

DOUBTING THOMAS

In 1945, a copy of a lost gospel known as the Gospel of Thomas was discovered with a large collection of ancient texts known as the Nag Hammadi Library. With 114 seemingly disjointed sayings, there is no attempt to compose a narrative. Thomas' gospel was written in Coptic, the common language of Egypt during the period of the early church.

References to such a gospel were known reaching back to earlier antiquity; three Greek fragments of this gospel known as the Papyrus Oxyrhynchus had been discovered around the turn of the 20th century. Though "lost" for more than a millenium, the Gospel of Thomas had been portrayed as heretical by at least some early orthodox church patriarchs.

Re-discovery of the Thomas manuscripts ignited new controversies about the New Testament between biblical scholars. However, even today, Thomas is little known to outside the ecclesiastic and university realm.

For followers of the historic Jesus and students of the New Testament, the Gospel of Thomas is important for at least three reasons:

- This non-canonical gospel likely was composed contemporaneously with the four gospels that are now part of the New Testament; the discovered manuscript actually predates any known complete and authenticated manuscript of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.
- Thomas offers both independent corroboration and challenges to conventional views about the teachings of Jesus.
- Thomas is also decidedly counter-cultural – as a type of non-traditional wisdom literature and proto-Gnostic teaching.

In its simplest form, the heresy of Thomas is this: Jesus introduces the kingdom of God. But this kingdom is available to only a few who are called to unravel the mystery, attaining to a wisdom that reaches beyond conventional spiritual or material thinking.

ORTHODOXY & HETERODOXY

The writers of the New Testament introduce us to *doubting Thomas* – clearly a disciple who marches (or perhaps meditates) to the beat of a different drummer. The gospel of the canon portrays Thomas as a skeptic and an empiricist – he has to see to believe.

The non-canonical Gospel of Thomas – rediscovered only in this last century in the sands of Egypt – carries the inquiring mind a step further. We are carried into the world of the Jesus of mystery and wisdom.

The gospel writer John draws us up to the threshold of this mystery of the word with the revelation of a personalized divinity. Thomas crosses the threshold – yielding tantalizing, sometimes disconcerting glimpses of the mysteries of God's earthly and heavenly domain.

The Jesus of Thomas offers a unique spin to many of the parables found in the New Testament gospels. This Jesus clearly preaches a gospel of the here and now.

And Thomas' Jesus gives conflicting advice. The portrait of a conflicted Jesus clearly emerges from this long-buried, non-canonical work of heresy. In the canonical New Testament, the conflicts are also present; they just have to be coaxed out more gently.

Thomas' Jesus is the only one to say: "Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor, give God what belongs to God, and give me what is mine." The Jesus of Thomas wants his share; he also appears to distinguish himself from God the Father.

And, this is the Thomas of the bizarre, who ends his list of sayings with Jesus telling Peter about how he will transform Mary: "Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who becomes male will enter the kingdom of heaven."

CANONICAL EXCLUSION

It is not difficult to understand why the orthodox church felt uncomfortable with Thomas and the associated spectre of gnosticism. The established church positioned itself as the arbiter of Biblical interpretation and atonement – particularly after Constantine. In contrast, Thomas suggested that each individual may have a different interpretation and spiritual experience – and that is just plain ok.

We have had less than a century to rediscover the Jesus of Thomas. It may take some time and a willingness to drop prejudices over loaded terms like gnosticism and mystery cults to experience the Jesus that Thomas labored – through a series of seemingly disjointed sayings – to reveal.

Which brings us full circle back to the start – to the first saying of Jesus in Thomas that: "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death."

And the second: "Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find, When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will rule over all."

As we hurtle into this new millennium, there are yet a few that bother to seek. A few have begun to find – and the ensuing disturbance has yet to unfold.

This passage is adapted from the chapter "The Heresy of Thomas: Mystery & Wisdom," excerpted from the approximately 360 page book *12 Heresies of Christianity*. For additional information, check out www.jesustheheresy.com.