *Forum* 3:1 (1987), 48–97, esp. 50–52; see also Risto Uro, ‘Is *Thomas* an Encratite Gospel?’ in *Thomas at the Crossroads* (ed. Risto Uro; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 140–62.

⁸ Cf. George Richter, ‘Präsentische und futurische Eschatologie im 4. Evangelium’, in idem, *Studien zum Johannesevangelium* (ed. Josef Hainz; BU 13; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1977), 346–82, esp. 367–68.

⁹ For *Thomas*’s opinions about Jews, their scripture and customs, see Antti Marjanen, ‘*Thomas* and Jewish Religious Practices’, in Uro, *Thomas at the Crossroads*, 163–82.

- Attitudes towards Jewish customs are similar. In *Thomas*, bodily circumcision is ridiculed (*Gos. Thom.* 53), whereas the Johannine Jesus speaks about circumcision and Mosaic Law as an outsider would (John 7:19–24; 10:34–36 and 15:25), calling it ‘your law’—as Pilate, another outsider, does in the Johannine narrative (John 18:31).¹⁰
- In contrast to any of the synoptic gospels, both John and *Thomas* claim to have been written by a disciple of Jesus (*Gos. Thom.* incipit; John 21:24).

The similarities between *Thomas* and John listed above are abundant enough to raise a question about their mutual relationship, regardless of what one thinks of the merits and drawbacks of the theory that the two gospels were in conflict. Several methodological difficulties are involved, however, in examining their relationship. The conflict theory contains problems of its own to be discussed below; here I will confine myself to more general methodological considerations.

¹⁰ Interestingly enough, in the Gospel of John, the outsider’s attitude towards Jewish law does not prevent the author from making positive use of Jewish scriptures. Not only are they frequently quoted but they can also be regarded as witnessing to Jesus or as finding their fulfillment in him (cf. John 1:45; 5:39; 15:25). For different aspects of the use of the Jewish scriptures in John, see Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (NovTSup 14; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 287–91; Markku Kotila, *Der umstrittene Zeuge: Studien zur Stellung des Gesetzes in der johanneischen Theologiegeschichte* (Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae: Dissertationes humanarum litterarum 48; Helsinki: The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, 1988).

To begin with, it cannot be known with certainty which of the two gospels antedates the other.¹¹ It would be unwarranted to assume that the *Gospel of Thomas* was written later than the Gospel of John, or vice versa. Moreover, since neither gospel presents quotations from the other, conclusions about their relationship can be drawn only by comparing their contents to each other. Conclusions from such comparisons are, however, difficult to draw with any certainty because of great differences in genre. For example, the principles of ordering Jesus' words are entirely different in the two gospels. In John, Jesus' sayings are parts of larger thematic discourses, whereas they are treated as individual, small units in *Thomas*.¹²

This substantial difference in the literary form of both gospels needs to be taken into account when comparing them to each other. Since *Thomas* is a sayings collection, it is unlikely that it would contain numerous references to the Johannine narrative order. Lengthy Johannine discourses would have been unsuitable in the literary genre of *Thomas*, too. Thus, if the author(s) of *Thomas* knew the Gospel of John, the most likely strategy of using it would have been

¹¹ As regards the dating of the Fourth Gospel, the traditional dating of P⁵² (c. 125 CE) has been questioned by Armin Schmidt, who argues that this papyrus dates no earlier than 170 CE; cf. Armin Schmidt, 'Zwei Anmerkungen zu P.Ryl III', *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 35 (1989), 11–12.

¹² Even though there are, without doubt, central themes in the *Gospel of Thomas* (such as the kingdom, solitariness, and immortality), the sayings concerning these themes are usually dispersed in different parts of the gospel instead of being collected into larger thematic units. Cf. Koester, 'Introduction', 41: 'Apart from the introduction (sayings 1–2), central section (sayings 49–61) and conclusion (sayings 113–114), there are no thematic arrangements.'

selecting single elements and presenting them as individual sayings. On the other hand, if the Johannine author(s) knew *Thomas*, short sayings derived from it would most likely have been intergrated into larger textual units given as Jesus' discourses. In consequence, the argument of order cannot play as important a role as it does, for example, in the study of the relationships among the synoptic gospels.

Another crucial problem is related to difficulties in tracing the redaction histories of John and *Thomas*. It is commonly acknowledged that the *Gospel of Thomas* can be considered to be dependent on the synoptics only if clear redactional traces of them can be found in it. To be sure, even this generally accepted principle has not guaranteed unanimous results concerning *Thomas's* relationship to the synoptic gospels.¹³ It is, in any case, far more difficult to make use of conclusions based on redaction histories in comparing *Thomas* to John because the redaction histories of both gospels are still unsettled issues.

¹³ Schrage's view, repeated more recently by Fieger, is that a large number of synoptic redactional traits or even traits of the Sahidic translations of the New Testament can be found in the extant *Gospel of Thomas*; cf. Wolfgang Schrage, *Das Verhältnis des Thomas-Evangeliums zur synoptischen Tradition und zu den koptischen Evangelienübersetzungen: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur gnostischen Synoptikerdeutung* (BZNW 29; Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1964); Michael Fieger, *Das Thomasevangelium: Einleitung, Kommentar und Systematik* (NTAbh, n.F. 22; Münster: Aschendorff, 1991). Many scholars have reached the opposite conclusion; cf., for example, John H. Sieber, 'A Redactional Analysis of the Synoptic Gospels with Regard to the Question of the Sources of the Gospel According to Thomas' (Ph.D. Diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1965); Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Foundations and Facets: Reference Series; Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1993).

None of the theories concerning the sources of John has gained a dominant position comparable to that of the Two Source Theory in the study of the synoptic gospels.¹⁴ The redaction history of the *Gospel of Thomas* is, if possible, even more cloudy than that of the Gospel of John. Differences between Greek fragments and the extant Coptic manuscript of *Thomas* (such as the placement of *Gos. Thom.* 30 and 77), as well as quotations from this gospel by the patristic authors, show that different versions of *Thomas* were in circulation from early on.¹⁵ The great variety in the transmission is most likely due to the genre of *Thomas*: it was probably not too difficult to add new sayings to, or to remove earlier sayings from, a collection like this.¹⁶ The available evidence for different versions of *Thomas* is, however, too sparse to warrant a consequent theory of its literary development. In fact, each saying in *Thomas* can have a tradition history of its own, and it is possible that this

¹⁴ John 21 is often regarded as a secondary appendix to the gospel, but even those who are in favor of this view disagree as to whether this chapter stands alone or whether it represents a larger redactional layer also visible elsewhere in the gospel.

¹⁵ Cf. Miroslav Marcovich, 'Textual Criticism on the Gospel of Thomas', *JTS* 20 (1969), 53–74.

¹⁶ Cf. Francis T. Fallon and Ron Cameron, 'The Gospel of Thomas: A Forschungsbericht and Analysis', *ANRW* II 25.6: 4195–251 (p. 4203: 'Gos. Thom. was subject to redaction as it was transmitted'); James M. Robinson, 'Die Bedeutung der gnostischen Nag Hammadi Texte für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft', in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World* (ed. Lukas Bormann, Kelly Del Tredici, and Angela Standhartinger; *NovTSup* 74; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 23–41, esp. 30–31; Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 12–13.

text shows variation in its relationship to the canonical gospels.¹⁷

In consequence, concentration solely on a literary relationship between *Thomas* and John does not recommend itself. This approach needs to be complemented by a broader comparison with other early Christian literature. This broader approach is also needed for evaluating the claim that John and *Thomas* were gospels in conflict. It is necessary to clarify whether the affinities between John and *Thomas* imply a particular connection, or whether the ideas they share with each other were more commonly attested in early Christian literature.

Many of the aforementioned issues that bring John and *Thomas* close to each other will be discussed in the course of this study, while some of them I have dealt with elsewhere.¹⁸ My analysis of I-sayings in *Thomas* and their relationship to John (chapter four of this book) is an attempt to show that the comparison between the two gospels is worthwhile even if one does not assume any direct link between them—either a literary dependence in one way or another or two communities engaged in a debate with each other.

¹⁷ Cf. Kenneth V. Neller, 'Diversity in the Gospel of Thomas: Clues for a New Direction?', *SecCent* 7 (1989–90), 1–18, esp. 15–18; Klyne N. Snodgrass, 'The Gospel of Thomas: A Secondary Gospel', *SecCent* 7 (1989–90), 19–38, esp. 19. Snodgrass, however, only offers examples of sayings in *Thomas* which he claims to be secondary to the synoptic tradition.

¹⁸ Views about immortality in John and *Thomas* are discussed in Ismo Dunderberg, 'From Thomas to Valentinus: Genesis Exegesis in Valentinus's Fragment 4 and Its Relationship to the *Gospel of Thomas*', in *Thomasine Traditions in Antiquity: The Gospel of Thomas and Its Relatives* (ed. Jon Ma. Asgeirsson, April D. DeConick, and Risto Uro; NHMS 59; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 220–37.

The second main part of this study (chapters five, six, and seven) is devoted to the figures of the Beloved Disciple in John and Thomas as portrayed in the *Gospel of Thomas*. It seems to me that Thomas and the Beloved Disciple are used to authenticate these gospels in strikingly different manners. My discussion is, however, not confined to the Beloved Disciple and Thomas, but I will take into account other figures used for similar purposes elsewhere. Special emphasis will be placed on other beloved disciples of Jesus portrayed in early Christian texts. Although I do not see John and *Thomas* as gospels in conflict, I do find it possible that the figure of the Beloved Disciple in John was created as part of an early Christian debate over the authority of Jesus' family.

2

John and *Thomas* in Conflict—about What?

The theory of a conflict between John and *Thomas* has dominated most recent discussions about the relationship between these gospels. Nevertheless, at least two major solutions to this puzzle were already offered before the conflict theory was coined. At an early stage of research, it was suggested that *Thomas* is either directly or indirectly dependent on John. Another theory, which, in fact, paved the way for the conflict theory, was that the affinities between John and *Thomas* go back to some common traditions. As will become apparent, there has been surprisingly little discussion between the proponents of the different views. In outlining the history of research in some detail below, my goal is to engage myself in critical discussion with the previously suggested models instead of simply leaving aside the views with which I do not agree.¹

¹ In her new study, April DeConick offers a brief research history that runs partially parallel to my account; cf. April D. DeConick, *Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospels of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature* (JSNTSup 157; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic

1. THOMAS IS DEPENDENT ON JOHN

In the early 1960s, Raymond Brown devoted a lengthy article to the relationship between the Johannine writings and the *Gospel of Thomas* in which he concluded that the latter is ‘ultimately (but still indirectly) dependent on John itself.’² ‘Indirectly’ meant that, in Brown’s view, there was a Gnostic, or Gnostic-like, source that functioned as an intermediary between John and *Thomas*.³ What made this suggestion necessary was Brown’s observation that he was unable to find any clear quotations from John in *Thomas*, although he saw in the latter several allusions to the Johannine writings.

In his article, Brown examined a number of possible points of contact in *Thomas* and the Johannine writings and classified them into what he designated as ‘remote’ and ‘close’ parallels. The remote parallels were, according to Brown, ‘so tenuous that they would be of significance only after a clear relationship between John and GTh had already been established.’⁴ Thus, only the close parallels were really conclusive.

Press, 2001), 26–30. My account of the research history is, however, not based upon hers, but on my own earlier survey published prior to DeConick’s book; cf. Ismo Dunderberg, ‘Thomas’ I-Sayings and the Gospel of John’, in *Thomas at the Crossroads* (ed. Risto Uro; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 33–64, esp. 35–40.

² Raymond E. Brown, ‘The Gospel of Thomas and St John’s Gospel’, *NTS* 9 (1962–63), 155–77 (176).

³ Brown, ‘Gospel of Thomas and St John’s Gospel’, 177.

⁴ Brown, ‘The Gospel of Thomas and John’s Gospel’, 174. The remote parallels include *Gos. Thom.* 2; 4; 6; 11; 15; 21–22; 23; 29; 30; 40; 42; 49; 52; 55–56; 64; 76; 90; 101; 104; 105; 110; 114.

Brown argued that the close parallels between *Thomas* and John accumulate in the latter in two passages (John 7:37–8:59; 13–17). It is likely that such lengthy passages in John are literary compositions by the Johannine author. Hence the importance of Brown's observation that what he regarded as the close parallels between *Thomas* and John were scattered in different parts of these Johannine passages.⁵ For Brown, this observation suggested that *Thomas* not only shared some traditions with John, but also presupposed the way these materials were arranged by the Johannine author. Thus, Brown concluded that *Thomas* is dependent on the Gospel of John in its final literary form rather than on some common traditions behind these texts.⁶

Brown's argument was based upon presuppositions of early Thomasine scholarship that can no longer be taken for granted. First, Brown obviously assumed that the *Gospel of Thomas* is a later writing than the canonical gospels, including John. This can be seen in the fact that he does not at all raise the question of whether John could be dependent on *Thomas*. At present, however, there is an ongoing debate about the date of *Thomas*, and the early dating has received considerable support from several scholars.

Brown's second presupposition was that *Thomas* is Gnostic in character.⁷ Whether or not *Thomas* is 'Gnostic'

⁵ Brown, 'Gospel of Thomas and St John's Gospel', 175: John 7:37–8:52/*Gos. Thom.* Prologue, 1; 18; 19; 24; 28; 38; 43; 59; 61; 69:1; 77; 78; 91; 108; 111; John 13–17/*Gos. Thom.* 12; 13; 24; 27; 37; 43; 50; 51; 61; 69:1; 92; 100.

⁶ Brown, 'Gospel of Thomas and St John's Gospel', 175–76.

⁷ Cf. Stevan L. Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983), 106–7.

depends completely, of course, on how 'Gnosticism' itself is defined. This, in turn, has proved to be a vexing problem. In light of recent studies, it seems very difficult to give a satisfactory definition of Gnosticism that would not carry along, in one way or another, biased generalizations inherited from early Christian polemics.

It is not possible to reproduce here the entire recent discussion about the term Gnosticism and its usefulness as a scholarly category. Yet it needs to be pointed out that specialists on the Nag Hammadi texts have become increasingly critical of using the term Gnosticism. Michael Williams has suggested that the term should be discarded because it gives a misleading impression of a relatively unified movement while, in reality, the extant evidence for 'what used to be called Gnosticism' shows great diversity and effectively resists all attempts at an incontrovertible definition of 'Gnosticism'.⁸

In addition, Karen King has demonstrated that 'Gnosticism' and 'Gnostic' are not neutral terms in scholarly usage, but they are regularly employed to construct 'the other' to which the 'true' and 'genuine' Christianity is then compared.⁹ To characterize *Thomas* as 'Gnostic' has no doubt served the purpose of constructing this text as the dubious other, that which does not belong to the true Christianity represented by the canonized gospels of the New Testament.

⁸ Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁹ Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

The way Bertil Gärtner defined *Thomas* as ‘Gnostic’ in his study in the 1960s showed this bias well: he employed ‘Gnosticism’ as an umbrella term for everything that was different from what he called ‘the main traditions of the Great Church.’¹⁰ The same idea is operative in Brown’s analysis of *Thomas*. He apparently took the Gnostic character of *Thomas* for granted, for he never explained the reasons for designating the intermediating source he posited between John and *Thomas* as ‘Gnostic.’

It is, however, quite unclear what qualities would make *Thomas* ‘Gnostic’ in any meaningful sense of the word. Suffice it to say that there are no clear references in *Thomas* to two features which many would still consider characteristic of the distinctly ‘Gnostic’ myth: neither the tale of Wisdom’s fall in the divine realm nor the figure of the ignorant creator-God is mentioned in this gospel.¹¹

Moreover, the cumulative force of Brown’s analysis is weakened by the fact that he included the Book of Revelation in the same group of Johannine writings as the Gospel and the Epistles of John. A number of the parallels Brown mentioned in his article were between *Thomas* and Revelation. The inclusion of Revelation into the corpus of

¹⁰ Bertil Gärtner, *Ett nytt evangelium? Thomasevangeliets hemliga Jesusord* (Stockholm: Diakonistyrelse 1960), 9. ‘The Great Church’ (‘den stora kyrkan’) was omitted in the English translation of Gärtner’s book: *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas* (trans. E. J. Sharpe; London: Collins, 1961), 12.

¹¹ Cf. April D. DeConick, *Seek to See Him: Ascent and Vision Mysticism in the Gospel of Thomas* (VigChrSup 33; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 16–27; Antti Marjanen, ‘Is *Thomas* a Gnostic Gospel’, in Uro, *Thomas at the Crossroads*, 107–39.

Johannine writings is, however, far from certain, and Brown himself discarded this view later.¹²

In addition, the way Brown used what he regarded as the 'close parallels' does not seem very convincing. First, he did not explain the criteria by which he differentiated between 'close' and 'remote' parallels. Second, his key argument that the 'close' parallels between John and *Thomas* appear in different parts of two Johannine discourses and thus speak in favour of *Thomas's* dependence on John is not very strong. In fact, it would work only if we could be absolutely sure that *Thomas* is later than John. Otherwise, the argument can easily be turned upside down. Brown did not give a second thought to the fact that his 'close parallels' between John and *Thomas* are not only dispersed in different parts of certain Johannine passages, but they are also scattered in different parts of *Thomas*. Thus, by using the same argument as Brown did, one could also conclude that the Gospel of John presupposes *Thomas* in its final form because John contains echoes of different parts of *Thomas*.

This reversibility shows that the dispersion of parallels in different parts of certain Johannine passages (or in *Thomas*) is no conclusive argument. In fact, there are similar materials in the two gospels, but they are neither arranged in a similar manner, nor are there any clear cases where the order

¹² Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 6 n.5. That Revelation could stem from the Johannine circle after all has recently been suggested by Jörg Frey, 'Appendix: Erwägungen zum Verhältnis der Johannesapokalypse zu den übrigen Schriften des Corpus Johanneum', in Martin Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage: Ein Lösungsversuch* (WUNT 67; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1993), 326–429.

of sayings in *Thomas* follows the Johannine arrangement of traditional materials.

Brown's arguments were accepted and developed by Jesse Sell and Klyne Snodgrass. Sell parted company with Brown only in that he found the intermediary between John and *Thomas* suggested by Brown unnecessary. Sell insisted that *Thomas* is directly dependent on John.¹³ In Sell's opinion, there are at least eight sayings in *Thomas* that 'display the sort of echoes of Johannine ideas and vocabulary which lay the burden of proof on one who would deny the probability of some direct influence of "John itself" on (the Gospel of Thomas).'¹⁴ In these eight sayings, Sell found 'echoes of fifty-three verses, from seventeen different chapters of John.'¹⁵ If Brown's intermediary source existed, Sell claimed, it must have 'had to represent nearly the complete structure of the present Gospel (of John).'¹⁶ As I previously suggested, this argument is not convincing; the number of parallels as such does not betray knowledge of the Johannine literary structure in *Thomas* (or vice versa).

Snodgrass added little to the discussion. He seems to maintain—without saying it very clearly—that the coming together of 'Synoptic and Johannine type sayings' in *Thomas* speak for the latter's (indirect) dependence on the canonical gospels.¹⁷

¹³ Jesse Sell, 'Johannine Traditions in Logion 61 of the Gospel of Thomas', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 7 (1980), 24–37.

¹⁴ These eight passages are *Gos. Thom.* prologue; 8; 13; 28; 38; 43; 91 and 92. Sell, 'Johannine Traditions', 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 28.

¹⁷ Snodgrass, 'The Gospel of Thomas', 25.

Miroslav Marcovich has also argued that the *Gospel of Thomas* is dependent on John. His suggestion was based upon only one saying in *Thomas*. Marcovich maintained that the latter part of *Gospel of Thomas* 11 ('In the days when you ate what is dead, you made it alive. When you will be in the light, what will you do?') was, both in the Coptic and the Greek version (Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 5.8.32), inspired by the Gospel of John. In the Coptic version, Marcovich saw in the sentence 'whenever you are in the light' (Marcovich's translation) allusions to several Johannine passages (John 12:36; 1 John 1:7; 2:9). Moreover, Marcovich thought that the phrase 'to eat living' (ζῶντα φαγεῖν) in the Greek version of *Thomas* 11 recalls the 'predominantly eucharistic homily' in John 6:31–58.¹⁸ Again, it remains unclear why these resemblances should indicate a literary relationship between John and *Thomas*. The imagery of light is far too common to warrant *Thomas's* dependency on John, and the affinity between 'to eat living' in *Thomas* 11 and what is said in the Johannine discourse of the living bread (John 6:31–58) does not seem very close after all.

Tjitze Baarda has suggested that, taken together, the sayings 42 and 43 in *Thomas* presuppose the narrative sequence in John 8:30–48. Baarda's view, however, presupposes his particular interpretation of *Thomas* 42, which is that the 'passers-by' mentioned in this saying should be understood as 'Hebrews', and that the saying should be read together with the subsequent saying. In *Thomas* 42, in Baarda's opinion,

¹⁸ Miroslav Marcovich, 'Textual Criticism on the Gospel of Thomas', *JTS* 20 (1969), 53–74, esp. 72–74.

Jesus invites his audience to become ‘Hebrews’. This, in turn, raises among the audience the question of Jesus’ authority to make such a demand, and leads finally to his comment that his listeners have become like the Jews.¹⁹

In my view, Baarda insists correctly that *Thomas* 43 refers to something that has been said previously. Yet it is not clear that reference is made only to the previous saying. The plural form employed in *Thomas* 43 (ΕΚΧΩ ΝΗΝΑΙ ΝΑΝ, ‘you are saying *these* to us’) indicates, rather, that the saying refers to a larger group of the teachings of Jesus or to his teachings in general. Moreover, the linkage to the Johannine context remains vague, since *Thomas* 43 implies an audience that does not consist of ‘Jews’, as in John 8:30–48, but of those who are in danger of becoming like them.

Finally, James Charlesworth and Craig Evans have argued in favor of the dependence of *Thomas* on all four gospels in the New Testament. In their view, ‘the presence of M, L, and Johannine elements in *Thomas* indicate that the latter, at least in its extant Coptic form, has been influenced by the New Testament gospels.’ This argument is clearly inconclusive; for it mentions special traditions found only in certain gospels (M = material found only in Matthew; L = material found only in Luke), but does not specify whether these materials were traditional in these gospels or whether they were created by the authors of these gospels. Only in the latter case can one assume that *Thomas* derived these ele-

¹⁹ Tjitze Baarda, ‘“Jesus Said: Be Passers-by”: On the Meaning and Origin of Logion 42 of the Gospel of Thomas’, in id., *Early Transmission of Words of Jesus: Thomas, Tatian and the Text of the New Testament* (Amsterdam: VU, 1983), 179–205, esp. 196–97.

ments from other gospels. As to the relationship between John and *Thomas*, Charlesworth and Evans simply offer a brief list of what they consider parallels without qualifying them in any detail. In fact, Charlesworth and Evans ended up with differing conclusions concerning *Thomas's* dependence on the canonical gospels; Evans is more positive while Charlesworth remains undecided.²⁰

2. JOHN AND THOMAS ARE DEPENDENT ON COMMON SAYINGS TRADITIONS

If a literary dependence between John and *Thomas* is difficult to prove, one obvious alternative is to assume that their affinities go back to early traditions of Jesus' sayings. This was suggested by Gilles Quispel, who argued that the two gospels drew upon a common source of Jesus' sayings. Quispel maintained, in addition, that the author of John could have been familiar with some distinctively Palestinian traditions represented by the *Gospel of Thomas*.²¹

²⁰ James H. Charlesworth and Craig E. Evans, 'Jesus in the Agrapha and Apocryphal Gospels', in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig E. Evans; NTTTS 19; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 479–533 (498–99). The affinities they mention between John and *Thomas* are the following: John 1:9/*Gos. Thom.* 24; John 1:14/*Gos. Thom.* 28; John 4:13–15/*Gos. Thom.* 13; John 7:32–36/*Gos. Thom.* 38; John 8:12; 9:5/*Gos. Thom.* 77.

²¹ Gilles Quispel, 'Qumran, John and Jewish Christianity', in *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. by James Charlesworth; New York: Crossroad, 1991), 137–55, esp. 139–40, 144–46. Quispel's view on the sayings source behind the Gospel of John is based on Bengt Noack, *Zur johanneischen Tradition:*

Helmut Koester has argued on several occasions that the sayings traditions in John are related to those attested in *Thomas*. Furthermore, he has traced similar sayings traditions in two other Nag Hammadi texts, the *Dialogue of the Savior* and the *Apocryphon of James*.²² Koester believes that these writings enable us to clarify the tradition history of Johannine discourses: 'The Johannine speeches frequently contain sentences that can be clearly identified, with the help of the new texts from Nag Hammadi, as sayings that were originally isolated sayings.'²³ In fact, Koester believes that the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Dialogue of the Savior* bear witness to earlier stages of the sayings tradition than the Gospel of John: 'The *Gospel of Thomas* exhibits the first stage of transition from sayings collection to dialogue. The *Dialogue of the Savior* shows the initial stages of larger compositions. . . . The Gospel of John contains fully developed dialogues and discourses.'²⁴

Beiträge zur Kritik an der literarkritischen Analyse des vierten Evangeliums (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bager, 1954).

²² Helmut Koester, 'Dialog und Sprachüberlieferung in den gnostischen Texten von Nag Hammadi', *EvT* 39 (1979), 532–56; id., 'Gnostic Writings as Witnesses for the Development of the Sayings Tradition', in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. 1: *The School of Valentinus* (ed. Bentley Layton; Studies in the History of Religions 41; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), 238–61; id., *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2: *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 178–80; id., 'Gnostic Sayings and Controversy Traditions in John 8:12–59', in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1986), 97–110; id., *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity Press International, 1990), 256–63.

²³ Koester, *Introduction*, 179–80; cf. id., *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 257.

²⁴ Koester, 'Gnostic Writings', 253.

Koester's work can also be regarded as a precursor to the theory that John and *Thomas* are in conflict with each other. In his study of the sayings tradition in John 8:12–59,²⁵ he already argued that there was a tension between the pre-Johannine sayings tradition behind this passage and the Johannine author; while the tradition visible in *Thomas* represented a 'Gnostic understanding of salvation', this understanding was dismissed by the Johannine author.²⁶

Koester discussed the relationship between *Thomas* and John only in connection with his broader view of the development of sayings traditions.²⁷ This overall view determines both his method and his results. Koester provided lengthy lists of parallels to support his contention, but did not examine these parallels one by one. A closer qualification of them would have been desirable, however, since scholars whose conclusions are squarely opposed to Koester's, such as Charlesworth and Evans, have supported their view with quite similar lists of parallels between John and *Thomas*. Moreover, Koester does not take seriously the possibility that the *Gospel of Thomas* has run through several editorial stages. Although I find Koester's view that the form of a sayings gospel was more archaic than that of the lengthy Johannine discourses persuasive, it does not necessarily follow from this that *all* materials in *Thomas*, as it now stands, would be earlier than John.

A fascinating, but very speculative, version of the common sayings traditions theory was developed by Stevan

²⁵ Koester, 'Gnostic Sayings.'

²⁶ Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 263.

²⁷ Cf. Koester, 'Gnostic Writings', 251.

Davies. His suggestion was that the *Gospel of Thomas* had its origins in the Johannine community before the Gospel of John was written. According to Davies, this theory of the origin of *Thomas* would explain several things:

Indeed, the hypothesis that the Gospel of Thomas is a sayings collection from an early stage of the Johannine communities accounts for the fact that Thomas contains no quotations from the as yet unwritten Gospel and Letters of John, accounts for the use of both Johannine vocabulary and synoptic-style sayings, and to a certain extent accounts for the fact that the ideas of Thomas are less well conceptualized than the ideas in John.²⁸

Davies builds his hypothesis upon three observations. First, there is a similar usage of sapiential motifs in John and *Thomas*, including the pre-existence of Jesus, a dualism of light and darkness, Jesus' descent to earth and his teaching activity, a return of believers to the original state of creation (an idea which, in my opinion, is not evident in John), and the division among human beings that is accomplished by Jesus.²⁹ Second, there are certain other theological similarities, such as present eschatology and the double sense of the 'world'.³⁰ Third, Davies supports his contention with his view of an oral tradition behind the Gospel of John. Unfortunately, this part of Davies's argument remains utterly speculative, as the following quotation may show:

²⁸ Stevan Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (New York: The Seabury Press), 116.

²⁹ Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 107–12.

³⁰ Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 112–13.

If we assume that the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John were in part derived from sayings of Jesus such as are found in the synoptics, then the oral preaching of the early Johannine community must have contained sayings of Jesus modified in a Johannine way, but less modified than the sayings now preserved in John. One would expect then that a document which remained from the period of the oral preaching of the Johannine communities and which Thomas used would have been a sayings collection, as Thomas is. It probably would have contained some sayings closer to synoptic sayings than are the discourses in John, and would show signs of early development of the Johannine tendencies... [I]f we try to imagine what a sayings collection underlying Thomas from an early stage of the Johannine community would look like, it would look very much like Thomas itself.³¹

Davies's argument is based upon several wild guesses at this point, and it also raises more questions than it answers. For example, Davies does not try to explain why it should be assumed that an earlier sayings collection of the Johannine community was more closely related to the synoptic traditions than the extant Johannine discourses are. Moreover, he does not explain why the synoptic-like sayings tradition that had already established its position in the Johannine community would have gone virtually unnoticed when the Gospel of John was written.³² In other words, Davies offers no explanation for the eclipse of an earlier sayings tradition in the Johannine community that must be taken for granted in his theory. In sum, Davies's theory suffers from too many unproven assumptions concerning the early history of the

³¹ Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 115–16.

³² Cf. Snodgrass, 'The Gospel of Thomas', 24.

Johannine community. This, however, should not distract us from his otherwise sensitive remarks on theological similarities between the Gospel of John and the *Gospel of Thomas*. For example, Davies has offered the best inventory thus far of the sapiential motifs common to John and *Thomas*.

3. JOHN AND THOMAS: THE GOSPELS IN CONFLICT

While Koester had already paved the way for theories of a conflict between John and *Thomas*, it was his student, Gregory Riley, who was the first scholar to argue distinctly for this view. He did this in his book *Resurrection Reconsidered* (1995), which was based upon his Harvard dissertation supervised by Koester.³³ Although Riley affirmed that John and *Thomas* are close to each other in spirit, he argued that the communities behind these gospels were engaged in a mutual controversy over a number of issues, including the importance of faith, the divinity of Christ, and, above all, physical resurrection. Riley maintained that Thomasine Christians denied the resurrection of the body while Johannine Christians believed in it. The struggle that became one decisive factor in defining Christian orthodoxy and heresy in later centuries was, according to this view, anticipated by an earlier debate over the same issue between Johannine and Thomasine Christians.

³³ Gregory J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1995).

After Riley, other scholars have posited a conflict between John and *Thomas*, too, but they have sought reasons for it elsewhere. April DeConick already hinted in her study, *Seek to See Him* (1996), at the possibility that John and *Thomas* were engaged in a debate about ascent mysticism and *visio dei*³⁴ which, according to her, formed the key to the correct interpretation of *Thomas*. DeConick's more recent book, *Voices of the Mystics* (2001), is devoted to making a more thorough argument for the conflict theory.³⁵ Elaine Pagels, in an important article that now forms the core of her best-selling book, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (2003), traced two strikingly different interpretations of Genesis in John and *Thomas*, and maintained that the two gospels were in conflict with each other over this issue.³⁶ In their studies on smaller textual units, Stephen Johnson and Harold Attridge have explained differences between John and *Thomas* as being due to their mutual controversy,³⁷ and Richard Valantasis has voiced agreement with the

³⁴ DeConick, *Seek to See Him*, 72–73.

³⁵ See also April D. DeConick, 'The Original Gospel of Thomas', *VigChr* 56 (2002), 167–99, esp. 187, 196; ead., 'John Rivals Thomas: From Community Conflict to Gospel Narrative', in *Jesus in Johannine Tradition* (ed. Robert T. Fortna and Thomas Thatcher; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 303–11.

³⁶ Elaine Pagels, 'Exegesis of Genesis 1 in the Gospels of Thomas and John', *JBL* 118 (1999), 477–96; ead., *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 30–73.

³⁷ Harold A. Attridge, "'Seeking" and "Asking" in Q, *Thomas*, and John', in *From Quest to Q* (ed. Jon Ma. Asgeirsson, Kirstin de Troyer and Marvin W. Meyer; BETL 146; Leuven: Leuven University Press—Peeters, 2000), 295–302; Stephen R. Johnson, 'The *Gospel of Thomas* 76:3 and Canonical Parallels: Three Segments in the Tradition History of the Saying', in *The Nag Hammadi*

conflict theory in his commentary on the *Gospel of Thomas*.³⁸ The conflict theory even made headlines in *Time* magazine (22 December 2003), where Pagels was quoted as follows: 'I'm not saying that [John] was responding to *Thomas* as written, because there may have not been a written text [yet]... But it is inconceivable that the *Gospel of John* is not responding to some of these ideas.'

In fact, a few years before Riley's study, the Japanese New Testament scholar Takashi Onuki had already argued that Jesus' saying now attested in *Gospel of Thomas* 17 was circulated among the opponents of the author of 1 John, who then denounced their claims by reversing the original saying at the beginning of his letter (1 John 1:1).³⁹ Surprisingly, Onuki's study is not mentioned by any of the scholars mentioned above, though his conclusion is largely similar to theirs.

Library After Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration (ed. John D. Turner and Anne McGuire; NHMS 44; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 308–26, esp. 322–24. Johnson points out that the phrase 'taste death' occurs in John 8:51–52 only in a reply by the Jews whereas Jesus himself speaks of 'seeing death'. According to Johnson, this feature demonstrates a Johannine reaction against the Thomazine version of the promise of immortality. It seems more likely to me, however, that what is misunderstood by the Jews in John 8:51–52 is not the *wording* of Jesus' promise but his *authority* to make this promise.

³⁸ Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 19: 'Riley is...persuasive that the communities represented by Thomas and John are communities in a competitive relationship.'

³⁹ Takashi Onuki, 'Traditionsgeschichte von Thomasevangelium 17 und ihre christologische Relevanz', now in id., *Heil und Erlösung: Studien zum Neuen Testament und Gnosis* (WUNT 165; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 221–39.

I will discuss Onuki's analysis of *Gospel of Thomas* 17 more thoroughly later in this study.⁴⁰ In what follows, I will review more closely the views of Riley, DeConick, and Pagels, whom I consider the most important representatives of the conflict theory at the moment.

Riley insists that, while Johannine Christians accepted the resurrection of body, Thomasine Christians denied it, and that the two groups were engaged in a battle over this issue.⁴¹ According to Riley, the disagreement was mutual. Not only does it become visible in how the disciple Thomas is portrayed in John, but also in the saying of the destruction of 'this house' in *Thomas* (*Gos. Thom.* 71). The latter shows, according to Riley, a Thomasine response to the Johannine interpretation of the temple saying (John 2:18–22).

Riley's scenario of the conflict between the gospels of John and *Thomas* raises the question of whether the author of John knew the *Gospel of Thomas*. Riley's answer is a cautious 'yes':

The elements present and positions countered in the pericope [of the Doubting Thomas] cohere well with those in the *Gospel of Thomas*, and lead to the conclusion that the *Gospel of Thomas* itself was already *at some stage of completion*, either written or oral, and that its contents were known to the author of John, probably through verbal contact with members of this rival community.⁴²

⁴⁰ See below chapter four, section three.

⁴¹ Riley, *Resurrection*, 5; cf. id., 'The Gospel of Thomas in Recent Scholarship', *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 2 (1994), 227–52, esp. 240.

⁴² Riley, *Resurrection*, 178 (emphasis added).

While his own view as to whether the contacts between John and *Thomas* are literal or oral remains somewhat vague, Riley rejects vigorously Brown's suggestion that *Thomas* could be dependent on John. This is only a 'desperate solution', according to Riley.⁴³ Instead of really arguing against Brown, Riley simply affirms his own position:

'Dependency' of Thomas on John is not only not demonstrable, it is indeed nothing more than a presupposition of some early Thomas scholarship to which Brown and others subscribed, which obscured the actual relationship of the text.⁴⁴

Riley's evaluation of Brown's position seems basically correct to me, but what is surprising is that Riley's outright rejection of the possibility that *Thomas* is dependent on John is not in keeping with his own interpretation of *Thomas* 71. In fact, his reading of this saying presupposes that it is a reaction to the Johannine *author's* interpretation of the temple saying in John 2:21.⁴⁵ Riley's study, thus, does not clarify what 'the actual relationship of the text' he is referring to in his condemnation of Brown's views really is.

Be that as it may, Riley argues that the Gospel of John was not only addressed to the Johannine community but also to Thomasine Christians.⁴⁶ Riley does not speculate about how persuasive the Gospel of John would have seemed in the eyes of the latter. Nevertheless, the author of John could scarcely have entertained any hopes of great success for his writing

⁴³ Riley, *Resurrection*, 2.

⁴⁴ Riley, *Resurrection*, 3.

⁴⁵ For Riley's interpretation of *Thomas* 71, see below, chapter four, section six.

⁴⁶ Riley, *Resurrection*, 178.

among them, if they saw his portrayal of the disciple Thomas as negatively as Riley does, and read this portrayal as the complete refutation of their views.

DeConick reads the *Gospel of Thomas* as advocating vision mysticism, where salvation is acquired by seeking and by ascension to the divine realm, leading to a *visio dei*.⁴⁷ Moreover, DeConick argues that not only are there passages in John that were ‘written as an attack against some form of Jewish mystical ascent theology’,⁴⁸ but the Johannine author was engaged in a debate with Thomasine Christians over this issue.⁴⁹ The same position can be found in DeConick’s earlier case study, in which she examined the Johannine sayings of seeking and finding (John 7:33–34; 8:21; 13:33), concluding that ‘John is arguing against the type of insistence found in *Thomas* that one must actively seek to ascend to the place where Jesus was.’⁵⁰

In her *Voices of the Mystics*, DeConick, like Riley, considers the Johannine figure of Thomas to be the spokesman for the beliefs of Thomasine Christians. Her understanding of what Thomas stands for in the Johannine story is, however, completely different from Riley’s. Her view about a conflict between John and *Thomas* is based upon four key arguments.

⁴⁷ DeConick, *Seek to See Him*, passim; *Voices*, 86–108; cf. also April D. DeConick and Jarl Fossum, ‘Stripped Before God: A New Interpretation of Logion 37 in the Gospel of Thomas’, *VigChr* 45 (1991), 123–50, esp. pp. 135–39. DeConick’s view of mystical ascension in the *Gospel of Thomas* is based on her detailed study of *Gospel of Thomas* 50 (*Seek to See Him*, 43–96).

⁴⁸ DeConick, *Voices*, 40.

⁴⁹ DeConick, *Seek to See Him*, 73; *Voices*, passim.

⁵⁰ De Conick, *Seek to See Him*, 72–73.

(1) According to *Thomas*, salvation is acquired through heavenly journeys prior to death. During these journeys, the believer will see God and experience transformation: ‘... the Thomasine Christians were mystics seeking visions of God for the purpose of immortalization.’⁵¹

(2) In *John*, the idea of heavenly journeys is rebutted: ‘According to the Johannine polemic, salvation could not be wrought by personally ascending into heaven in order to see the deity and thus become deified.’⁵² Instead, ‘the vision of Jesus on earth substitutes for the vision of the Father in heaven.’⁵³ There are no heavenly journeys either, but Jesus’ resurrected body is ‘the new heavenly Temple which believers are able to enter at the end of time.’⁵⁴ *John* replaces vision mysticism with ‘faith mysticism’, which is ‘a polemical response to the mystical ascent soteriology such as that found in the Gospel of Thomas.’⁵⁵ The Johannine faith mysticism also promised transformation, but one that is achieved by means of sacraments instead of mystical ascent.⁵⁶

(3) The negative portrayal of *Thomas* in *John* shows that the Johannine author is critical of Thomasine Christians and their views of salvation in particular: ‘Thomas’s misunderstanding is that he believes that in order to achieve life, one must seek the “way” to Jesus, the route of ascent into heaven, and a *visio dei*.’⁵⁷

⁵¹ DeConick, *Voices*, 107.

⁵² DeConick, *Voices*, 131.

⁵³ DeConick, *Voices*, 116.

⁵⁴ DeConick, *Voices*, 124.

⁵⁵ DeConick, *Voices*, 131, cf. 125–27.

⁵⁶ DeConick, *Voices*, 128–31.

⁵⁷ DeConick, *Voices*, 85.

(4) The controversy between John and *Thomas* continued and can be seen in later texts of Syrian origin (*Preachings of John*; the *Gospel of the Savior*; the *Apocryphon of James*; the *Ascension of Isaiah*; the *Dialogue of the Savior*). These texts, unlike *Thomas*, reckon with the possibility that a *visio dei* takes place only after death.⁵⁸

In my view, the most convincing part in DeConick's argument is point (2). The author of John emphasizes that nobody (John 1:18), or the Son only (John 5:19), has seen the Father. The clearest indication of the Johannine critique of vision mysticism is the discussion between Jesus and Philip in John 14:8–9. When Philip asks Jesus to 'show us the Father', he is criticized and corrected by Jesus: 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.' Yet the fact that it is Philip who wants to see the Father fits poorly with DeConick's solution. Thomas does not raise this issue in his question to Jesus (John 14:5). (Should we assume, then, that there was yet another early Christian group that propagated vision mysticism but subscribed to Philip's authority instead of Thomas's?)

The greatest difficulties in DeConick's arguments are, in my view, related to points (1) and (3). The *Gospel of Thomas* no doubt considers transformation to divine status possible (cf. *Gos. Thom.* 108). It remains doubtful, however, whether this transformation was really thought to be acquired through heavenly journeys, for the *Gospel of Thomas*

⁵⁸ DeConick, *Voices*, 162–63.

contains no direct descriptions of such journeys. Even *Gospel of Thomas* 50, upon which DeConick's overall interpretation of the Thomasine vision mysticism is built,⁵⁹ does not mention a journey to, or visit in, heaven. DeConick's interpretation is deduced from parallels to this saying, not from the saying itself. Her comprehensive tradition-historical analysis demonstrates that the closest parallels to *Thomas* 50 are indeed connected with either the post-mortem or mystic ascension of the believer. However, strictly speaking, the ascension terminology itself ('to go/come above') does not occur in this saying.

In addition, *Thomas* contains passages that can be understood as a critique of heavenly journeys; these passages are not discussed at all by DeConick. One such critique is visible in *Thomas* 3: 'If your leaders say to you, "Behold, the kingdom is in heaven", then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, "It is in the sea", then the fish will precede you. The kingdom is, however, inside of you and it is outside of you.'⁶⁰

Moreover, DeConick herself shows that mystical journeys were often prepared for 'by certain ascetic behaviors like celibacy, fasting, and other dietary restrictions.'⁶¹ It is odd that she nowhere discusses the fact that fasting and dietary restrictions are *not* recommended in *Thomas*; instead, their

⁵⁹ Cf. DeConick, *Seek to See Him*, 64–96; *Voices*, 93.

⁶⁰ This point was made by Elaine Pagels in her response to DeConick, *Voices*, at the Thomas Christianity Group, The Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Nashville, TN, November 2000.

⁶¹ DeConick, *Voices*, 53.

importance is downplayed (*Gos. Thom.* 6, 14).⁶² Read in the light of *Gospel of Thomas* 3, these sayings could be understood as part of a critique of heavenly journeys.

Another crucial difficulty is related to DeConick's interpretation of the figure of Thomas in John. She does not make any effort to discuss the objections I had earlier made as to Riley's interpretation of the Johannine portrait of Thomas, but continues to interpret this portrait in a manner similar to Riley's. This makes her interpretation subject to the same criticism that I earlier levelled against Riley.⁶³

When it comes to the position the disciple Thomas represents in John, however, DeConick's view is opposed to that of Riley's. She maintains, against Riley, that 'the intent of (John) 20.24–29 is not to confirm a fleshly resurrection but to criticize visionary experience in favor of faith. . . .'⁶⁴ Thomas is, thus, portrayed in John as a representative of vision mysticism. DeConick adduces John 20:24, where Thomas insists that he wants to see the Lord, in support of her view. Moreover, Jesus rebukes Thomas in John 20:27, 'because Thomas confesses his belief that Jesus is God on the basis of his vision of Jesus. . . .'⁶⁵ In addition, Thomas's question about the way in John 14:5 'reflects the popular association of *ὁδός* with proleptic heavenly ascents.'⁶⁶

The disagreement between Riley and DeConick about what ideas are embodied in the Johannine figure of Thomas

⁶² Cf. Antti Marjanen, 'Thomas and Jewish Religious Practices', in Uro, *Thomas at the Crossroads*, 163–82, esp. 166–75.

⁶³ See chapter three of this book.

⁶⁴ DeConick, *Voices*, 83.

⁶⁵ DeConick, *Voices*, 82.

⁶⁶ DeConick, *Voices*, 73.

shows, better than any other argument, that this figure remains too vague to admit of any far-fetched conclusions as to positions he may or may not represent in the Johannine story of the Doubting Thomas.

DeConick's new study also demonstrates in other ways how difficult it is to prove that the author of John reacted against Thomasine Christians and their views. DeConick counters my earlier complaint, that there are no clear signs of a controversy between John and *Thomas*, by maintaining that this lack only shows that their controversy was 'of the "hidden" variety.'⁶⁷ Few would deny DeConick's claim that 'controversies between actual communities are often fictionalized and recorded as dramas in their literature rather than related in terms of verbatim dialogue.'⁶⁸ I fail to see, however, why this claim would negate the demand for clearer evidence. 'Often' is not 'always' (and I am not even quite sure about 'often', either); thus it may or may not be that the texts in question reflect 'controversies between actual communities'. This is not a matter of course, but needs demonstration.

Moreover, DeConick admits that hidden controversy is 'more difficult to demonstrate explicitly' than open controversy, in which the opponents and their views would be mentioned directly.⁶⁹ Hidden controversy as DeConick defines it, I would like to add, is not very informative either,

⁶⁷ DeConick, *Voices*, 31.

⁶⁸ DeConick, *Voices*, 31.

⁶⁹ DeConick, *Voices*, 31. DeConick recalls the distinction made between open and hidden controversy by Marc G. Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity* (trans. Batya Stein; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 126.

for it is almost impossible to prove or disprove such controversy in ancient texts. In hidden controversy, DeConick says, the rejected ideology can simply be ignored, or the author 'can insist on the status quo, or conceal any material that might be helpful to his opponents.'⁷⁰ If the author chose not to mention the conflicting ideology at all, this leaves us with the question of how we can possibly know this ideology to begin with.

DeConick, however, mentions other strategies of hidden controversy, too: 'the author might modify the disagreeable ideology, condemn it outright, or provide an alternative model.'⁷¹ These strategies are plausible as such and can be detected, if we could be sure what ideology the author was opposed to; but they are not valid as proofs for the alleged existence of the opposed ideology. The crucial question is how to differentiate between the positions the author deliberately ignored or concealed, and those that were not there because the author did not know them or because the author did not find them interesting or useful.

The same critique can be raised concerning the term 'intertraditions', which DeConick suggests should be added to the socio-rhetorical model coined by Vernon Robbins.⁷² According to DeConick, 'intertraditions' form 'an arena where *specific language connections cannot be identified*, but where we can see that people appear to be consciously talking to one another in their texts. The authors are using

⁷⁰ DeConick, *Voices*, 31.

⁷¹ DeConick, *Voices*, 31.

⁷² For socio-rhetorical method, see Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996).

texts to dramatize actual dialogues which were engaging their communities.⁷³ This definition, again, begs the question of how we can see people ‘consciously talking to one another in their texts’ to begin with, if there are no ‘specific language connections’ that would demonstrate such discussions.

Both Riley and DeConick take the figure of Thomas in John as a mirror image of the community subscribing to the authority of Thomas. To what extent the mirror reading of John, as reflecting the situation in which it was written, is justified in general, however, is a matter of debate. Riley and DeConick build upon Raymond Brown’s and J. Louis Martyn’s theories concerning the Johannine community that can be detected behind the fourth Gospel.⁷⁴ Brown thought that we can detect no less than five separate stages in the history of the Johannine community,⁷⁵ whereas Martyn approached the Gospel of John as a two-level drama, that is, describing not only the drama of Jesus but also that of the Johannine community.⁷⁶

In light of recent studies, however, we should be cautious in attempting a mirror reading of John and the historical reconstruction of the Johannine community based upon it. This is not to say that the experiences of the community could not have any impact on how the story of Jesus was

⁷³ DeConick, *Voices*, 20 (emphasis added).

⁷⁴ Cf. Riley, *Resurrection*, 73 (the Johannine characters ‘represent facets of John’s religious worlds’); DeConick, *Voices*, 23–25; for a similar assessment, see now Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 63–64.

⁷⁵ Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, passim.

⁷⁶ J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

told in John, but it is very difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct these experiences on the basis of the Johannine story. As Raimo Hakola points out in his recent study, ‘the careless leap from the narrative of the gospel to the historical reality behind it has resulted in distorted views of the early rabbinic movement, and these views cannot be sustained in light of recent studies.’⁷⁷

The strategy of mirror reading has often produced neo-allegorical interpretations of narrative figures in John. Martyn argued that the lame man in John 5 represents an informer on Johannine Christians, and that John 9 was really an account of Jewish interrogations of Johannine Christians.⁷⁸ Riley’s and DeConick’s interpretations of the figure of Thomas in the Gospel of John follow the same strategy of reading this text. The underlying interpretive presupposition that the Gospel of John should be read as an allegory of what Johannine Christians went through is, however, far from self-evident.

In her study of the interpretations of Genesis 1 in John and *Thomas*, Pagels avoided the difficulties embedded in mirror reading, as she did not place so much importance on the figure of Thomas in John.⁷⁹ At the same time,

⁷⁷ Raimo Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness* (NovTSup 118; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005), 22. Hakola introduces several Johannine specialists who have recently criticized Martyn’s two-level reading of the Gospel of John, including Margaret Davies, Marinus de Jonge, Joachim Kügler, and Adele Reinhartz (ibid. 18–21).

⁷⁸ Cf. Martyn, *History and Theology*, 52–57.

⁷⁹ Elaine Pagels, ‘Exegesis of Genesis 1.’ For an interpretation of Genesis 1–2 in *Thomas*, see also Stevan Davies, ‘Christology and Protology of the *Gospel of Thomas*’, *JBL* 111 (1992), 663–82, esp. 663–74. For Jewish views

however, the evidence she offered in this study for a real conflict between the two gospels remains thin. (Perhaps it is for this reason that in her new book Pagels now rehearses the same arguments concerning the portrayal of Thomas in the Gospel of John as did Riley and DeConick to support her conclusion that John and *Thomas* are gospels in conflict.)⁸⁰

In her article, Pagels pointed out that *Thomas* makes extensive use of Genesis 1:26–27 ‘to show that the divine image implanted at creation enables humankind to find...the way back to its origin in the mystery of the primordial creation.’⁸¹ The ideal state for human beings in *Thomas* is ‘that people restore themselves to the condition of the image of God’, and ‘the cluster of logia that interpret Genesis 1 directs those who seek access to God toward the divine image given in creation.’⁸² According to Pagels, the Johannine interpretation of Genesis goes in another direction. What is considered common to all humankind in *Thomas* is restricted to Jesus in John:

John, interpreting Gen 1:1–3, insists that the primordial divine light—far from being accessible through the ‘image of God’ implicitly present in human nature—resides exclusively in the *logos*

about Adam visible in *Thomas*, see Martha Lelyveld, *Les logia de la vie dans l'Évangile selon Thomas: à la recherche d'une tradition et d'une rédaction* (NHS 34; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), esp. 27–30, 38–43, 49–54.

⁸⁰ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 69–72.

⁸¹ Pagels, ‘Exegesis of Genesis 1’, 488, building upon Hans-Martin Schenke, *Der Gott ‘Mensch’ in der Gnosis: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Diskussion über die paulinische Anschauung von der Kirche als Leib Christi* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962).

⁸² Pagels, ‘Exegesis of Genesis 1’, 487.

(cf. John 1:3) and becomes perceptible to humankind exclusively through the *logos* incarnate.⁸³

In my view, Pagels has seen a noteworthy difference in the interpretations of the primordial divine light in John and *Thomas*.⁸⁴ However, her case for a conflict between these gospels is less persuasive. Pagels herself admits that ‘the basic pattern of Thomas’s Genesis exegesis was widely known,’⁸⁵ and that ‘John differs not only from Thomas, but from all other exegesis that derives from mainstream Jewish Genesis speculation.’⁸⁶ Hence, Pagels’s own conclusion remains quite vague after all: ‘John apparently points polemics against a type of Genesis exegesis used by a wide range of readers, both Jewish and Christian, and perhaps even pagan as well.’⁸⁷

In light of this conclusion, which seems sound to me, I do not see any compelling reason to assume that John’s interpretation of Genesis was a polemic against Thomasine Christians in particular. The author of John could have written against any of the groups and traditions mentioned by Pagels (Thomas, Hellenistic Jewish authors, Hermetic texts), or, as seems the most plausible explanation to me, John and *Thomas* employed a similar tradition in two different manners. The former made use of Genesis traditions to emphasize the unique status of Jesus; the latter to show the

⁸³ Pagels, ‘Exegesis of Genesis 1’, 481.

⁸⁴ Cf. Dunderberg, ‘From Thomas to Valentinus.’

⁸⁵ Pagels, ‘Exegesis of Genesis 1’, 479.

⁸⁶ Pagels, ‘Exegesis of Genesis 1’, 489.

⁸⁷ Pagels, ‘Exegesis of Genesis 1’, 492.

way to salvation open to all human beings. It does not seem necessary to assume that one interpretation emerged as a reaction to the other. The two interpretations could easily have come into existence independently of each other.

4. CONCLUSION

The early stages of research outlined in the first two parts of this chapter show how clearly scholars' presuppositions concerning *Thomas* have determined their conclusions. I believe this is also the case for the theory of a conflict between John and *Thomas* in its different forms. Proponents of this theory have their own views about what the *Gospel of Thomas* is all about, and then find a confirmation, in the form of opposition, for their particular views about the *Gospel of Thomas* in the Gospel of John. The evidence derived from John proves very flexible in the usage of these scholars. They have constructed quite different, and mutually exclusive, pictures of the Thomasine position rebutted in John. In my view, this demonstrates that the Johannine story world remains too vague to justify any particular form of the conflict theory. A number of allegedly Thomasine positions have been seen as condemned in the Gospel of John, but the question remains how persuasive this way of reading John is in the light of the results achieved by it.

In my opinion, Riley, DeConick, and Pagels have managed to show several points where John and *Thomas* differ from each other, and may even have opposing views. But

how can it be shown that these gospels, or communities behind them, were really in debate with each other? Riley, DeConick, and Pagels have found the necessary proof in the Johannine characterization of the disciple Thomas. He is interpreted as a mirror, reflecting ideas attributed to a rival group of Christians leaning on the authority of Thomas. Thus, a focal point in their argument is the Johannine story of Doubting Thomas (John 20:24–29). Both Riley and DeConick maintain that Thomas is portrayed as a fool in this story, and that the Johannine author characterized Thomas in this way to combat ideas characteristic of Thomasine Christians.

Yet Riley's and DeConick's interpretations as to what the disciple Thomas stands for in John were strikingly different from each other. Is the Thomasine position refuted in John 20:24–29 the denial of physical resurrection, as Riley believes, or is it vision mysticism, as DeConick argues? Both views cannot both be right. In fact, DeConick disagrees with Riley's interpretation of that story while Riley has questioned a crucial element in DeConick's argument for the importance of *visio dei* in *Thomas*.⁸⁸

For me, the fact that Riley and DeConick cannot agree upon the cause of the conflict between John and *Thomas*

⁸⁸ For DeConick's disagreement with Riley, see DeConick, *Voices*, 30, 83. Riley has raised doubts concerning DeConick and Fossum's interpretation of *Gospel of Thomas* 37 as promoting *visio dei*. Riley argues against their position by proposing the reading $\tau\omicron\tau[\epsilon\ \tau\epsilon\tau]\bar{\eta}[\eta]\eta\gamma$ ('then you will come') instead of $\tau\omicron\tau[\epsilon\ \tau\epsilon\tau]\bar{\eta}\alpha\eta\gamma$ ('then you will see'). In that case, the saying would no longer bear witness to vision mysticism in *Thomas*, as DeConick and Fossum suggested. Cf. Gregory J. Riley, 'A Note on the Text of *Gospel of Thomas* 37', *HTR* 88 (1995), 179–81.

shows that their readings have not been able to do away with the usual difficulties involved in the mirror reading of the gospels. If both Riley's and DeConick's contrasting interpretations can be projected onto the figure of Thomas in John, this figure is apparently too vague to permit definite conclusions as to what was going on behind the scenes when the Gospel of John was written. This point will be worked out in more detail in the following chapter devoted to the narrative figure of Thomas in John.