

"The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas: A Lost, Secret Vision of Jesus"

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The recent discovery and current interest in the Gospel of Thomas have elicited considerable popular and scholarly attention, a phenomenon which shows no indication of coming to an end. The above title seeks to underscore some important facts which have propelled this ancient work to relative prominence in the public mind.

1) Thomas presents a portrait of Jesus which at one point in the church's history was popular but which the historical process and time have either judged non-mainstream or have simply forgotten. Thomas and its secret vision of Jesus, along with many other ancient images, became the victim of a process which tends to synthesize differences and impose uniformity, but still searches for new and exciting images. Some of the old images persist but new generations seek or create new ones or are often fascinated by earlier ones—so interest in Thomas.

2) The recent finding of Thomas reminds us of an important aspect of modernity, its ability through archaeology or historical research to rediscover and the possibility of its being challenged by lost texts and ideas. Powerful images and visions of the past may not be irretrievably lost. Besides, there is often a fascination with ancient ideas.

And 3) the vision of Gnosticism continues to appeal to a wide range of minds as it has done throughout the centuries. The discoveries accompanying the finding of Thomas have generated interest in the subject of dualistic thought and the themes of evil and salvation on the part of scholar and lay person. Thomas is obviously concerned with these.

So, having chosen to speak of Thomas, a text which has almost attained cult status in the popular mind, it is my intention to approach the subject in the following way.

The presentation will have four parts of unequal length. First, there will be a substantial examination of the text's history, rediscovery and relation to the Jesus tradition; some important facts need to be presented here. Secondly, I will dwell briefly on the formation and history of the Gospel of Thomas, including its origin and Gnostic editing. Thirdly, by means of an analysis of the text of Thomas, I will attempt to articulate at some length its unique vision of Jesus and his role in helping believers address the vicissitudes of the human condition. In this section I will refer frequently to the text of Thomas¹ to allow the reader to become acquainted first-hand with it and to allow a clearer sense of its message and portrait of Jesus. A brief fourth section will offer a closing contemporary note.

I. Rediscovery of Thomas and Its Relation to the Jesus Tradition

a. Early History and Rediscovery.

Before the reappearance of the Gospel of Thomas among the Nag Hammadi codices in 1946, there existed from various early Christian writers limited but tantalizing references to and citations from popular Thomas literature, that is, traditions and texts associated with the apostle Thomas, whether childhood narratives, sayings sources, acts, psalms, or apocalypses associated with the apostle.² A Gospel of Thomas was known to the second-century writer Irenaeus who cites childhood episodes from it and states that it was used by a late Christian Gnostic group, the Marcosians. Other references to a Gospel of Thomas are made by the great Alexandrian biblical scholar Origen in his first Lukan homily and the mid-fourth-century bishop Cyril of Jerusalem. The former cites this work in support of a philological point but the latter warns against it, saying that it was in use among the well-known Gnostic group, the Manichaeans. But more important to us is a second-century citation by Hippolytus said to be from a Gospel of Thomas, which reads: "the person who seeks me will find me in seven-year-old children; for hidden there in the fourteenth age, I am revealed."³ This passage has a vague resemblance to Thomas saying ⁴ about seven-day-old children.⁴ Nonetheless, since no such saying was found in the childhood gospel referred to by Irenaeus, recent scholars had to assume the

existence of another gospel attributed to Thomas. These gospel references therefore were to the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, on the one hand, a well-known narrative about Jesus the wunderkind or child prodigy and, on the other, to another gospel which later came to be identified with the Coptic Thomas we are discussing.

The next stage in the history of the Gospel of Thomas brings us to the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries when, as the result of archaeological excavations by B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt of the ancient Egyptian town of Oxyrhynchus (modern Behnesa, c. 120 miles south of Cairo), there was recovered literally bushels of Greek papyrus fragments. From an ancient third-century A.D. dump there emerged textual fragments of great variety: official documents and correspondence, non-literary notes and personal letters, as well as other literary fragments including parts of Matthew, Paul, 1 John, and the Book of Revelation. So impressive was this documentary find that by 1983 nearly 50 volumes of Oxyrhynchus papyri had appeared with Greek text, introduction, and notes to over 3400 items. Important for our study was the discovery in the Winter of 1896 (with its publication the following year) of a fragment (P1), which contained eight interesting "sayings of our Lord." The epigraphers dated this fragment to c. 200 A.D. Eight years later in 1904 there appeared two new fragments, P 654 and P 655 dated respectively to the mid-to-end of the 3rd century and to c. 250 A.D.

Following these discoveries, there ensued debate and much conjecture concerning the source, identity, and content of these new fragments. These along with other fragments such as Papyrus Egerton 2 and the independent Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 840, have been compared to or associated with the Q-Source (that is, Matthew and Luke's saying source), the logia referred to by the Christian writer Papias, and a variety of early apocryphal gospels (whether of the Egyptians, Hebrews, or Ebionites).

Matters remained thus until the important discovery in 1946 of the Gospel of Thomas among a large cache of Coptic, mainly Gnostic, treatises. The discovery was made near ancient Chenobaskion, near modern Nag Hammadi (c. 60 miles north Luxor). Interestingly, the manuscript find was made near the traditional site of Pachomius' cenobitic monastery; in fact the 12/13 codices, containing 52 treatises, were probably discovered in a large jar buried in a nearby monastic cemetery. While the stories

of the discovery and of the intrigue surrounding the early handling and subsequent publication of these almost rival those of the contemporary Dead Sea Scrolls finds,⁵ the history of the Gospel of Thomas was considerably simple. Its text was made available to the scholarly world in 1956 in a volume containing photographs only of the papyrus sheets of parts of codices I and II, Thomas consisting of plates 80-99 of that volume.⁶ Translations in a variety of languages began to appear in the late 1950s.

In palaeographic terms, Thomas appears on 20 sheets or ten leaves of papyrus from Nag Hammadi codex II. Its language is the central Coptic dialect of Sahidic with a mixture of Akhmimic forms (another Coptic dialect). The text is relatively well preserved and has few, generally restorable, textual breaks. The generally acceptable, conservative dating of the Coptic version is c. 400; the composition would of course have been much earlier. The connection between the Oxyrhynchus fragments and the Gospel of Thomas was soon recognized by scholars and provided with extensive comparative study and reconstruction.⁷ It is now generally accepted that Oxy P 654 corresponds to the prologue and first five sayings of Thomas, that Oxy P 1 offers sayings 26-30 and 31-33 but with an intrusive fragment of saying 77, and that Oxy P 655 consists of sayings 36-39. It is further concluded that the three fragments represent three different and differently dated copies of the Greek version of Thomas. Additionally, it is increasingly admitted that the Greek of Oxyrhynchus offers various editions of early Thomas (note the order of sayings in Oxy P 1) and that the Coptic is a Sahidic translation from a Greek original.⁸

b. Thomas' Relationship to the Jesus Tradition.

In Thomas one finds not Synoptic-like narratives which are the hallmark of the gospel tradition but rather a loose collection of prophetic, parabolic, and other didactic sayings (often in the form of question and answer), and usually introduced simply by "Jesus said." But it is not this virtual absence of narrative material which has caused surprise and created debate. Indeed, the Q-Source, Matthew and Luke's non-Markan resource, presents just such a phenomenon. Instead, scholars have been struck by the odd juxtaposition of sayings that have close parallels in the Synoptics and others that bear

no contacts with that tradition. Thus, two very different solutions have been proposed for this anomaly. Some, by far the minority, have seized upon these similarities and the seemingly primitive, non-allegorized state of some of these sayings to argue for a tradition independent of and even older than that represented by the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. The majority of scholars, however, view these similarities and differences as owing to Gnostic appropriation of the Synoptic tradition or texts. Both sides have seized upon one aspect of the problem to reach their conclusions and to paint vastly different pictures of the developing Jesus tradition. Either one insists on the primitive character of some of the sayings and ignores the overwhelmingly new, late material or else one ignores the sometimes original and simple Synoptic-like character of some of the saying to insist on the late, Gnostic form of Thomas. The former might suggest expanding the canon to include Thomas or even to replace the Synoptics with other traditions;⁹ the latter seem intent on ignoring data which add complexity to the process which led to the formation of the canonical gospels themselves.¹⁰

From the available data one is led to conclude that Thomas is a mixed collection of sayings of a mixed origin. In effect, the sayings of the gospel might be grouped into four categories which will assist our discussion.¹¹ First, there are a number of sayings that have close or identical parallels to the NT gospels. These of course could be considered as stemming from independent tradition or result from direct borrowing of the Synoptic tradition. A second category can be classified as paraphrases or variants of NT sayings. Again one might opt, on the one hand, for independent tradition, i.e., a different stream of tradition to account for the variations or, on the other hand, for redactional activity as accounting for the differences. Admittedly, even in the NT gospels there is already evidence of varying streams of oral and written tradition (whether that used by Mark, the Q-Source, and oral tradition employed by Matthew and Luke). A third group includes sayings not found in the NT but cited by patristic sources or found in apocryphal literature. Such sayings witness to the continued use, in post-NT times, of ecclesiastic collections of sayings of Jesus. And fourthly there is a large number, approximately half of Thomas, of previously unknown sayings which are generally Gnostic in character. Thus, a vast majority of Thomas is either apocryphal or Gnostic in character and origin. The

debate therefore must center on the far smaller number of sayings and parts thereof which parallel closely, resemble, or paraphrase Synoptic or Jesus-like sayings.

2. The Formation and History of Thomas

Considering the above factors, one is led to conclude that Thomas is the end product of an evolutionary process, similar to that which produced the NT gospels. Initially it consisted of a sayings collection like that used by Matthew and Luke (Q-Source) or the rather different sign-source or miracle tradition underlying the Fourth Gospel. The Synoptic-like character of some of its sayings points to a close connection either with the texts of or with the tradition underlying the Synoptics, particularly a concomitant use of oral tradition. It is especially the appeal to oral tradition which accounts for some of the seemingly less-allegorized form of a few parables, i.e., the parables of the weeds (Thomas 57 and Matt 13:24-30), of the great supper (Thomas 64; Luke 14:16-24; also Matt 22:2-10), or of the wicked tenants (Thomas 65; Mark 12:1-9 par). Each of these gospels betrays redactional interests in the rewriting and application of these parables. In these instances the minor revisions and Gnostic reading of Thomas are, in my opinion, no less conspicuous than the redactional applications of the canonical gospels.

The text of Thomas, like all known early renditions of the Jesus tradition, was written in Greek. Such is suggested by the existence of the Oxyrhynchus Greek fragments. Further, it was originally composed for the use of a Jewish Christian community as is suggested by a number of clues. Saying 12, for example, insists that James the Righteous will be the community's leader after Jesus' departure.¹² There was at one time a fondness for Jewish themes: kingdom (passim¹³), fasting/prayer/almsgiving (6 & 14), kosher diet (6), and circumcision (53); one should note saying 27 on the Sabbath: "If you do not observe the Sabbath as a Sabbath, you will not see the Father." Additionally, use of early Jesus tradition of a Synoptic type points also to a Jewish Christian community. Further, it is probably safe to point to Asia Minor or Syria as the home of the original tradition and collection of sayings, since the various Thomas traditions found a

home in early Syriac literature and since there is a decided Encratitic influence on much of Thomas. The latter explains Thomas' concern for human wholeness, for, in agreement with Syriac Encratitic writers (and other Hellenistic writings as well), Thomas sees the human being as having lost its original androgynous state. Just as Adam had been created as a whole being but rendered incomplete by the differentiation or separation of the sexes so now Christ comes to restore this primitive unity (11, 22, 114). Similar concerns and parallel sayings have also been identified in the Gospel of the Egyptians.¹⁴

It is assumed then that this Greek text found its way and much sympathy on Egyptian soil (note the several editions of the Greek found at Oxyrhynchus). It also found great favor in monastic settings where the Encratitic or "solitary" theme was most appealing and served to reinforce the celibate ideal.¹⁵ It was during this period that the popular text underwent a substantial Gnostic editing during the early 3rd century and was translated into Sahidic during the late 3rd or early 4th centuries, the approximate date of the extant Coptic manuscript.¹⁶

3. Thomas' Unique Vision of Jesus

Thomas then presents 114 varied sayings, usually introduced by "Jesus said." Many of these, especially the parables, have NT parallels, but most are vaguely or overtly Gnostic in character and a few are also attested in early apocryphal gospels. With this in mind we inquire therefore about the Gospel's content, point of view, and, particularly, its vision of Jesus and his role in the lives of believers.

a. Jesus the Revealer.

From the start one is confronted by the themes of Jesus as teacher of secret or esoteric knowledge and of knowledge or interpretation as the source of salvation. The Gospel is exclusively a sayings document and presents Jesus consistently as teacher or revealer. Indeed, in the prologue the work is called "the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke." Additionally, the Gospel claims that the interpretation of the knowledge

which Jesus gives will grant immortality to the believer. In words paraphrasing John 8:52 Jesus is made to say in logion 1: "whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience [or taste] death." Thus, Jesus and his sayings are made to bear a revelatory message and soteriological power. In John it is "the keeping of Jesus' word" (or God's word) which grants eternal life, while in Thomas it is the interpretation (Greek loan word hermeneia) of Jesus' esoteric message which grants spiritual life.

Before dealing with the message we should first turn our attention to the messenger or revealer and the titles given him. Interestingly, Jesus is never called Christ or Savior in Thomas, i.e., Christos or Soter as in the NT tradition. Nor is he the Lord; indeed, in logion 13 he is addressed as Master or Lord by Thomas but retorts, "I am not your master." Instead, Jesus plays the role of preexistent, heavenly messenger come into the world of alienated, intoxicated humans to bring them salvific knowledge or gnosis.

The document addresses Jesus' identity on several occasions. An important passage for our consideration is again saying 13, which itself resembles the Synoptic tradition of "who do people..." and "who do you say that I am" (Mark 8:27-29).¹⁷

13 Jesus said to His disciples: "Compare me to someone and tell Me whom I am like." Simon Peter said to Him, "You are like a righteous angel." Matthew said to Him, "You are like a wise philosopher." Thomas said to Him, "Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like." Jesus said: "I am not your master."

Interestingly, Jesus is no longer identified as a revived John the Baptist, neither Elijah nor an OT prophet, and, again, neither is he the NT Messiah or Christ. Instead, various disciples compare him in saying 13 to "a righteous angel" or in Coptic (borrowing Greek terms) an angelos dikaios or, more correctly, a "holy or righteous messenger." Jesus is a messenger from the heavenly world come to grant liberating or enlightening knowledge to darkened minds or imprisoned divine sparks (see saying 50: "We came from the light"). Equally, he is seen as "a wise philosopher" or philosophos (another Greek loan word used by Thomas). Again, the emphasis is on knowledge, even the literal phrase, "a philosopher of understanding," translated as "wise philosopher," suggests the esoteric nature of the

revelation. Lastly, Jesus' rejection of the Master title, in saying 13, underscores the difference between the NT acknowledgment of Jesus' lordship as source of salvation (though see 90) and Thomas' insistence that Jesus' soteriological role lies in the acceptance of his gnosis or special revelation (1).

Further, Jesus is said to come from the heavenly realm into the world of humans. Saying 28 begins: "Jesus said: 'I took My place in the midst of the world, and I appeared to them in flesh.'" While there is some debate regarding whether the Jesus who is speaking is the earthly, historical figure or the resurrected, returning revealer, the latter is suggested by a number of themes and passages from Thomas. Use of the term "the living Jesus" (prologue) or "the Living One" (59) suggests both that the author sees Jesus as the resurrected, heavenly messenger of saving knowledge, on the one hand, and, on the other, as the alter ego of "the Living Father" (50); see saying 77 (also 82) where Jesus is all but indistinguishable from the ultimate source of light and life, the All. Also, pointing to Jesus as the resurrected one is saying 92 (see also 38) which speaks of questions asked of Jesus "in former times" in contrast to the living Jesus' special revelation now about the heavenly world. Jesus then is no longer a traditional savior or messiah but a revealer or living, resurrected messenger who comes from the heavenly realm to offer a saving knowledge and to seek souls lost in the realm of matter. I would also add saying 61 here, Jesus' response to Salome, "I am He who exists from the Undivided. I was given some of the things of My father." He is of divine origin, almost indistinguishable from the All or the Undivided and has been given "some of the things" of his father, i.e., lost souls to seek.

b. Jesus' Esoteric Message.

We pass then to the content of the message. That it is esoteric in character and heavenly in origin is clearly hinted at in saying 13 when Thomas states, after having received special knowledge from Jesus, "If I tell you one of the things which he told me, you will pick up stones and throw them at me, a fire will come out of the stones and burn you up." What then is this message which is so incompatible with the earthly realm? What is it that the heavenly Jesus brings to a drunk, blind, unsuspecting creation?

In Thomas Jesus promises the reader otherworldly knowledge, or as he says in saying 17: "I shall give you what no eye has seen and what no ear has heard and what no hand has touched, and what has never occurred to the human mind." This knowledge is both about the inner kingdom or real self (3) and about the heavenly realm (4,19,64, etc). Indeed, Thomas insists in a short but perceptive saying (49) about "finding the Kingdom": "you are from it, and to it you will return." For Thomas, as for the Gnostic believer, the human being or its inner self, has a heavenly or divine origin but now finds itself mired or immersed in matter as a lost or concealed spark of the divine. Thus, Jesus teaches about the disunity of reality as it now exists, preaches about primordial unity, and seeks lost souls, stray sheep, or flickering lights or sparks.

Perhaps the best way to approach the dual character of the human condition (its heavenly origin and earthly desolation) is to examine one of Thomas' strangest and hardest sayings (22). In response to the disciples' query about whether they must be like suckling infants to enter the kingdom, Jesus says to them (I quote at length):

"When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter [the Kingdom]."

The human being, and reality generally, was once whole or unified and seeks or yearns to eliminate duality or divisiveness, whether sexual duality or appearance and reality.¹⁸ Basic to such an outlook, traceable to Encratitic influences noted earlier, is the claim that reality is in fact dual, particularly the human creature, and that it yearns to be restored to its original wholeness, whether by overcoming plurality, by returning to a primordial androgynous (non-male/non-female) state, or by discovering the unity of the self and of the non-material realm. One should also note that Jesus is the Undivided or comes from the Undivided (61).

Thus, the beginning of the book of Genesis was employed by Gnostic writers to evoke an original unitary state for humanity, an androgynous state before a lesser, evil god or heavenly demiurge split Adam asunder into male and female beings called Adam and Eve. With even more radical focus, this story about the first humans (see 83-85) was used to explain the creation of evil matter by a foolish demiurge and the countermovement by the highest God to posit or breathe into the human creatures a divine spark. Thus was explained, in stark contrast to Genesis 3 and its story of the fall of the first parents, the origin of evil and its mainly-successful struggle against good. Thomas presumes the absolute dualism of a Gnostic system. Human beings are monstrous physical creations of the Demiurge¹⁹ but possess a divine spark, spirit, or soul from the highest God. Thus, as stated earlier from saying 49, they (or their spirits) come from the heavenly realm and yearn to return to it.

Thus, the knowledge which Jesus brings, reveals, or teaches his disciples permits humans to see that "for the moment they are intoxicated" (28) and that they must "become passers-by" (42) as they seek to return to or discover their primordial home, the kingdom.²⁰ Saying 28 about intoxication then is important. Jesus describes at length what he found on his terrestrial journey:

I found all of them intoxicated; I found none of them thirsty. And My soul became afflicted for the sons of men, because they are blind in their hearts and do not have sight; for empty they came into the world, and empty they seek to leave the world. But for the moment they are intoxicated. When they shake off their wine, they will repent."

This is a beautiful image. Humans are in a stupor, a state of ignorance which must be illumined by heavenly knowledge about this state of affairs. Readers must realize that they are a spark from the heavenly light (24), a spark that needs to be recognized, purified, and released from corrupt matter (24,51). Jesus' role in this is that of teacher of primordial unity who seeks what is lost, concealed, or immersed in the lower realm of matter. He comes with and teaches the knowledge or gnosis which liberates and saves. The knowledge then that is promised in Jesus' words is that of the otherworldly and inner kingdom and that of the real self (17,3,67); it is also knowledge about the heavenly origin and destination of the human spirit or soul (18,49), that is, the preexistent self (19) and its

present drunken state (28). It is interpretation of this message which will grant sight, immortality, union.

c. Jesus and the Gnostic Believer.

If the image of intoxication or drunken stupor has a negative function in describing the state of the human being prior to Gnostic illumination, that same image also serves a positive function in Thomas. In two important sayings the Gnostic believer is described as becoming drunk as a result of receiving Jesus' revelation. Saying 13 states: "Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out." Gnostic believers are in a euphoric state of enlightenment and union, for they have drunk from the Savior's fountain. In fact saying 108 further elaborates: "He who will drink from My mouth will become like Me. I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him." Possessors of the hidden mysteries, Gnostic believers now see themselves as related to their revelatory Savior. They see the divine spark in themselves (24) as compatible or unified with the divine light which constitutes Jesus' very nature (77). Thus, they are near Jesus the divine fire (82).

The Gnostic believers are able to overcome the problems of this life, of this corrupt world since they have discovered their true, previously lost or divided, nature. In ascetic terms they become passers-by (42) as they live in the world without (in Johannine terms) being of the world. They are suckling children who strip off their clothes as they would the body as the prison of their souls (21, 37; also 22). Thus, they achieve a unitary state as they overcome the inner and outer, the male and female (22,114), as they seek to enter the bridal chamber where duality is dissolved (75,23,49),²¹ and as they reclaim what is theirs and see the Son of the Living One (21, 37). They find the kingdom (3,49,113-14) which is within and without for they have become united or identified with the Father, the Light, or the All from whom they have emanated (3,50).

What then is this union which Gnostic believers seek, the source from which they emanate? Saying 50 deserves full citation:

Jesus said, "If they say to you, 'Where did you come from?', say to them, 'We came from the light, the place where the light came into being on its own accord and established [itself] and became manifest through their image.' If they say to you, 'Is it you?', say, 'We are its children, and we are the elect of the Living Father.' If they ask you, 'What is the sign of your Father in you?' say to them, 'It is movement and repose.'"

The theme here is origin from and reunion with the Living Father or Divine Light, a state which is characterized by ultimate perfection: movement and stability. Additionally, as the following saying (51) indicates, this state is a present reality:

When will the repose of the dead come about, and when will the new world come?" He said to them, "What you look forward to has already come."

Thomas insists on a present or realized not on a future eschatology (see also 113). Further, believers are advised that conversion is possible and necessary (2, 28) but also warned that the choice is personal and temporary (59; also 63-64).

Finally, to describe Jesus' role in this process one might best appeal to a story from Syriac literature the "Song of the Pearl," drawn from the Acts of Thomas and summarized as follows:

The individual soul is the pearl which has been lost in Egypt, the realm of matter. The coming of the young prince from his Parthian kingdom to look after the pearl and to save it is interpreted as the fall of a universal soul into the world. In the end the prince saves himself when he discovers the pearl which is part of himself and carries it back to its homeland.²²

Jesus then is both a revealer of necessary knowledge and a seeker of the lost; but he is also a disturbing presence (10, 16) that allows seekers to be astonished, to stand solitary, and to rule over the All when they find the inner and outer kingdom (2-3, 16).

4. A Final Contemporary Note

I began this discussion by alluding to the fact that in some circles the Gospel of Thomas has acquired cult or near-cult status. In fact, to some it has become either a more trustworthy witness of the Jesus tradition than the Synoptics or has acquired revelatory status for various forms of new American religion. To introduce brief remarks on this issue and to bring my discussion of Thomas to a close, I cite a paragraph from an interpretive essay which accompanies a recent translation, introduction and interpretation of Thomas. Harold Bloom, an expert on American Religion, begins his essay thus:

The popularity of the Gospel of Thomas among Americans is another indication that there is indeed "the American religion": creedless, Orphic, enthusiastic, proto-gnostic, post-Christian. Unlike the canonical gospels, that of Judas Thomas the Twin spares us the crucifixion, makes the resurrection unnecessary, and does not present us with a God named Jesus. No dogmas could be founded upon this sequence (if it is a sequence) of apothegms. If you turn to the Gospel of Thomas, you encounter a Jesus who is unsponsored and free. No one could be burned or even scorned in the name of this Jesus, and no one has been hurt in any way, except perhaps for those bigots, high church or low, who may have glanced at so permanently surprising a work.²³

Bloom underscores some of the basic differences between Thomas and the NT gospels which clearly characterize Thomas as Gnostic Christian and the Synoptics as orthodox Christian. That Thomas "spares us the crucifixion, makes the resurrection unnecessary, and does not present us with a God named Jesus" seems for Bloom the modern commentator an advance over the basic soteriological doctrines of early Christianity. Be that as it may, his claim that the Jesus of Thomas "is unsponsored and free" is inaccurate at best and misleading at its worst. Images or presentations of Jesus in all forms of the tradition known to us, whether ancient or modern, are invariably related to the situations to which they are addressed. The portraits of Jesus in the Synoptics, in John, in Thomas, or in the iconography of subsequent centuries are interpreted images that have as much to do with the needs of the believers as they do to their relation to the historical Jesus.

The Jesus of Thomas is no neo-historical portrait, stripped, as some would have it, of religious dogma. Jesus in Thomas is no less sponsored nor free than he is in the Synoptics. On the one hand, most scholars would insist that Thomas, which probably began as a standard sayings collection of Jesus' sayings, became, with time, a vehicle for Gnosticizing Christians to appropriate both the Christian Savior figure and the anthropology of their Gnostic contemporaries.²⁴ In the process the concern of believers shifted from eschatology to a present but unrecognized kingdom, from Jesus' future coming to his role as revealer of secret knowledge, and from a belief in the salvific power of his death to a quest for a gnosis which liberates the alienated, imprisoned soul. In this way, the text of Thomas provides modern students with added information for understanding the process of development that the Jesus tradition underwent. On the other hand, its image of Jesus helps us to appreciate more fully Albert Schweitzer's observation of a century ago that each generation found in the biblical tradition or created from NT clues a Jesus according to its own image and need.²⁵

So the Jesus of Thomas is a Jesus who answers the Gnostic Christians' deepest desire, escape from a corrupt world and a corrupt body and return to or reunion with the source of their being. Saying 100, a rewriting of the tribute to Caesar text (Mark 12:13-17), serves as an interesting statement of this desire and Jesus' role in achieving it.

They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to Him, "Caesar's men demand taxes from us." He said to them, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, give God what belongs to God, and give Me what is Mine." In place of homage to Caesar as temporary ruler or Archon and to the God of this world or Demiurge, the author, by the simple addition of the final clause "and give Me what is Mine," underscores Jesus' role as a visitor from the world of light who has come to reclaim his own from this worldly morass and to lead them back to the heavenly kingdom where, in Pauline terms (1 Cor 15:28), they "may be all in all," that is, reunited with the source of their being--so many divine sparks that return to the Divine Flame.

Notes

1. The translation employed is that of T.O. Lambdin found either in J.M. Robinson, ed., The Nag Hammadi Library (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 117-30 or R. Cameron, ed., The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 23-37.
2. Reference is here being made to the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Gnostic Gospels of Thomas and Thomas the Contender, the Acts of Thomas, the Psalms of Thomas which form part of the Manichaean Psalter, and the Apocalypse of Thomas. For discussion of apocryphal literature, especially gospels, see E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, eds., New Testament Apocrypha (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963-65) and R.E. Brown et al, eds., The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990) 1065-68.
3. The Patristic references are as follows: Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 1.13.1; Origen, Hom. In Luc. 1; Cyril of Jerusalem, Orat. Catech. 4.36; 6.31; and Hippolytus, Ref. 5.7.20-21.
4. On the fondness of Thomas for childhood imagery to describe the Gnostic believer, see also sayings 21-22, 37, 46, and 50.
5. For the discovery and publication of the Nag Hammadi codices see Robinson, Library and for those of the Scrolls, see J.T. Milik, Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea (London: SCM, 1959); G. Vermes, The Dead Sea Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); and J.A. Fitzmyer, "What They Found in the Caves. Let's Go to the Scrolls," Commonweal (1992) 13-16 on the recent controversy regarding access to and publication of the Scrolls.
6. Coptic Gnostic Papyrus in the Coptic Museum at Old Cairo; this was the only volume of the series to be published.
7. See J.A. Fitzmyer, "The Oxyrhynchus Logoi of Jesus and the Coptic Gospel according to Thomas," Theological Studies 20 (1959) 505-60, reproduced in Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament (Missoula: Scholars, 1974) 355-433.
8. A similar situation exists for the Sophia of Jesus Christ (Nag Hammadi codex III) since papyrus fragments of its Greek original were also discovered at Oxyrhynchus.
9. See discussion of J.D. Crossan, Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) 15-37 and of H. Koester and S.J. Patterson, "The Gospel of Thomas. Does It Contain Authentic Sayings of Jesus?" Bible Review 6 (1990) 28-39.
10. See note 16 below.

11. I borrow here from the suggestions of O. Cullmann, "The Gospel of Thomas the Problem of the Age of the Tradition Contained Therein," Interpretation 16 (1962) 425.
12. Thomas 12: "The disciples said to Jesus, 'We know that You will depart from us. Who is to be our leader?' Jesus said to them, 'Wherever you are, you are to go to James the righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.'" This is a remarkable statement with no obvious Gnostic sense and points to Jewish-Christian interest.
13. One should note the (Jewish) Matthean formulation: "kingdom of heaven" (20, 54, 114)--such is also found in the Gospel of the Hebrews.
14. See J.-E. Menard, L'Evangile selon Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 1975) and in more popular form: "Gospel of Thomas" 902-5 in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Suppl. Vol. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984).
15. On the ascetic character of Thomas, see Crossan, Four Other Gospels, 30-35.
16. For a more general discussion of the relationship of Thomas to the Synoptic Gospels and of its composition and evolution as a text, see the articles of K.V. Neller, C.W. Hendrick and S.R. Snodgrass in Second Century 7 (1989-90) 1-56.
17. See also Mark 6:14-16 and par; also John 1:19f.
18. This presentation agrees more with the protology than with the Christology offered by S. Davies, "The Christology and Protology of the Gospel of Thomas," Journal of Biblical Literature 111 (1992) 663-82.
19. For a disparaging view of the body and of the physical world generally, see sayings 87 and 112 as well as the themes of poverty (3, 29; also 85), corpse (56; also 80, 110-111), and the body as a garment to be discarded (21-22, 37).
20. On the spatial and temporal characteristics of the kingdom, see sayings 3, 24, 49-50, etc., on the one hand, and 18-19, 51, etc., on the other.
21. Sayings about being solitary or a single one (4, 11, 16, etc) and about the bridal chamber (75, 104) join with theme of return to an androgynous state in stressing sexual asceticism wherein celibate or virginal practice is the ideal offered the reader.
22. Menard, "Gospel of Thomas," 904.
23. "Interpretation," 111 in M. Meyer, The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

24. In this case one would have to disagree with Crossan's judgment that "the Gospel of Thomas is precisely on the ambiguous borderline between Gnostic and Catholic Christianity" (Four Other Gospels, 34) and to insist instead that Thomas lies on the borderline between orthodox Christianity and classical Gnosticism, drawing from one and from the other the traditional, doctrinal, and anthropological elements with which it constructs its Christology and soteriology.

25. The Quest for the Historical Jesus; see E. Richard, Jesus: One and Many. The Christological Concept of New Testament Authors (Wilmington: Glazier, 1988) 26; see also 516-19.