Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies

VOLUME 59

Thomasine Traditions in Antiquity

The Social and Cultural World of the Gospel of Thomas

Edited by

Jon Ma. Asgeirsson, April D. DeConick,
and Risto Uro

CHAPTER FIVE

ON THE BRINK OF THE APOCALYPSE:
A PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION OF THE EARLIEST
SPEECHES IN THE *GOSPEL OF THOMAS*

April D. DeConick

In a recent article on the compositional history of the *Gospel of Thomas*, I proposed from a traditio-historical perspective that *Thomas* is best understood as an aggregate text, an accumulation of traditions and their interpretations.[1] As such, it contains old core traditions to which additional material became aggregated over time. The newer materials were organized in relation to the old core sayings, serving to interpret, explain, and update the core. In other words, the text appears to have started as a small gospel of oracles of the prophet Jesus. Over time, this "Kernel" gospel was modified with the addition of later materials as the community experienced crises and shifts in ideology and group constituency.

I set forth in that article a set of historical-critical principles by which the later accretions might be separated from the earlier, offered a brief analysis of the gospel according to these principles, and presented a tentative list of sayings belonging to the Kernel.[2] What I

---

[1] April D. DeConick, "The Original *Gospel of Thomas*," *VC* 56 (2002): 167–99.

[2] See now also, A. D. DeConick *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth* (JSNTSup 286; London: T & T Clark International, 2005). The present article provides a summary of the ideas developed in chapter 4 of the monograph. In this monograph, I continue to develop my methodology, particularly drawing on studies of oral and rhetorical cultures and more literary theory. The tentative list of Kernel sayings in my preliminary article has remained very stable with the exception of *Gos. Thom.* 69:1 which I now understand as belonging to a later rhetorical unit. Some earlier form of *Gos. Thom.* 60:1, perhaps a parable, may be behind the present dialogue, but, if this is so, it has been so reworked as to be unrecoverable. In this revised list, I have bracketed the two sayings where I think earlier versions were present in the Kernel and can be recovered with some certainty. Kernel sayings: 2; 4:2–3; 5; 6:2–3; 8; 9; 10; 11:1; 14:4; 15; 16:1–3; 17; 20:2–4; 21:5; 10–11; 23:1; 24:2–3; 25; 26; ((30)); 31; 32; 33; 34; 35; 36; 38:1; 39; 40; 41; 42; ((44)); 45; 46; 47; 48; 54; 55; 57; 58; 61:1; 62; 63; 64:1–11; 65; 66; 68:1; 69:2; 71; 72; 73; 74; 76; 78; 79; 81; 82; 86; 89; 90; 91; 92; 93; 94; 95; 96; 97; 98; 99; 100:1–3; 102; 103; 104; 107; 109; 111:1.

think I have recovered are the bones of a very old version of the *Gospel of Thomas*, a version which was modified significantly after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple when the Syrian Christians were faced with the pressure of Gentile conversion as they began to disassociate from the synagogue and come to terms with the unfulfilled promise of an "imminent" Eschaton.

A preliminary analysis of this Kernel gospel will offer us an opportunity to explore the origins of the Thomasine tradition in ways that previous analyses have not done. Most prior studies have been based on the assumption that the sayings in the text represent a form of Christianity that is considered by scholars to be either early or late.[3] When the *Gospel of Thomas* has been regarded "early," scholars have generally reconstructed a non-apocalyptic Christianity from it since they can point to many logia that seem more proverbial than apocalyptic.[4] The error in this approach has been a relative naivete regarding the age of the various logia and the accretive nature of this gospel: the later sayings have not been adequately distinguished from the earlier, if at all. When the *Gospel of Thomas* has been regarded "late," scholars have generally created a pre-gnostic or gnostic Christianity from it since they can point to many logia that seem to be more esoteric than the synoptic tradition.[5] The problem with this

approach is twofold. First, it has assumed an undiscriminating and easy use of the category "Gnosticism" and its corollaries,[6] categories which have been confused with early Jewish esotericism and Hermetism. Second, it has tainted its historical reconstruction with theological assumptions, particularly the assumption that the canonical version of Christianity is more historical or authentic than the non-canonical.

Thus, an analysis of the earliest layer of sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas*, the Kernel gospel, is extremely important to our understanding of the origin and nature of the Thomasine tradition. Was it sapiential, gnostic, or something else? In fact, since a study of the themes and structures of this old gospel will provide us with Christian traditions that possibly pre-date Q and Paul, an examination of the Kernel sayings may provide us with material with which to reexamine the assumptions we have made about the origins of Christianity itself and the continued quest for the Historical Jesus. For now, this latter suggestion will have to remain a question since its investigation is unfortunately beyond the scope of this preliminary examination of the Kernel gospel.

---

[3] For an overview of various positions, refer to DeConick, "The Original *Gospel of Thomas*," 168–79.

[4] Proponents of this view rely heavily on the work of James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester in their pioneering volume, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971). This view is most dominant in American scholarship, particularly among those scholars who belong to the Jesus Seminar, and has even been the basis for the reconstruction of a non-apocalyptic Historical Jesus by some contemporary scholars. For examples of this position, see Stevan L. Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1983), 13–17; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 227–302; Ron Cameron, "The *Gospel of Thomas* and Christian Origins," in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. Birger A. Pearson et al.; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 381–92; Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (FF: Reference Series; Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1993), 94–112; Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996), 121–39.

[5] This view seems to have been most popular in early analyses of *Thomas*. Cf. Lucien Cerfaux and Gérard Garitte, "Les paraboles du Royaume dans L'Évangile de Thomas," *Muséon* 70 (1957): 307–27; Robert McL. Wilson, "The Coptic 'Gospel of Thomas'," *NTS* 5 (1958–1959): 273–76; Robert M. Grant, "Notes on the *Gospel of Thomas*," *VC* 13 (1959): 170–80; Robert McL. Wilson, "'Thomas' and the Growth of the Gospels," *HTR* 53 (1960): 231–50; Robert McL. Wilson, *Studies in the Gospel of Thomas* (London: Mowbray, 1960); Robert M. Grant and David Noel Freedman, *The Secret Sayings of Jesus* (with an English translation of the *Gospel of Thomas* by

William R. Schoedel; London: Collins, 1960); J. Bauer, "Das Thomas-Evangelium in der neuesten Forschung," in *Geheime Worte Jesu: Das Thomas-Evangelium* (ed. R. Grant and D. Freedman; Frankfurt: Scheffler, 1960), 182–205; René Roques, "Gnosticisme et Christianisme: L'Évangile selon Thomas," *Irénikon* 33 (1960): 29–40; René Roques, "'L'Évangile selon Thomas': Son édition critique et son identification," *RHR* 157 (1960): 187–218; William R. Schoedel, "Naassene Themes in the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*," *VC* 14 (1960): 225–34; K. Smyth, "Gnosticism in 'The Gospel according to Thomas'," *HeyJ* 1 (1960): 189–98; E. Cornélis, "Quelques éléments pour une comparison entre l'Évangile de Thomas et la notice d'Hippolyte sur les Naassènes," *VC* 15 (1961): 83–104; Bertil Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas* (trans. E. Sharpe; London: Collins, 1961); Ernst Haenchen, *Die Botschaft des Thomas-Evangeliums* (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 6; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1961); H. E. W. Turner and Hugh Montefiore, *Thomas and the Evangelists* (SBT 35; London: SCM, 1962); J. Bauer, "The Synoptic Tradition in the *Gospel of Thomas*," (*SE* 3/TU 88; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1964), 314–17; Wolfgang Schrage, *Das Verhältnis des Thomas-Evangeliums zur synoptischen Tradition und zu den koptischen Evangelienübersetzungen: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur gnostischen Synopitkerdeutung* (BZNW 29; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1964); Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, "Gnostic and Canonical Gospel Traditions (with special reference to the *Gospel of Thomas*)," in *Le origini dello gnosticismo, colloquio di Messina, 13–18 aprile, 1966: Testi e discussioni* (ed. U. Bianchi; SHR 12; Leiden: Brill, 1967), 552–62; Jacques-É. Ménard, *L'Évangile selon Thomas* (NHS 5; Leiden: Brill, 1975); the most recent attempt is that of Michael Fieger, *Das Thomasevangelium: Einleitung, Kommentar, und Systematik* (NtAbh, n.F. 22; Münster: Aschendorff, 1991).

[6] Cf. Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

1. *Distinguishing the Kernel from* Thomas' *Sources*

The Kernel gospel is to be distinguished from the gospel "sources" that previous scholars have suggested for *Thomas* when they have attempted to deduce the origins of this gospel from its content or the form of its sayings. Even though it is *possible* that the Kernel gospel may be related to an old Jewish Christian gospel or ancient written collections of sayings, the Kernel gospel itself is neither Gilles Quispel's Jewish Christian gospel, nor Helmut Koester's ancient written collections of Q-like sayings. Because some of the assumptions that these theories are based upon seem problematic to me for various reasons, my approach to the problem of *Thomas'* origins, in fact, is quite different from either Quispel's source-critical approach or Koester's form-critical one.

Quispel has attempted to identify the earliest source for the *Gospel of Thomas* with a Jewish Christian gospel in which were integrated very early sayings "perhaps reflecting a development in the oral tradition of the Aramaic material underlying the Greek Q."[7] He concludes this on the basis that many of the sayings are "positively Jewish Christian,"[8] and reflect versions of sayings that are also found in our fragments of the Jewish Christian gospels, particularly the *Gospel of the Nazorees*.[9] Based on their "Jewish Christian elements," he identifies particular sayings to have been among those drawn from this early Jewish Christian gospel.[10] His attempt to recover the earliest source for *Thomas* raises some methodological concerns for me not because I find the theory to be implausible or even improbable, but because the theory seems to develop out of more circular reasoning than I prefer. That is, once the sayings that contain Jewish Christian elements are identified, the source is determined to be a Jewish Christian gospel because some of the identified sayings reflect versions of the sayings in our Jewish Christian gospel fragments.

---

[7] Gilles Quispel, "Gnosis and the New Sayings of Jesus," in *Gnostic Studies II* (Uitgaven van het Nederlands Historisch–Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul 34:2; Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1975), 194.

[8] Gilles Quispel, "The Discussion of Judaic Christianity," in *Gnostic Studies II*, 150.

[9] Quispel, "Gnosis," 193.

[10] Gilles Quispel, "The *Gospel of Thomas* Revisited," in *Colloque International sur Les Textes de Nag Hammadi, Québec, 22–25 août 1978* (ed. B. Barc; BCNH 1; Louvain: Peeters, 1981), 245–54.

I also have reservations about Koester's theory regarding the source of *Thomas'* sayings which he develops by comparing this gospel with Q. He suggests that *Thomas* did not use Q directly but represents "the eastern branch of the gattung, *logoi*, the western branch being represented by the synoptic *logoi* of Q."[11] The sayings they share in common come from earlier and smaller collections of logia like those used in *1 Clement* 13 and *Didache* 1, collections which were independently incorporated into the *Gospel of Thomas* and Q.[12]

This hypothesis is certainly conceivable, but it is not without its own problems. Even if we set aside the messy problem of Q's reconstruction as a minimal document and the assumptions that we have made about its genre, content, and development, another problem persists. Is the presence of variants of some of the sayings enough evidence to suggest that Q and *Thomas* drew from the same sources? I think that this question is especially important for us to consider since many of *Thomas'* variants are so different from the parallel Q versions. In fact, many scholars have argued on this basis that the sayings tradition in *Thomas* is independent of and, in some cases, earlier than the synoptic tradition.

I have even more concerns when I am faced with the further implications that Koester builds upon his hypothesis. Since *Thomas* did not "reproduce" the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings so prevalent in Q, Koester maintains that *Thomas* must presuppose a stage when the sayings tradition did not yet include the apocalyptic expectation of the Son of Man.[13] Because of this, the earliest form of Q must have been similar to *Thomas*, the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings entering the text at a later date.[14] This means to Koester that the oldest stage of sayings were "wisdom" sayings rather than apocalyptic in which Jesus is the "teacher" and "presence" of heavenly Wisdom whose words revealed some kind of existential "eschatology," some decisive moment of encounter with the power of God's Kingdom.[15]

---

[11] Helmut Koester, "GNOMAI DIAPHOROI: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity," in James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971), 136.

[12] Koester, "GNOMAI," 135.

[13] Koester, "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," in James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories*, 171.

[14] Koester, "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels," *HTR* 73 (1980): 113.

[15] Koester, "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels," 113.

The evidence, however, does not seem to me to support this conclusion. The absence of apocalyptic Son of Man sayings in *Thomas* should not necessarily indicate to us that *Thomas* or other early sayings collections were non-apocalyptic. The Christian apocalyptic tradition was much more complex than this as was the Son of Man Christology itself which developed over several decades. For instance, what are we to make of the identification of Jesus in *Thomas'* Kernel sayings with some sort of apocalyptic Judge, sayings that associate Jesus with a figure who will cast God's judgment on the world, select those who will be saved, and cast out those who are to perish (*Gos. Thom.* 8; 10; 16:1–3; 23:1; 40; 57; 61:1; 82; 107)? Might this represent an early stage in the development of the Son of Man Christology?

Frustrated by the inadequacies of earlier explanations of *Thomas'* origins and nature, my own analysis of the *Gospel of Thomas* has stayed away from trying to reconstruct a genealogy of written sources for the gospel. Although I admit there must have been some, I am reluctant to try to identify them. So my approach in the past has been that of a tradition critic, to examine *the various religious traditions* that we find in the *Gospel of Thomas*: a Christian Jewish tradition from Jerusalem, an encratic tradition from Alexandria, a Hermetic tradition from Alexandria, and Jewish apocalyptic-mystical traditions from Palestine and Alexandria.[16] I have attempted, even in my discussions about possible relationships between the gospels of John and *Thomas*, to analyze the relationship on the level of *the dialogue of shared traditions*, not

---

[16] April D. DeConick, *Seek to See Him: Ascent and Vision Mysticism in the Gospel of Thomas* (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 33; Leiden: Brill, 1996).

I have begun to use the term "Christian Judaism" instead of "Jewish Christian" because scholars have meant various things when using the latter phrase. Some have applied the term to any Christian text that uses Jewish ideas. Others have understood it ethnically: Christians with Jewish parents. Most recently, it has come to delineate Christians who observed the Mosaic Law. I now have discarded this term in favor of "Christian Judaism" which I believe to be more historically descriptive in this period. It is only in the second century that we find groups which can be properly labeled "Jewish Christian." These groups (i.e., Ebionites, Nazoreans, and the Elkesaites) clearly identify themselves as Christians who have maintained their connections with the Mosaic Law. By making "Christian" the adjective and "Jews" the noun, I hope to emphasize that the first Christian Jewish communities were expressions of pre-Rabbinic Judaism. Like other forms of first-century Judaism, Christian Judaism was discussing the major themes of Judaism and its history: monotheism, the interpretation and observation of the Mosaic Law, the Temple cultus, and apocalypticism including mystical as well as eschatological subjects. The conservative faction was centered in Jerusalem and initially was led by James and the disciples of Jesus. The liberal faction was based in Antioch and heralded Paul as its great missionary and theologian at least in its early years.

---

direct literary dependence.[17] Further, I have subjected the *Gospel of Thomas* to a stringent method, the "new" *traditionsgeschichtliche* approach,[18] in order to identify the later accretions and recover *the oldest version of Thomas* rather than the ancient sources upon which the gospel might have been based.[19] This old version I call the Kernel gospel.

2. *Uncovering the Bones of the Kernel Gospel*

Because it is impossible for us to know the extent to which various Kernel sayings may have been moved around or deleted entirely at the levels of revision and manuscript transmission, any attempt to discuss the original structure or sequence of sayings in Kernel *Thomas* must, to some extent, be speculative. Therefore, the reconstruction of the "original" gospel must be understood to be a minimal and tentative reconstruction. My analysis should not be mistaken to suggest that I understand the Kernel sayings I have isolated to be a complete coherent document.

Having said this, however, it is intriguing that once the later sayings have been removed, upon examination of the remaining sayings in their present order, a striking structure for the Kernel gospel and rhetorical arrangement of sayings emerges. Buried beneath layers of later interpretation there emerges an early gospel that, even in its minimal form, seems to have consisted of five speeches of Jesus, speeches which appear to have been intended to "reperform" and "compose anew" selections of Jesus' sayings.

Each of the five speeches begins with admonitions calling the person to seek the truth or promises offering the hearer revelation of the truth (*Gos. Thom.* 2, 17, 38:1, 62:1, 92). The sayings that follow each of these opening "calls" seem to have been strung together mnemonically in order to elaborate the meanings and meaning-effects of a particular theme, a theme which is more often than not left unexpressed with the presumption that it will be obvious from the

---

[17] 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 Press, 2001).

[18] This approach is detailed in my monograph, *The Original Gospel of Thomas*.

[19] DeConick, "The Original *Gospel of Thomas*," 187–94.

overall content of the sayings within each discourse. The speech is centered around certain admonitions and promises which are then elaborated upon in order to convince the reader to consent to the admonition or believe the promise. These speeches appear to have concluded with a saying about the Eschaton or its demands, serving to underscore the gravity of the discourse and urgency of the message, thus bringing each speech to a close (*Gos. Thom.* 16:1–3, 36, 61:1, 91, 111:1). So it appears that the speech themes were developed by a rhetorical process of elaboration consisting of a compilation of rhetorical questions, maxims, examples, analogies, promises and even warnings.

(a) *Rhetorical Composition*

Is this type of rhetorical composition and gospel speech-structure a salient plausibility in early Christianity especially since we have understood the compositional process of the ancient Jewish and Christian texts to be very scribal?[20] Traditionally, we have thought of an ancient "author" as someone who collects materials from oral and written sources and edits them together, preserving much of the original source material. Modifications are perceived to be minimal, for editorial or specific theological purposes. Most of these modifications are to be located in the editorial bridges that link together the source materials or characteristic clauses appended to the source materials.

Within the last decade, rhetorical critics have challenged this understanding of the ancient compositional process, arguing that the scribal culture that began to dominate the transmission of ancient Christian literature in the late second century has been imposed upon the earlier compositional period.[21] This earlier period, it is argued, is better understood as a "rhetorical culture" enlivened by a creative interaction between oral and written composition. It is a culture that uses both oral and written language interactively *and* rhetorically in the compositional process.[22]

---

[20] Vernon K. Robbins, "Progymnastic Rhetorical Composition and Pre-Gospel Traditions: A New Approach," in *The Synoptic Gospels: Source Criticism and the New Literary Criticism* (ed. C. Focant; BETL 110; Leuven: Peeters & Leuven University Press, 1993), 116–21.

[21] Robbins, "Progymnastic Rhetorical Composition," 111–47; cf. Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 31–43.

[22] Tony M. Lentz, *Orality and Literacy in Hellenic Greece* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989).

Evidence of this culture is preserved in the rhetorical handbooks from the ancient world.[23] For instance, Aelius Theon of Alexandria reveals in the earliest manuscript of *Progymnasmata*, that a composition, whether verbal or written, will have its own inner rhetorical nature even when the topic of the composition is focused on the chreia, the speech or action of a specific personage. This inner rhetorical nature was argumentative, the composition was meant to persuade the hearer or reader to a particular action or point of view. The chreia could be presented as a maxim, an explanation, a witty remark, a syllogism, an enthymene, an example, a wish, a symbol, an ambiguous statement, a change of subject, or a combination of these. In fact, Theon tells us that a chreia could be elaborated into a fuller speech or essay in order to create a more complete argument by adding rationales, statements from the opposite, examples, amplifications, and more. This type of elaboration will often develop an argument that would give a meaning to the chreia that a hearer or reader might not be able to gain for him or herself.[24]

Part of this compositional process, Theon reveals, is that it involved an oral dimension. Theon's first exercise with the chreia is "the recitation." The teacher would present a speech or action gleaned from oral or written sources, and his students would write it down "clearly in the same words or in others as well."[25] The students were encouraged to write down as much or as little verbatim from the speech as they saw fit. The point of the exercise was for the students to develop clarity of argument, not verbatim repetition. Certainly their arguments would contain a significant repetition of the teacher's speech, but this would appear in varied contexts in order to make the old traditions meet the needs of a new day or persuade a different

---

[23] Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O'Neil, eds., *The Progymnasmata* (vol. 1 of *The Chreia in Ancient Rhetoric*; SBLTT 27: Graeco-Roman Religion Series 9; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986); James Butts, "The 'Progymnasmata' of Theon: A New Text with Translation and Commentary" (Ph.D. diss., The Claremont Graduate School; 1987); George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988), 161–65, 186–92, 198–204; Burton L. Mack and Vernon K. Robbins, *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* (FF: Literary Facets; Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1989); Burton L. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament* (GBS; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

[24] I am indebted to Vernon Robbins for this understanding of the compositional process which he lays out so eloquently in "Progymnastic Rhetorical Composition," 119–21.

[25] Hock and O'Neil, *The Progymnasmata*, 95.

audience. Examples from the *Progynmasmata* show that the students' compositions featured different inflections, expansions, and abbreviations. The beginnings and endings of the recitations were frequently modified to link subjects, provide commentary, or extend the argument. The body of the recitations could be abbreviated as well as lengthened by adding questions, responses, acts, and much more.[26]

I agree with the rhetorical critics that this understanding of ancient composition certainly explains well what we have long observed in early Christian texts: the extensive variation of words in the gospels alongside extensive verbatim repetition.[27] In fact, I would go even farther to argue that it gives us insight into the accrual of older traditions and newer traditions in our gospels as well. Our early Christian gospel texts are about the "reperformance" of Jesus' words and deeds. In the process of the reperformance, the old oral and written traditions are given new life by juxtaposing them with newer oral and written traditions, interpretations and contexts. In this way, the relevance of the older material is maintained in the face of changing times and situations.

The repercussions of this are far-reaching. We already knew from literary-critical and historical-critical analyses of the gospels that the early sayings traditions were unstable. Now it is clearer how and why this was the case. The first Christians did not just preserve traditions of Jesus in haphazard collections or lists that were later organized and used as "sources" for the gospel authors. Rather when they first began to write down the sayings of Jesus, they apparently did so rhetorically in speeches with the knowledge or intent that these speeches would be reperformed and developed in the process.

The reperformance, of course, would have varied depending upon the audience, the purpose of the speaker or author, and the occasion. This alone gives new insight into the passing remarks made by Papias when he writes that Peter used to "adapt his teachings to the occasion" and that Mark, "his interpreter, wrote down carefully, but not in order" the traditions of the Lord. Papias sees his own work, *The Sayings*

[26] Vernon Robbins, "The Chreia," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres* (ed. David E. Aune; SBLSBS 21; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 13–16; Robbins, "Progymnastic Rhetorical Composition," 119–21.
[27] Vernon Robbins, "Writing as a Rhetorical Act in Plutarch and the Gospels," in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy* (ed. D. F. Watson; JSNTSSup 50; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 142–68.

of the Lord Explained, in much the same manner: he is furnishing his reader with the traditions he has heard from the presbyters "along with the interpretations" of the traditions (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 39).

This type of transmission is very clearly described by Clement in the *Pseudo-Clementine* corpus. The process of composition is characterized here in very interactive terms, having both oral and written dimensions of remembrance and interpretation, beginning with a teacher delivering a speech to his pupils. The pupils were commissioned to transmit these teachings and their interpretations in both verbal and written formats. Thus, in the *Recognitions*, Peter tells us that the charge to Jesus' disciples was an oral one, to go out and "expound the sayings and affirm the judgments" of the Prophet Jesus. "We are not commissioned to say anything of our own, but to unfold the truth of his words" (*Rec.* 2.34). After Clement is instructed about the teachings of the True Prophet by Peter, he makes some fascinating comments about the sequencing of Peter's speeches:

> I shall now call to mind the things which were spoken, in which the order of your discussion greatly helps me; for the way in which the things that you said followed by consequence upon one another, and were arranged in a balanced manner, makes them easily recalled to memory by the lines of their order. For the order of sayings is useful for remembering them: for when you begin to follow them point by point in succession, when anything is wanting, immediately the sense seeks for it; and when it has found it, retains it, or at all events, if it cannot discover it, there will be no reluctance to ask it of the master (*Rec.* 1.23).

The *Pseudo-Clementines* seem to be preserving a very old memory from the early movement about the process of transmission of the traditions associated with Jesus. It appears that the sayings of Jesus first began to be collected into speeches in which the sayings were arranged rhetorically to provide a memorable interpretation or present an argument to the audience. If the sense of the rhetoric was unclear, it was expected that the pupil would inquire after it by asking the teacher. The teacher would expound or justify the sayings accordingly.

Clement goes on to tell us that he himself has been commissioned to write down the words and instructions of the True Prophet which had been spoken by his own teacher, Peter. This record was to be sent to James for use in proselytizing (*Rec.* 1.17; *Hom. Epistle of Peter to James* 2). When the pupil wrote down the speech of his teacher, it appears that another layer of interpretation was imposed upon the

sayings since Clement says that after he heard the teachings of the True Prophet from Peter, he "*reduced into order what he had spoken to me* and compiled a book concerning the True Prophet" (*Rec.* 1.17). This seems to have further complicated the matter since Peter tells us that the words which Jesus himself said were "plainly spoken" by him but "not plainly written" afterwards. This meant that "when they were read" to proselytes, they could not be understood "without an expounder" (*Rec.* 1.21).

Thus the process seems to have begun with the collection and arrangement of sayings of Jesus into speeches which were used by the first Christians to convert others. These speeches were explained by the preacher whenever the need arose. The speeches were sometimes written down. The sayings were rearranged and reinterpreted in the scribal process. When these written speeches were then read to audiences, they too had to be expounded in order to continue to make sense of them or perhaps to provide alternative interpretations for them. So it appears that the "pre-gospel" sayings traditions were subjected to subsequent updating and interpretation when they were reperformed, something that occurred whenever the sayings were recited or rewritten. The "final" form of the traditions preserved in our gospels is thus the result of their reperformance over a lengthy period of time.

(b) *A Rhetorical Reading of the Kernel Speeches*

The *Gospel of Thomas* is a fine example of this process of reperformance, a gospel which I understand to be an aggregate collection of sayings that accumulated over time. It began as a gospel of speech-acts of Jesus in which select themes were elaborated through a mnemonic and rhetorical arrangement of sayings of the Lord. This elaboration reflects the *progymnastic* patterns of recitation and composition such as those referred to by Aelius Theon of Alexandria in his *Progymnasmata* and other pre-gospel sources like Luke's Sermon on the Plain.[28] What were the themes of these five speeches? How might the rhetoric have flowed? I offer here a possible reading of the speeches based on my understanding of their *progymnastic* rhetorical patterns.

---

[28] Vernon Robbins, "Progymnastic Rhetorical Composition," 111–47; see also,

First Speech: *ESCHATOLOGICAL URGENCY*

Jesus introduces the collected speeches by leading off his first speech with two admonitions that the hearer seek the truth (*Gos. Thom.* 2:1, 5:1 opening admonitions). The person who seeks the truth is promised an amazing journey that will ultimately lead to "rest" (*Gos. Thom.* 2 Gr., rationale). Counter the wisdom of the world, those hearers who think they already know the truth are told that they do not, while those who think themselves to be ignorant will be the ones to gain knowledge. Thus "many who are first will become last, and the last will be first" (*Gos. Thom.* 4:2–3: contrawisdom rule). Jesus promises to reveal what has previously been hidden because "there is nothing hidden which will not become manifest" (*Gos. Thom.* 5:2: rationale).

The subsequent sayings in this first speech, through rhetorical elaboration, stress the critical nature of the times. Jesus tells his followers that they must behave correctly: they must not lie or do to others what they hate to have done to themselves (*Gos. Thom.* 6:2–3: admonitions). They should be exclusively committed to the truth which is about to be revealed to them just like the fisherman who casts his net into the sea keeping only the one fine large fish and casting all others back (*Gos. Thom.* 8: analogy). They should be like the seed that fell on good soil and produced good fruit rather than the seed that the birds gathered, or fell on rock or among thorns and did not survive (*Gos. Thom.* 9: analogy). Their decision is critical since Jesus is already casting God's Judgment upon the world (*Gos. Thom.* 10: rationale). The universe is quickly passing away (*Gos. Thom.* 11:1: rationale). They should take this message to others, eating what is set before them and healing (*Gos. Thom.* 14:4). So imminent is the end, that they, even now, have direct access to God's throne where they can bow down before God in worship (*Gos. Thom.* 15: admonition). Unfortunately, people have not understood Jesus or this time of distress. Although people think that Jesus came to cast peace on the earth, the truth is that he came to cast God's Judgment: fire, sword and war (*Gos. Thom.* 16:1–3: contrawisdom rule).

Second Speech: *ESCHATOLOGICAL CHALLENGES*

This type of *progymnastic* rhetorical discourse is visible in the second speech as well which elaborates the theme of true discipleship in an eschatological time. In this speech the truth about discipleship is revealed to the hearer, truth that Jesus claims has been hidden until now (*Gos. Thom.* 17: promise). The time is ripe for this revelation

since the Kingdom of God has already broken into the world and soon will be fully manifested; like a small mustard seed which has been sown in tilled soil, the Kingdom will quickly mature into "a great plant" (*Gos. Thom.* 20: rationale). Jesus tells the hearer that his disciple must be ready for the coming of God's Kingdom and the practical difficulties that are expected to come along with it (*Gos. Thom.* 21:5: analogy), to understand that the Judgment is as near as the sickle which is in hand ready to reap the ripened grain (*Gos. Thom.* 21:9–10: analogy). Jesus promises that he himself will be the judge, choosing "you, one out of a thousand, and two out of ten thousand" (*Gos. Thom.* 23:1: promise).

Jesus says that he expects the hearer will follow him as "a man of light," lighting up "the whole world" (*Gos. Thom.* 24:3: maxim). He admonishes the hearer to "love" and "guard" his brother like his own "soul" and to remove the "mote" from his own eye before trying to do the same to his brother's (*Gos. Thom.* 25 and 26: admonitions). Jesus both promises his hearer that he will be with him (*Gos. Thom.* 30:2: promise) and warns him that his followers will be persecuted like he was. Like all prophets, they can expect to be rejected, like a physician, they can not heal people they know (*Gos. Thom.* 31: examples). Even so, they must be like a city built on a high mountain (*Gos. Thom.* 32: analogy), preaching from the housetops (*Gos. Thom.* 33:1: admonition). They must be like a lamp set out on a lampstand rather than hiding themselves under a bushel basket (*Gos. Thom.* 33:2: analogy). They are not to be like blind men leading blind men (*Gos. Thom.* 34: statement from the opposite). When faced with an opponent, they should bind him first and then take him on (*Gos. Thom.* 35: example). The situation that the disciples face is so urgent that they can not be concerned about even the most essential daily matters like clothing or food. They must rely on God for all of their needs (*Gos. Thom.* 36: admonition).

Third Speech: EXCLUSIVE COMMITMENT TO JESUS

The focus of this speech is on the theme that only Jesus reveals the truth so the hearer must listen to him and serve him exclusively (Gos. Thom. 38:1: maxim). Particularly important to this section is Jesus' insistence that the Pharisees, even though they possess the keys of the Kingdom, should not be heeded by the hearer because they have hidden the truth from themselves and others (Gos. Thom. 39:1–2: example). Readers are admonished to be as "wise as serpents and as

innocent as doves" when it comes to listening to the Pharisees (Gos. Thom. 39:3: admonition). The rationale for this is twofold: the Pharisees are compared to a grapevine that has been planted outside the Father and that will be yanked out by its roots (Gos. Thom. 40: rationale); the Pharisees have nothing and will be deprived even of that (Gos. Thom. 41: rationale). In this context, Jesus commands the hearer to "pass by" the teaching of the Pharisees and others (Gos. Thom. 42: admonitions). The Pharisees are blasphemers who will not be forgiven (Gos. Thom. 44: maxim). The truth can not be harvested from the Pharisees because they have evil in their hearts (Gos. Thom. 45: analogy). Even John the Baptist who is so highly regarded does not have the truth. In fact, the person to whom Jesus has revealed the truth is greater than John (Gos. Thom. 46: example).

Because of this, the hearer must choose to serve Jesus alone. Rationale is provided: it is "impossible for a man to mount two horses or to stretch two bows" or "to serve two masters" (*Gos. Thom.* 47:1–2: rationale). Analogies are made to wine drinking, wine manufacturing, and mending a garment (47:3–5: analogies) and promises are given: serving Jesus means that the disciple is a peacemaker whose words will have tremendous power, even moving mountains (*Gos. Thom.* 48). By blessing the poor, Jesus is telling the hearer that serving him alone means that the disciple must have not divide his interests between Jesus and wealth (*Gos. Thom.* 54: example). Serving Jesus alone means that the disciple must even hate his own family (*Gos. Thom.* 55: example). The hearer is reminded that his decision to exclusively follow Jesus is critical because he will be held accountable for it. There will be a harvest. The hearer does not want to make the wrong decision and, like a weed, be pulled up on that day and burned (*Gos. Thom.* 57: rationale). Rather those disciples who suffer by serving Jesus now are blessed (*Gos. Thom.* 58: rule). At the End, only the few who make the right choice will receive the final reward (*Gos. Thom.* 61:1: promise): "Two will rest on a bed: the one will die, the other will live."

Fourth Speech: THE SELECTION OF THE WORTHY FEW

In the fourth speech, this type of *progymnasmatic* elaboration continues, emphasizing that only a select number of people are worthy to know the truth that Jesus reveals about himself (*Gos. Thom.* 62:1: promise). The rationale that Jesus provides for this seems to come from some ancient adage that a person generally does not let his left hand know

what his right hand is doing (*Gos. Thom.* 62:2: rationale). Jesus then discusses the characteristics of those who are not worthy to receive his teaching: the person who does things for personal gain (*Gos. Thom.* 63: statement of the opposite) and the person who has other obligations, obligations that keep him from the Messianic banquet table (*Gos. Thom.* 64:1: analogy). In fact, most of the people that Jesus met were so unworthy that they were even responsible for his death (*Gos. Thom.* 65: example), a fact that is given authoritative testimony as support (*Gos. Thom.* 66: authoritative testimony).

The speech then appears to turn to elaborate on the characteristics of those who are worthy of his teaching. Those people who are hated and persecuted are the worthy ones (*Gos. Thom.* 68:1: contrawisdom rule) as well as those who are hungry (*Gos. Thom.* 69:2: contrawisdom rule). Counter to the wisdom of the majority, Jesus denies that the Temple provides the way to achieve worthiness by warning that the Temple will be destroyed and will not be rebuilt (*Gos. Thom.* 71: contrawisdom rule). Those who are worthy of Jesus' teaching are not to be like the silly man who came to Jesus concerned about his inheritance (*Gos. Thom.* 72: example from the opposite). Rather they are to be like a few hardworking field hands bringing in a large harvest (*Gos. Thom.* 73: analogy). The worthy are not to be counted among the many who are standing around an empty drinking trough (*Gos. Thom.* 74: analogy from the opposite). Rather they are to be like the shrewd merchant who sold everything for a single pearl (*Gos. Thom.* 76: analogy).

This speech seems to have used a set of rhetorical questions to shift the discussion so that the sayings progressively begin to reveal to the worthy the truth about Jesus. The worthy disciple is unlike those people who journey to the desert to see great men because Jesus is not like a king or other men (*Gos. Thom.* 78: rhetorical questions). Jesus is not like these kings and great men because he alone is blessed from the womb and speaks God's word (*Gos. Thom.* 79: rationale). In fact, Jesus admonishes people other than himself to be kings (*Gos. Thom.* 81: admonition). In contrast, Jesus dwells in a heavenly Kingdom of fire and it is there that he will reveal himself to the worthy (*Gos. Thom.* 82: maxim) because the earth is not the permanent residence of the human being and "rest" cannot be found here (*Gos. Thom.* 86: rationale). The hearer is asked in the two rhetorical questions that follow, why he is concerned with observing Jewish rituals in the way that some Pharisees have demanded (*Gos. Thom.* 89: rhetorical ques-

tions). The hearer is admonished to choose Jesus' leadership instead because his yoke is "easy" and his lordship is "mild" and his future promise is "rest" (*Gos. Thom.* 90: admonition). The speech concludes on the note that there are some who are not worthy since they have examined "the face of heaven and earth" but do not understand who Jesus is or the urgency of this time (*Gos. Thom.* 91: contrawisdom rule).

Fifth Speech: THE IMMINENT KINGDOM OF GOD

In the last speech, the truth about God's Kingdom is revealed. Hearers are admonished to seek the truth because Jesus wants to reveal it now even though Jesus has not always done so (*Gos. Thom.* 92: admonition). Jesus has not revealed the truth previously because a person must be careful not to give "what is holy to the dogs" or throw "the pearls to swine" (*Gos. Thom.* 93: rationale). But now if the hearer seeks the truth, Jesus will give it to him; if the hearer knocks on the door, Jesus will let him in (*Gos. Thom.* 94: promise). Jesus implies that because the hearer has received the truth freely, he must now freely give it to others by presenting an analogous situation in which a person is told to lend money at no interest to the person who can not pay it back (*Gos. Thom.* 95: admonition).

What follows is a series of parables and examples that reveal the truth of God's Kingdom. The inauguration of the Kingdom is like the amazing surprise of a pinch of leaven growing large loaves of bread (*Gos. Thom.* 96: analogy); although its beginnings look small and impossible now, the rule of God will soon be fully established. Its coming is astonishing like the reaction of a woman who returns home with a jar of meal, only to find it empty because the handle had broken off on the way (*Gos. Thom.* 97: analogy). It requires preparation like the man who prepared himself before murdering another man (*Gos. Thom.* 98: analogy). Those people who do the will of God will enter the Kingdom and they will form a family that will replace their human families (*Gos. Thom.* 99: example). Unlike earthly rulers such as Caesar and his earthly kingdom Rome, God does not demand money and taxes (*Gos. Thom.* 100:1–2: example). The Pharisees do not have the answers about God's Kingdom because they are like a dog sleeping in the manger of oxen, "neither does he eat nor does he let the oxen eat" (*Gos. Thom.* 102: woe). The hearer is warned that he must be ready for God's Kingdom and any distress associated with its coming (*Gos. Thom.* 103: maxim): "Fortunate is the man who knows

where the brigands will enter, so that he may get up, muster his domain, and arm himself before they invade." The time of God's Kingdom is compared to a wedding, a time of celebration rather than a time of fasting (*Gos. Thom.* 104: analogy). It is compared to the joyous story about recovering a sheep that had strayed from the flock (*Gos. Thom.* 107: analogy). The surprise and elation that the disciple experiences as the Kingdom is established is like finding a hidden treasure in a field and being able to loan money to other people (*Gos. Thom.* 109). The imminence of God's Kingdom is underscored with what appears to have been the closing to the last speech in the collection: "The heavens and the earth will be rolled up in your presence" (*Gos. Thom.* 111:1: promise).

3. *Hearing the Voice of the Prophet*

Jesus appears to have a very specific role in the sayings found in the old Kernel gospel. The sayings are oracles collected into instructional speeches pronounced by the Prophet Jesus. His words are to be heeded because he alone is able to reveal the truth about God's Kingdom and instruct people how to prepare for the imminent Judgment. Like the faithful remnant that heeded the voices of the previous prophets of Israel, only a few people are worthy enough to hear and understand Jesus' message, a message that *only* Jesus can give. Because this message has been previously hidden and is only known to God, the person who wants to know the truth must receive it from Jesus who alone reveals God's word. So, as we saw, Jesus introduces the collected speeches with two admonitions that the hearer seek the truth (*Gos. Thom.* 2:1; 5:1). The person who seeks the truth is promised an amazing journey that will ultimately lead to "rest" (*Gos. Thom.* 2). Jesus promises to reveal what has previously been hidden because "there is nothing hidden which will not become manifest" (*Gos. Thom.* 5:2). Hearers are admonished repeatedly to seek the truth because Jesus wants to reveal it now even though Jesus has not always done so (*Gos. Thom.* 92). Jesus has not revealed the truth previously because a person must be careful not to give "what is holy to the dogs" or throw "the pearls to swine" (*Gos. Thom.* 93). But now if the hearer seeks the truth, Jesus will give it to him; if the hearer knocks on the door, Jesus will let him in (*Gos. Thom.* 94).

Like previous Jewish prophets, Jesus is portrayed in the Kernel sayings as the prophet who is rejected even in his own village (*Gos. Thom.* 31). In fact, he is characterized as a prophet in the long line of prophets who have been killed over the course of Jewish history. Comparable to the tenant farmers who seized and murdered the landlord's servants and son, the Israelites have killed all of God's prophets including Jesus (*Gos. Thom.* 65). This was understood to be the fulfillment of the prophecy in Psalm 118:22: "Show me the stone which the builders have rejected. That one is the cornerstone" (*Gos. Thom.* 66). Jesus is a prophet whose message is superior even to the message of the revered John the Baptist (*Gos. Thom.* 46).

This depiction of Jesus in the Kernel gospel as a great Jewish "prophet" is similar to the depiction of Jesus in the traditions of the early Christianity from Jerusalem, a tradition I call conservative Christian Judaism.[29] The Jerusalem tradition presented Jesus' earthly role in connection with a line of Jewish prophets who came as models of righteousness and interpreters of the Law. He was the Prophet-like-Moses promised in Deuteronomy (Acts 3:18–26; 7:37). But he was greater than Moses or any other prophet, even his predecessor, John the Baptist (Acts 3:17–26; 7:37). Ultimately though, he was rejected, starting with his own village (Acts 2:23; 3:17–18; 7:51–53; cf. Mark 6:4–5; Matthew 13:57–58; Luke 4:23–24; John 4:44): he was the rejected cornerstone mentioned in the ancient prophecies (Acts 4:11; Mark 12:10–11; Matthew 21:42; Luke 20:17; 1 Peter 2:4–8).

The earliest Christian Jews, the itinerant prophets from Jerusalem, were missionaries with a message, an eschatological message to be sure. They took seriously the continuation of Jesus' own preaching that "the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God has drawn near!" (Mark 1:15), insisting that people need to "repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). This stanza is taken up in Matthew's discourse on discipleship in chapter 10 of his gospel. Jesus commissions the disciples to "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And preach as you go, saying, 'The Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near!'" (Matt 10:5–7; cf. Luke 10:9, 11). So immediate was the coming of the Kingdom and the Judgment that they believed that Jesus would return as the great Judge, the Son of Man, even before they

---

[29] See n. 16 above.

had finished preaching in all of the towns of Israel (Matt 10:23).[30]
So their message of repentance and piety was of the utmost urgency.

This understanding of Jesus was not replaced in all forms of later
Christianity. It survived and was further developed in communities
of Ebiontite Christians in eastern Syria, Christians responsible for
the traditions recorded in the *Pseudo-Clementine* corpus. Although the
Ebionite traditions display some later second-century christological
developments, the core elements from the Jerusalem tradition remain
embedded in the later Ebionite materials. These elements are remark-
ably similar to those features that characterize the Prophet Jesus so
prominently in the Kernel *Thomas*. The Ebionites state over and over
again that Jesus is the only one who reveals the truth. He is the
only one who could "enlighten the soul" (*Hom.* 1.19) because "it is
impossible for a person to know anything, unless he learn from the
True Prophet" (*Rec.* 9.1). Truth can be found nowhere but from him
(*Hom.* 3.11). Jesus' revelation of the truth is so exclusive that it is
even compared to the natural process of gaining knowledge through
our human senses: "no one can see without eyes, nor hear without
ears, nor smell without nostrils, nor taste without a tongue, nor han-
dle anything without hands, so it is impossible without the True
Prophet to know what is pleasing to God" (*Rec.* 1.44). This knowledge
is the truth about the Kingdom of God (*Rec.* 5.10), righteous living,
and promised Judgment (cf. *Rec.* 1.33; 2.20; 3.20).

The "knowledge of truth" given to us by Jesus the Prophet must
be "eagerly sought after" because "no one can confer it except the
True Prophet" himself (*Rec.* 4.5). If anyone desires to learn "all things,
let him seek after the True Prophet" (*Rec.* 8.60; cf. 8.62). In one
passage, people are admonished to "seek the True Prophet" because

> it is he alone who knows all things and who knows what and how
> every man is seeking . . . he works in those who seek after that which
> is profitable to their souls, and kindles in them the light of knowledge.
> Wherefore, seek him first of all; and if you do not find him, expect
> not that you shall learn anything from any other. But he is soon found
> by those who diligently seek him through love of truth . . . (*Rec.* 8.59).

Thus readers are admonished consistently to seek the truth from Jesus
solely because "from none but himself alone can it be known what
is true" (*Rec.* 1.16; cf. *Hom.* 1.19; 2.4; 2.5; 2.6; 2.7; 3.54).

---

[30] For more discussion of the eschatological nature of the itinerants message and
their connection to Jesus' proclamation, see D. Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second
Corinthians* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986), 164–67.

There is also a very developed rhetoric in this corpus against the
Pharisees who are said to possess the truth because they are the
receivers of the tradition of Moses, the keeper of the keys of knowl-
edge. It has already been recognized by Gilles Quispel that the
Pseudo-Clementines preserve a variant of logion 39 that shows more
affinity with the *Thomas* variant than its synoptic counterparts (Mt.
23:13; Luke 11:52). It has been suggested that the reason for this is
a common Jewish-Christian source.[31] But the similarities may indicate
something even more remarkable than this since it appears that sev-
eral *Pseudo-Clementine* passages show knowledge of sayings that appear
in clusters in the Kernel gospel and apply them hermeneutically in
comparable ways. Are we possibly witnessing in the Kernel gospel
a particular interpretation of some of Jesus' sayings that became stan-
dard in some forms of later eastern Christianity? Or is it possible
that at least one of the sources of the *Pseudo-Clementine* corpus was
some version of the Kernel gospel?

In the case of logion 39, many of the same rhetorical clusters that
we find in the beginning of the third speech of the Kernel gospel,
are also applied to the Pharisees in the *Clementine* literature. The
focus of the third speech is on the theme that Jesus exclusively reveals
the truth so the hearer must listen to him and serve him alone (*Gos.
Thom.* 38:1). Just as Jesus insists in the Kernel speech that the Pharisees
have the keys of knowledge, they have "hidden" them, not allowing
themselves or others to enter (*Gos. Thom.* 39) so the *Pseudo-Clementines*
state that the Pharisees have "hidden" the key of the Kingdom of
Heaven" (*Rec.* 1.54; cf. *Rec.* 2.46; *Hom.* 3.18).[32] In the Kernel the
Pharisees are immediately compared to a grapevine that is "unsound"
(*Gos. Thom.* 40) who bring forth "evil" things from their hearts (*Gos.
Thom.* 45). They are to be associated with John the Baptist who is
great, but not greater than the followers of Jesus (*Gos. Thom.* 46). This
understanding of the Pharisees is very similar to the description of
them in *Clementines* as men with "unsound doctrine" and "evil deeds"
who have hidden the key of knowledge (*Rec.* 2.30). The Pharisees

---

[31] Gilles Quispel, "The *Gospel of Thomas* and the New Testament," in *Gnostic Studies
II* (Uitgaven van het Nederlands Historisch-Arachaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul 34:2;
Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Arachaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1975), 13–14;
G. Quispel, "L'Evangile selon Thomas et les Clementines," in *Gnostic Studies II*
(Uitgaven van het Nederlands Historisch-Arachaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul 34:2;
Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Arachaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1975), 24–25.

[32] The synoptics state that they have "taken away" the key (Luke 11:52) or they
have "shut the kingdom" (Matthew 23:13)

elevate John the Baptist to the level of Moses and do not under-
stand that Jesus, because he is the Christ, is greater than both; they
have received the truth from Moses as "the key of the Kingdom of
Heaven" but have hid it from the people (*Rec.* 1.54, 59–60).

Furthermore, in the Kernel, the worthy disciple is supposed to
"pass by (ⲡⲓⲁⲣⲁⲧⲉ)" the teachings of the Pharisees and all others
(*Gos. Thom.* 42).[33] So also, according to the *Pseudo-Clementines*, a per-
son ought to "pass by (παρέρχεσθαι)" all teachings other than those
of Jesus and "commit himself to the Prophet of the truth alone (*Hom.*
2.9).[34] We should note that the Coptic translation ⲡⲓⲁⲣⲁⲧⲉ prob-
ably was rendering the Greek phrase, ἔστε παρερχόμενοι.[35] This recon-
struction is collaborated by this passage from the Greek *Homilies*. It
is quite possible that this expression translated the Hebrew עבר as
several scholars have suggested.[36] But it did not originally evoke the
image of a traveller or wanderer, but the notion to pass by or turn
away from someone or something such as we find in Psalm 119:37:
"Turn my eyes away from looking at vanities: and give me life in
your ways" (cf. 2 Sam 12:13; 1 Kg 15:12; Eccl 11:10). In this par-
ticular case, Jesus was instructing them to pass by the teachings of
the Pharisees and other teachers, to listen exclusively to his words.

In the Kernel speech, another saying belonging to this rhetorical
cluster implies that the Pharisees possess nothing to give, so they will

---

[33] Bentley Layton, ed., *Gospel According to Thomas, Gospel According to Philip, Hypostasis of the Archons, and Indexes* (vol. 1 of *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2–7 together with XIII, 2*, Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1), and P.Oxy. 1, 654, 655*; NHS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 70.

[34] Bernhard Rehm, *Homilien* (vol. 1 of *Die Pseudoklementinen*; ed. B. Rehm; GCS 42; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1953), 39.

[35] The first to propose this was Rodolphe Kasser, *L' Évangile selon Thomas: Présentation et commentaire théologique* (Bibliotèque théologique; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1961), 71. In fact, we find similar translations of παρέρχομαι in Matt 5:18, 24:35; Mark 6:48, 13:13, and Luke 16:17. For further use of this verb in texts, refer to Erik Peterson, *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis: Studien und Untersuchungen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1959), 297, 301 and n. 64. For other translation suggestions, see Tjitze Baarda, "Jesus said: Be Passers-By: On the meaning and origin of logion 42 of the *Gospel of Thomas*," in *idem, Early Transmission of Words of Jesus: Thomas, Tatian and the Text of the New Testament* (ed. J. Helderman and S. J. Noorda; Amsterdam: VU Bockhandel/Uitgeverij, 1983), 179–205.

[36] Joachim Jeremias, *Unbekannte Jesusworte* (3rd ed.; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963), 107–10, esp. notes 240 and 251; Gilles Quispel, *Makarius, Das Thomasevangelium, und das Lied von der Perle* (NovTSup 15; Leiden: Brill, 1967), 20–22; Gilles Quispel, "Gnosticism and the New Testament," in *Gnostic Studies I* (Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul 34; Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, 1974), 197.

---

be deprived even of that (*Gos. Thom.* 41). In *Homily* 18.16, also in the
context of a discussion of the Pharisees' possession of the key of the
Kingdom of Heaven, the point is made that the Pharisees will not
be allowed to keep the key indefinitely: "but from him who is not
worthy, even should he seem to have anything, it is taken away,
even if he be wise in other matters." It is striking that the rhetorical
use of this saying in the *Homilies* mirrors its use in the Kernel gospel
which is so different from its Lukan context (Luke 8:19).

Like logion 5, in the Ebionite tradition we are told that the truth
which people should seek is hidden and that Jesus alone can reveal
it. As we have seen already, in the Kernel it is argued that the truth
has not always been revealed to everyone who seeks for it (*Gos. Thom.*
92) because Jesus does not give "what is holy to the dogs" or toss
"the pearls to swine" (*Gos. Thom.* 93). Only if the worthy person
seeks the truth, will Jesus give it to him (*Gos. Thom.* 94). Again we
find that the *Pseudo-Clementine* literature seems to be familiar with this
interpretative cluster of sayings, applying the "Dogs and Swine" say-
ing to this precise situation, something that the synoptic variant does
not do (Matt 7:6). In one passage we learn that "we ought to be
careful, yea, extremely careful, that we cast not our pearls before
swine" when we preach the words of truth to an audience filled with
worthy and unworthy people alike (*Rec.* 2.3). The teacher of the
truth must be very cautious when setting forth the truth in a mixed
crowd because "if he set forth pure truth to those who do not desire
to obtain salvation, he does injury to him by whom he has been
sent, and from whom he received the commandment not to throw
the pearls of his words before swine and dogs" (*Rec.* 3.1).

According to the *Pseudo-Clementines*, Jesus "knows hidden things"
(*Hom.* 3.13), and reveals "that which lies secretly veiled in all human
hearts" (*Hom.* 18.6). He "enables some to find easily what they seek,
while to others he renders even that obscure which is before their
eyes." This preserves the truth for the righteous, the worthy people
whose minds "will fill up secretly" with understanding (*Rec.* 2.25; cf.
Hom. 18.8). Jesus explains the "mysteries" to the disciples because
the truth has had to be hidden from the impious (*Hom.* 19.20). In
the Kernel gospel, Jesus similarly states that only a select number
of people are worthy to know the truth that Jesus reveals (*Gos. Thom.*
62:1). The reason? Because a person does not normally let his left
hand know what his right hand is doing (*Gos. Thom.* 62:2). We dis-
cover a comparable application of this saying in *Homily* 18:7–10, an

application that is not made by its synoptic variant (Matt 6:3). Embedded in a discussion about preaching to an audience that potentially contains both worthy and unworthy company is the explanatory note: "Since God, who is just, judges the mind of each one, he would not have wished this [truth] to be given through the left hand to those on the right hand." Thus, those present and listening must all be known to the Son and worthy of the revelation. The Son is "alone appointed to give the revelation to those to whom he wishes to give it" (*Hom.* 18.13).

According to the Ebionites, part of the revelation that Jesus is responsible to deliver is the teaching that "God desires mercy and not sacrifice." People were to learn from Jesus that the "place" that God chooses for purification is baptism when one's sins are forgiven through "his wisdom." They are to hear from the Prophet Jesus that the Temple, although instrumental for a time, is the "place" that has often been harassed by "hostile invasions and plunderings" and "at last" will be "wholly destroyed" (*Rec.* 1.37–38; cf. 1.64). Similarly, the Kernel *Gos. Thom.* 71 implies that the Temple will be utterly destroyed. But an even more interesting parallel is the fact that the Kernel saying is embedded in a cluster of logia which are addressing the question, "What makes a person worthy or blessed?" We are told that the hated, persecuted, and hunger are the blessed ones (*Gos. Thom.* 68:1, 69:2). The Temple will be destroyed. The worthy are not to be like the fool who came to Jesus seeking his portion of his father's inheritance (*Gos. Thom.* 72). The blessed are the hard workers laboring in the fields (*Gos. Thom.* 73). They are unlike the majority who are standing around an empty drinking trough (*Gos. Thom.* 74). They are compared to the shrewd merchant who sold everything he had to buy a single pearl (*Gos. Thom.* 76). It appears that, in this rhetorical context, *Gos. Thom.* 71 was understood to imply what the *Pseudo-Clementines* make explicit: worship at the Temple does not make a person worthy before God or blessed by him as many mistakenly think.

In the *Recognitions* it is stated that although the seeker will find a difficult journey to the Kingdom, the "labor" should not be considered "hard" because "at the end of it there shall be rest" (*Rec.* 2.22), a teaching not unlike that of logia 2 and 90. Why is it so essential for the person to seek the truth from Jesus? What "rest" is being promised? As was implied by the sayings in the Kernel gospel, the *Clementine* literature states consistently that the reason for this journey is because it will result in Judgment: "Humans must inquire whether

they have it in their power by seeking to find what is good, and to do it when they have found it; for this is that which they are to be judged" (*Rec.* 3.37). The looming Judgment means that people must make the immediate choice to seek the truth or perish (*Hom.* 9.19; 15.6; 20.3). "At the time of harvest," the *Recognitions* say, "the crops are gathered into the barn, but the chaff or the tares are burned in the fire." This is the Day of Judgment, "when the righteous shall be introduced into the Kingdom of Heaven, and the unrighteous shall be cast out, then the justice of God shall be known" (*Rec.* 3.38). At the Judgment, the worthy person will be the one whose mind has received "the best seed" and has brought forth "joyful fruits by good deeds." If a person refuses to receive this seed, "he shall have the cause of his perishing, not from us, but from himself" (*Rec.* 4.6–8; 5.8). "Ignorance" will make a person "the enemy of God," and he can be certain that he will perish (*Rec.* 5.18, 28).

4. *The Origins of the* Gospel of Thomas

The apocalyptic expectations and christological ideas in the Kernel *Thomas* appear to be most similar to the traditions associated with conservative Christian Judaism from Jerusalem and those developed later by the Ebionites. It seems very likely that this collection of speeches was used by the Jerusalem mission between 30–50 CE as it labored to convert people to the faith especially in Palestine and its environments (cf. Acts 10–11:18; 15:1, 22, 27, 32).[37] It should not go unnoticed that the *Pseudo-Clementine* corpus claims to have knowledge of the teachings of the True Prophet, teachings that had been collected into books of speeches in order to be used by Christian missionaries in their proselytizing efforts in and around Palestine. I think it is quite conceivable that the Kernel gospel is a representative example of one of these old speech books from Jerusalem. This association of the original Thomasine Christians with the conservative Christian Jewish tradition certainly indicates that Gilles Quispel's intuition about the origin of the oldest source for the *Gospel of Thomas* was correct. But, based on the speech-structure of the Kernel that

---

[37] For a detailed discussion of missionary activities among Jews and the first Christian-Jews, see Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul*, 83–228.

has emerged in my research, I am not convinced that such a source was an Aramaic narrative gospel.

It appears that the vogue hypothesis that the *Gospel of Thomas* is a collection of "wisdom" sayings warrants substantial modification. In its earliest form at least, it was not a collection of sayings of Jesus the Sage as some scholars have previously proposed. In fact, this early gospel of Jesus' sayings was not independent of the apocalyptic tradition. It did not represent the message of a non-eschatological proverbial Jesus. Rather it was a collection of oracles of the Prophet Jesus, the Prophet who taught the worthy how to live righteously in preparation for God's imminent Judgment. As God's Prophet, he embodied God's wisdom and passed on this wisdom to those who sought it.

Jesus' message at this early stage of interpretation had an apocalyptic character, featuring eschatological dimensions as well as mystical ones. He was the chosen one from birth, the one whose prophetic voice prepared the faithful for their glorious future and warned the unworthy of their future demise. He was God's Judge who was in the process of selecting the few from the many to receive fully the joys of God's Kingdom when its glorious establishment was complete. Jesus, according to the Kernel, taught that God's power and judgment would soon bring this world to an end, that, in fact, this process was already underway. God's presence was directly accessible to the faithful now that the world was coming to an end and the boundary between heaven and earth was becoming more and more permeable. Members of the community believed that they were already participating in the Kingdom as it was gradually being inaugurated. They were already worshiping before God's throne. Jesus, in fact, instructs the faithful in the Kernel *Thomas* about the proper way to worship before God's throne in heaven, patterning the response after those of the heroes in apocalyptic lore (*Gos. Thom.* 15). He tells them to expect to experience a fiery theophany of him as they enter the Kingdom (*Gos. Thom.* 82).

These mystical ideas, however, took on a life of their own once, after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple, when the Thomasine Christians felt the impact of the "delayed" Eschaton. With the collapse of their teleology came a reformation of their apocalyptic thought. This reformation resulted in a shift that served to isolate the mystical dimension from the temporal, making the mystical an end unto itself.

CHAPTER SIX

"LET HIM WHO SEEKS, CONTINUE SEEKING":
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE
JEWISH-CHRISTIAN GOSPELS
AND THE *GOSPEL OF THOMAS*

PETRI LUOMANEN

Soon after the *Gospel of Thomas* was available for scholars, Gilles Quispel presented a hypothesis that a significant amount of *Thomas'* logia would be based on a Jewish-Christian gospel.[1] As such, the hypothesis has not found many supporters but it is acknowledged that Quispel's studies include important observations about similarities between the *Gospel of Thomas* and the Jewish-Christian gospel tradition.[2] At least the following similarities are obvious: (1) Some of the logia of the *Gospel of Thomas* are paralleled in Jewish-Christian gospel fragments. (2) Both the *Gospel of Thomas* and the Jewish-Christian gospel fragments

---

[1] Quispel attributed about 60% of *Thomas'* logia to a Jewish-Christian gospel. See, Gilles Quispel, *Makarius, das Thomasevangelium und das Leid von der Perle* (NovTSup 15; Leiden: Brill, 1967), 75. First (see, *Makarius*, 75–111, esp. 106) Quispel assumed that the author of the *Gospel of Thomas* had used two sources: a Jewish-Christian gospel of the Nazoreans/Hebrews and an encritite gospel of the Egyptians. Later on, a third, Hermetic source was added. For the summary of Quispel's hypothesis, see Francis T. Fallon and Ron Cameron, "The *Gospel of Thomas*: A Forschungsbericht and Analysis," *ANRW* 25.6: 4195–251, esp. 4216–19.

[2] Recently, April D. DeConick has presented the hypothesis that *Thomas* was a "rolling corpus" and suggested that its earliest kernel could be related to the Jewish-Christian gospel postulated by Quispel. See, April D. DeConick, "The Original *Gospel of Thomas*," *VC* 56 (2002): 167–99, esp. 197. Some scholars also assume a Jewish-Christian *collection of sayings* behind the *Gospel of Thomas*. Thus, Oscar Cullmann, "Das Thomasevengelium und die Frage nach dem Alter in ihm enthaltenen Tradition," *TLZ* 85 (1960): 321–34. W. H. C. Frend, "The *Gospel of Thomas*: Is Rehabilitation Possible," *JTS* 18 (1967): 13–26; Kendrick Grobel, "How Gnostic is the *Gospel of Thomas?*" *NTS* 8 (1961–62): 367–73, esp. 370, 373. Grobel supports his view with Semiticisms he finds in some of the logia of the *Gospel of Thomas*, and locates the *Gospel of Thomas* in Egypt. Several scholars also assume a connection between *Thomas* and Q's earliest layers. Helmut Koester, in particular, has emphasized the independence of the traditions of the *Gospel of Thomas* and its connection to the earliest layer of Q's wisdom sayings, prophetic sayings, proverbs and community rules. See Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 86–89.