

# The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus

*Stephen J. Patterson*

TO ENTER THE DISCUSSION OF CHRISTIAN ORIGINS today is to wander into a world of texts and traditions both familiar and strange. The story of how Christianity came to be is still communicated largely in texts familiar to us from the New Testament. However, more and more historians of earliest Christianity are appreciating the need to move beyond the traditional limits of the canon in exploring all of the sources available to us from this earliest period, regardless of how the later church came to regard them from a theological point of view. Among these early non-canonical texts, perhaps none is more important than the Gospel of Thomas.

## THE DISCOVERY OF THOMAS

The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in 1945 among a collection of books called the Nag Hammadi Library, a name which derives from the town in Upper Egypt near to which this remarkable discovery was made.<sup>1</sup> Scholars had known of the Gospel of Thomas before this time, since ancient writers make occasional reference to it, sometimes even quoting a line or two. But the book in its entirety was lost. Around the turn of the century the famous British team of Grenfell and Hunt had discovered a series of papyrus leaves bearing fragments of this lost gospel, but without the complete text of Thomas to serve as a reference point, they had not realized the full value of their find.<sup>2</sup> The mystery was shat-

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1. For an account of this fascinating discovery, see James M. Robinson, "The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices," *Biblical Archeologist* 42 (1979): 206-24, and "Getting the Nag Hammadi Library into English," *Biblical Archaeologist* 42 (1979): 239-48.

2. These fragments are known as the Oxyrhynchus fragments of Thomas. They were published originally by B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt in *LOGIA IHSOU: Sayings of Our Lord* (London: Henry Frowde, 1897) and *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Part 1* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1898).

tered in 1945 with the swing of a mattock that smashed the ancient clay jar containing our only complete copy of the Gospel of Thomas. In a swirl of ancient dust out tumbled a textual treasure.

### THOMAS: A DIFFERENT SORT OF GOSPEL

Thomas turned out to be a gospel quite unlike the gospels familiar to us from the New Testament. In contrast to the canonical gospels, Thomas has no narrative. It does not tell a story of Jesus' life. It contains only a few brief anecdotal stories. In it there are no stories of Jesus' birth, baptism, his preaching at Nazareth. There are no stories of his entry into Jerusalem, his arrest, crucifixion, or resurrection. Thomas consists, for the most part, of isolated sayings listed serially using the simple introductory formula "Jesus said . . ."

### THOMAS AND CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

In recent years the Gospel of Thomas has become ever more important to historians of earliest Christianity. Why?

Even though Thomas is formally quite different from the canonical gospels, it does share with these gospels a good deal of content. In fact, about half of Thomas's sayings are paralleled in the three gospels known as the "synoptics": Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This means that Thomas relies on the same basic roots that gave birth to earliest Christianity as reflected in the New Testament. This raises the question: Can Thomas tell us anything about Christian origins that we did not already know?

Early in the Thomas debate many answered this question with an emphatic "no." They argued that parallels between Thomas and the synoptics indicate that Thomas made use of the synoptic gospels, pirating sayings from them and corrupting them to reflect the unorthodox theology of Thomas. For such, Thomas could be dismissed as nothing more than an heretical perversion of earliest Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

But the evidence for this view was slim, and the theories justifying this or that slight change in Thomas's version of a saying were fanciful. In recent years, in all but conservative Catholic and evangelical circles, this view has gradually given way to another. The parallels between Thomas and the synoptics are due to a common shared oral tradition, not Thomas's reliance on Matthew, Mark, or Luke. The evidence for this hypothe-

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3. This view is represented in the popular book by R. M. Grant and D. N. Freedman, *The Secret Sayings of Jesus. With an English Translation of the Gospel of Thomas by William R. Schoedel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/ London: Collins, 1960). Over the years, many have gained their first introduction to Thomas from this book.

sis is as follows<sup>4</sup>:

1) Close, detailed comparison of sayings contained in both Thomas and the synoptics reveals that Thomas preserves them in a form that is more primitive than the synoptic form. In some cases the Thomas form of a saying shows signs of later development, but lying behind it is a form that is more basic than the synoptic form. In either case such evidence indicates that Thomas did not rely on the synoptic gospels but on traditions, whether written or oral, that antedate them.

2) Literary dependence of one text on another often shows up in the ordering of material. Remnants of the same order in both texts indicates some literary relationship between them. This is not true of Thomas and the synoptics. There is between them virtually no shared order.

3) If Thomas were later than the synoptics one would expect it to have a form reflective of this later time period. It does not. Rather, it is cast in the form of a sayings collection. Most scholars agree that Matthew and Luke used such a collection in composing their gospels. This early sayings gospel is referred to as Q. Its existence shows that Christians were using sayings collections before the synoptics were written. Later, however, this practice gave way to narrative forms such as we have in the New Testament. For whatever reason, the sayings collection fell from use—and probably from favor, as the disappearance of such an important foundational document as Q seems to indicate. Thomas belongs formally to that early period of collecting sayings of Jesus, a time contemporaneous with Q.

This evidence has convinced most current Thomas scholars that the Gospel of Thomas is basically independent of the synoptic gospels. This does not mean that the author of this gospel did not know the other gospels and that Thomas was completely unaffected by them. Indeed, there is evidence that the author of Thomas or the scribes who copied and preserved it did know the New Testament gospels and may have been affected by that knowledge. As for its composition, however, Thomas is not fundamentally dependent on the New Testament gospels. Rather, its roots are to be found in the same early oral traditions from which Mark, Q, and the rest of the synoptic tradition emerged.

For historians of earliest Christianity this finding has dramatic implications. First, it means that by studying Thomas, we will catch a glimpse of another branch of earliest Christianity that was heretofore unknown to us: Thomas Christianity. Second, it gives scholars another critical tool for approaching the question of the historical Jesus. The second of these re-

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4. The following remarks are a summary of my own more extensive treatment of the question in *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1993), 9-110. Many of the arguments offered here find their roots in a series of essays by Helmut Koester and James M. Robinson in *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

quires special explanation. But first a word about Thomas Christianity.

#### THOMAS CHRISTIANITY

Recent studies of the synoptic gospels and their antecedent traditions, like Q, have revealed an earliest phase in Christianity that was characterized by an intense social radicalism. This earliest phase is commonly referred to as the "Jesus movement," a term coined by the German scholar, Gerd Theissen, whose work initiated much of this current research.<sup>5</sup> The Jesus movement was characterized by itinerant wandering from place to place—thus: "Foxes have holes, and birds their nests, but human beings have nowhere to lay down and rest" (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58; and Thom. 86). These early itinerants left behind family life, of which they had become critical—thus: "Whoever does not hate father and mother cannot become my student. Whoever does not hate brothers and sisters and take up a cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37-38; Luke 14:26-27; Thom. 55).

They became critical of common piety, distinctions of clean and unclean, and purity as a means of validating human worth and belonging: "There is nothing outside a person which by going in can defile" (Mark 7:15; Matt. 5:11; Thom. 14:5). They criticized the religious and scholarly community that upheld these socially constructed boundaries: "The Pharisees and the scholars have taken the keys of knowledge and hidden them. They have not entered, nor have they allowed those who want to enter to go in" (Matt. 23:13; Luke 11:52; Thom. 39:1-2).

They embraced the socially marginalized as God's blessed ones:

Blessed are you poor, for God's imperial rule is yours (Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20b; Thom. 54).

Blessed are you who hunger, for you will be fed (Matt. 5:6; Luke 6:21a; Thom. 69:2).

Blessed are you who cry, for you will be comforted (Matt. 5:4; Luke 6:21b).

Blessed are you who are hated and persecuted (Matt. 5:10-11; Luke 6:22; Thom. 68).

And they characterized wealth as useless: "There was a rich person who had much money. He said, 'I will use my money to sow and reap

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5. See, for example, his book *The Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

and plant and fill my barns with the produce so that I shall lack nothing.' But that very same night he died" (Luke 12:16-20; Thom. 63). Or again: "If you have money, give to someone from whom you will not get it back" (Matt. 5:42; Luke 6:30, 34-35; Thom. 95).

But while this socially radical tradition is imbedded in the early Jesus tradition, it is also clear that by the time it was incorporated into the New Testament gospels it had lost much of its edge. So, for example, when a rich young man comes to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark but is sent away because he is unable to renounce his wealth and take up the itinerant life, we find this scenario: "And [the disciples] were perplexed, wondering to themselves, 'Well, then, who can be saved?' Jesus looks them in the eye and says, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; after all, everything is possible for God'" (Mark 10:26-27; compare Matt. 19:25-26; Luke 18:26-27).

In synoptic Christianity the early social radicalism of the Jesus movement gave way to a form of belonging that did not require the rigorous demands of itinerancy and world renunciation. This was perhaps inevitable if the movement of Jesus' followers was to escape the fate of so many other peripatetic philosophical movements that fell into obscurity and eventually extinction.

By scanning the citations listed above, one can see that the social radicalism that characterized the early synoptic tradition is also found in Thomas. But unlike the synoptic gospels, one does not find in Thomas any evidence to suggest that in Thomas circles this early radical tradition ever gave way to a more sedentary accommodation of it. This means that both synoptic and Thomas Christianity have their origins in an early, socially radical Jesus movement. But while synoptic Christianity followed a trajectory that led to settled, less socially radical community life, Thomas Christianity continued on a trajectory of itinerant social radicalism.

#### THOMAS'S THEOLOGY

The basic pattern we have just described, of one group continuing to pursue the social radicalism of the early Jesus movement while another began to settle down, reinterpreting the tradition to accommodate other, less radical ways of being a follower of Jesus, can be seen elsewhere in early Christian literature. It surfaces in the form of conflict, when local settled communities come into contact with wandering radicals. Naturally, the wandering radicals would have been held in esteem by those who had not been able to sustain or enter into its rigorous demands. At the same time, however, their occasional presence as they wandered through town might also have become something of a problem. In their absence, local communities would have found ways to organize them-

selves, with local leaders taking up roles as befit their needs. The resulting conflicts between local leaders and wandering radicals eventually forced readjustments in the way these early radicals were regarded and sometimes how they regarded themselves and their cause.

This was true of Thomas Christianity. As the itinerant life became less and less attractive, those who chose to pursue it found ways of raising the stakes so that its rigors did not seem such a high price to pay. For example, in the following saying, abandoning home and family has become more than a wise choice; it is a matter of life and death: "<sup>1</sup>Whoever does not hate [father] and mother as I do cannot be my [disciple], <sup>2</sup>and whoever does [not] love [father and] mother as I do cannot be my [disciple]. <sup>3</sup>For my mother [gave me falsehood], but my true [mother] gave me life" (Thom. 101).

Or again in the following statement one finds initially the simple praise of one who has embraced the solitary life of the wanderer: "Jesus said, 'Congratulations to those who are alone and chosen, for you will find the <Father's> Domain'" (Thom. 49:1). But as the saying continues, this basic idea is transformed. The solitary one belongs to another place and is bound to another destiny, a destiny of cosmic proportions:

49<sup>2</sup> For you have come from <the Father's domain>, and you will return there again." 50<sup>1</sup> Jesus said, "If they say to you, 'Where have you come from?' say to them, 'We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established [itself], and appeared in their image.' <sup>2</sup>If they say to you, 'Is it you?' say, 'We are its children, and we are the chosen of the living Father.' <sup>3</sup>If they ask you, 'What is the evidence of your Father in you?' say to them, 'It is motion and rest.'"

The idea that human beings belong to another place, another world to which they shall someday return because they share another, divine identity, is characteristic of the ancient religious tradition known as Gnosticism.<sup>6</sup> Gnosticism enjoyed a great flowering during the period of Christian origins, making its way into Judaism, early Christianity, and other new and old religious traditions of the time. As the price for maintaining the rigorous life of itinerancy became dearer, Thomas Christianity raised the stakes for its itinerant radicals, who now came to see themselves as living out their destiny as "children of the light," as the "chosen of the living Father." Gnosticism provided this branch of the Jesus movement with a religious mentality through which they could view their situation in a positive light.

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6. The best treatment of this ancient religious phenomenon remains that of Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1958).

## THOMAS AND JESUS

So far we have seen that Thomas Christianity, like other forms of early Christianity, used contemporary theological paradigms to help it interpret its calling to follow Jesus. But this is only part of the picture. On the other hand, it also preserved and cultivated the tradition of Jesus' sayings. Even though Thomas Christians preserved these sayings as the revelations of a Gnostic redeemer, sent from God to remind lost souls of their true destiny, it is possible that in so doing they also preserved something of historical value as well. This raises the question: Can Thomas be of any help in the quest for the historical Jesus? More and more, scholars who regard Thomas as an independent rendering of the Jesus tradition are answering this question in the affirmative. In fact, Thomas has made a major contribution to what may be described as nothing less than a contemporary revolution in the way scholars reconstruct the original preaching of Jesus. Let me explain.

For most of the modern period of historical research on Jesus, the synoptic gospels, especially Mark, have formed the basis for scholarly reconstructions of what Jesus actually said. John has little that is of historical value, and so has played almost no role in the quest of the historical Jesus. The other two synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke, depend on Mark for their basic outline of Jesus' life and destiny. Consequently, they cannot be counted on to offer a substantially different view of Jesus. They add nuance to Mark and appropriate Mark's narrative in the service of theological and ideological agendas that are their own. But the earliest and most basic synoptic account, that of Mark, has remained the most influential in giving shape to the way most scholars have conceptualized Jesus.

In Mark Jesus appears as an apocalyptic preacher, a prophet of the world's imminent judgment and destruction at the hand of God. For almost a century this apocalyptic Jesus has been the figure to whom most New Testament scholars have accorded the greatest historical plausibility. This view, suggested by the earliest synoptic gospel, was reinforced by evidence from elsewhere in earliest Christianity. Most importantly, the second synoptic source, Q (see remarks above), basically agrees with Mark in presenting Jesus' preaching as apocalyptic in message and tone. Moreover, Paul, whose letters are the earliest direct evidence we have for early Christian belief, also appears to have understood Jesus in terms of an apocalyptic scenario whose culmination he believed had drawn near. Thus, among the early sources there was virtual unanimity on this matter.

But when Thomas' sayings are laid alongside their parallels in Mark and the other synoptic gospels, one sees a most interesting pattern: the synoptic tradition seems consistently to bend various sayings and tradi-

tions in an apocalyptic direction.<sup>7</sup> This raised a question: Is it possible that later Christians, not Jesus himself, were responsible for providing Christian preaching with its apocalyptic orientation?

This suspicion has received apparent support in recent studies of Matthew and Luke's second source, Q. Current research on Q has shown that this document did not originally share Mark's apocalyptic orientation. Rather, it consisted originally of a series of speeches which Jesus delivers as one of Wisdom's chosen prophets. Only in a later, secondary redaction (editorial revision) did it receive its apocalyptic bent. Scholars now commonly speak of Q1 and Q2, the second of which alone bears the apocalyptic orientation many once thought of as pervasive in earliest Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

That leaves Paul. When we encounter him through his letters, relatively late in his career, he is certainly under the influence of apocalyptic thinking. Paul believes that the resurrection of Jesus signaled the beginning of the end, that his resurrection would lead to a general resurrection at the return of Christ, who will bring an end to history as we know it and render judgment on all, both dead and alive (1 Thess. 4:9-5:11). But in Paul's churches there were Christians who did not share these views. In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul argues with certain folk who do not believe in the resurrection, but believe rather that in Christ the reign of God has already arrived (1 Cor. 4:8; 15:12-19). Their view is rather like that expressed in Thomas 113: "1 His disciples said to him, 'When will the <Father's> imperial rule come?' 2 'It will not come by watching for it. 3 It will not be said, 'Look, here' or 'Look, there.' 4 Rather, the Father's imperial rule is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.'"

This saying also has a parallel in Luke, which many scholars argue stems from that earliest phase of Q we spoke of before: "When asked by the Pharisees when God's imperial rule would come, he answered them, 'You won't be able to observe the coming of God's imperial rule. People are not going to be able to say, "Look, here it is!" or "Over there!" On the contrary, God's imperial rule is right there in your presence'" (17:20-21).

Thus it appears that there is an early stratum of material imbedded in the New Testament itself, and confirmed by Thomas, which suggests that in the earliest phase of Christian theology Jesus was thought of as inaugurating God's reign already in the present moment, not in an imminent or distant future act of apocalyptic violence. The reign of God had be-

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7. For a detailed treatment, see my essay "Wisdom in Q and Thomas," 187-221 (esp. 208-14), in Leo G. Perdue, Bernard Brandon Scott, and William Johnston Wiseman, eds., *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

8. This is the conclusion of John Kloppenborg's influential study, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

come a reality already in Jesus' preaching insofar as persons who heard him chose to act upon his words.

Early Christians did not sustain this fervent belief very long. The world's resistance to their hoped for reign of God soon forced a rethinking of how their dreams might be realized. The fruits of this conflict are played out in all of our surviving gospels. The folk of Q and Mark turned to the violent scenarios of apocalypticism to shore up their hopes. The folk of Thomas turned to ascetic withdrawal from the world and focused their hopes on a transcendent realm far removed from this world, which they regarded as the material realm of death and corruption. Both abandoned that earlier notion, which stems perhaps from Jesus himself, that God's reign exists as a potential reality whenever human beings, as children of God, resolve to make it so. Though washed over with the transcendentalism of later Thomas Christianity, this idea survives in eloquent form in a Greek fragment of the Gospel of Thomas itself:

<sup>1</sup> Jesus said, "[If] your leaders [say to you, 'Look,] the <Father's> imperial rule is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky [will precede you. <sup>2</sup> If they say] that it is under the earth, then the fish of the sea will enter preceding] you. <sup>3</sup> And [the <Father's> imperial rule] is within you [and outside (you). <sup>4</sup> Whoever] knows [oneself] will find this. [And when you] know yourselves, [you will understand that] you are [children] of the [living] Father. <sup>5</sup> [But if] you do [not] know yourselves, [you are] in [poverty], and you are the [poverty]" (POxy 654.9-21 = Thom. 3:1-5).

The Gospel of Thomas has turned out to be a very important document for those interested in the study of Christian origins. First, its own peculiar use of the tradition of Jesus' sayings has broadened our understanding of the diversity of early Christian belief. Second, and just as important, it gives us another window through which to view the earliest traditions surrounding Jesus. By comparing Thomas and the synoptic tradition, it has become easier to see the tendency of these important gospels to move in an apocalyptic direction, an orientation we once thought came from Jesus himself. If this now seems less likely, it is because Thomas has called this one-time consensus into question. The result has been the opening of a new chapter in the quest for the historical Jesus. This, perhaps more than anything else, will be the legacy of this gospel, once lost, now found, and never to be forgotten again.