The View from Across the Euphrates

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Introduction

This essay is about broadening the perspective from which we view the origins of Christianity. The vehicle is a gospel by now perhaps as familiar to students of the New Testament as the canonical four, the *Gospel of Thomas*. It is well known among specialists that the content of this gospel overlaps with that of the synoptic tradition roughly by half. Also well known, perhaps, is that it presents this commonly-held content in a very different form, the sayings collection, and by consequence, under the supposition of a different theological paradigm: wisdom theology. So, here is a different gospel, a wisdom gospel, in which the words (λόγοι) of Jesus take center stage. Since Helmut Koester and James M. Robinson placed it within the context of Walter Bauer's theory about the diverse nature of earliest Christianity,[1] the *Gospel of Thomas* has become a prime illustration of that diversity. It can help us see the potential of the Jesus tradition to develop in directions we could scarcely fathom before. But can it tell us more?

When one compares the *Gospel of Thomas* with the much better-known canonical gospels, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, one immediately notices some clear differences, long noted as absences in this new and unusual gospel: Thomas lacks a passion narrative and is almost completely devoid of interest in the death of Jesus. Thomas also lacks the great apocalyptic speeches from Mark and Q (which also find their way into Matthew and Luke), as well as the apocalyptic cast of much of the material common to both Thomas and the synoptic tradition. Finally, not often noted, and perhaps only true by a matter of degree, one might further observe

[1] Helmut Koester and James M. Robinson, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), especially the essay "*LOGOI SOPHON*: On the Gattung of Q" (71–113) by Robinson and "*GNOMAI DIAPHOROI*: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity" (114–57) and "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels" (158–204) by Koester. For the full publication history of Robinson's essay, see no. 8.

HTR 104:4 (2011) 411–31

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816011000381 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the absence of the intense anti-Jewish rhetoric that characterizes the canonical gospels at certain key points. Why are these features absent from the *Gospel of Thomas*? In what follows I will offer what I believe is an answer to this question. In so doing, I will also raise another question that should be equally obvious and compelling to students of the New Testament: Why are these features present in the synoptic gospels?

It is the premise of this essay that the *Gospel of Thomas* is not simply a new focal point in the diversity of early gospel traditions. It can also be a vantage point from which to gain new perspective on other, more familiar early traditions. Much of what we see in the canonical tradition is taken for granted as original, natural, and normative. The canonical story is the Christian story because it is seen as the original story. Jesus is the messiah who comes into the world, is rejected and crucified, but in the end is raised from the dead. This is Mark's story, the synoptic story; and though John's details diverge widely from Mark and the other synoptic gospels, the broad strokes of its story are the same. But is this in fact the original, natural story? Mark's story was penned many years after the actual life and times of Jesus. It resembles John's story not so much because they both know the real story, but because they both knew how to write a martyr's story.[2] Paul, too, knows this tradition of the noble death and formulates his kerygma accordingly.[3] But it is an interpretation, an effort to render meaningful the memory of Jesus in a particular cultural context and in light of a particular experience: the experience of living as a dissident within the Roman Empire. Jesus was in fact executed as a dissident in the Roman Empire. This was a fact to which his dissident followers could relate, and so, their stories focus on Jesus' martyrdom: his life, death, and redemption. But was it the only way Jesus might be remembered?

In this essay I wish to offer some observations first about the *Gospel of Thomas* and its geographic home—Edessa and the region east of the Euphrates River. The memory of Jesus that is cultivated through the *Gospel of Thomas* is very different. But, then, so was the cultural context in which it arose. Edessa, east of the Euphrates, was not a Roman city. It was an independent city-state, a caravan

[2] On the martyr's story as the template by which Mark's passion narrative was created, see George Nickelsburg, "The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative," *HTR* 73 (1980) 153–84; also idem, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (HTS 26; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981, repr., expanded ed.: *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity*; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Divinity School, 2006). Whether John made use of Mark for the passion narrative, or shared with Mark an earlier source, which was itself shaped according to the canons of the wisdom tale, is not important for our purposes here. The significance of Nickelsburg's work is that it demonstrates the extent to which the canonical story is a conventional story and a conventional stratagem for interpreting the premature death of a hero. For John and martyrdom, see Paul Minear's study, *John: The Martyr's Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim, 1984).

[3] Sam Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event: The Background and Origin of a Concept* (HDR 2; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1975); David Seeley, *The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul's Concept of Salvation* (JSNTS 28; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816011000381 Published online by Cambridge University Press

town, a place where people from across the Levant met, through which they passed, and where they sometimes settled. These differences—in text and context—are not incidental. The *Gospel of Thomas* turns out to be well suited to its environment and the questions that came with it. In what follows, I will explore this relationship between the *Gospel of Thomas* and the context from which it emerged. But then I wish to use Thomas as a vantage point from which to gaze back across the boundary that was the Euphrates River, and ask whether Mark and the rest of the canonical tradition makes more sense now in its geographic home. In the end I hope to have shown that the relative absence of reflection on Jesus' death, apocalypticism, and anti-Jewish polemic in Thomas is not to be seen as a divergence from the more original, natural canonical tradition, but as a difference that exposes the canonical tradition as contingent in its own way.

The *Gospel of Thomas*: Assumptions

My argument is predicated on certain assumptions that cannot be defended fully in this limited context. I enumerate these assumptions below. None is idiosyncratic, although, as is the case with most historical premeses, none is beyond dispute.

1) The *Gospel of Thomas* represents an autonomous development of the Jesus tradition that is more or less independent of the synoptic tradition. This is not to say that our present Coptic manuscript is devoid of all influence from the synoptic texts—either at the later stages of scribal transmission, or even at earlier stages where "secondary orality" might have resulted in cross-influence between the synoptic gospels and the text of Thomas. Still, it is becoming clearer to students of this gospel that it was not composed by an author who went about extracting sayings from one or another of the synoptic gospels.[4] In other words, in the *Gospel*

[4] This question has proven to be a thorny problem in the history of the Thomas discussion. My own view, strongly shaped by John Sieber's unpublished dissertation ("A Redactional Analysis of the Synoptic Gospels with regard to the Question of the Sources of the Gospel of Thomas," Ph.D. diss., Claremont, 1966) was laid forth in *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge, 1993) 9–110; more recently I renewed this argument in a more nuanced way in "The Gospel of (Judas) Thomas and the Synoptic Problem," in *The Oxford Conference in the Synoptic Problem* (ed. John Kloppenborg et al.; Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming). For an older review of the literature see Stephen J. Patterson, "The Gospel of Thomas and the Synoptic Tradition: A Forschungsbericht and Critique," *Forum* 8 (1992) 45–97. More recent proposals have made the discussion even more complex, including especially that of Hans-Martin Schenke, "On the Compositional History of the Gospel of Thomas," *Forum* 10 (1994) 9–30. Schenke argues on the basis of a series of apparent narrative spurs in Thomas that its sayings were drawn from a narrative work, but not one of our known gospels. The idea of "secondary orality," first promulgated by Kline Snodgrass some years ago ("The Gospel of Thomas: A Secondary Gospel," *SecCent* 7 [1989–1990] 19–38), has been revived by Risto Uro in "*Thomas* and the Oral Gospel Tradition," in *Thomas at the Crossroads: Essays on the Gospel of Thomas* (ed. Risto Uro; Studies of the New Testament and Its World; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 8–32, as a way of arguing for Thomas's dependence on the synoptic gospels in some cases, while acknowledging evidence in Thomas of a certain freedom over against the synoptic text themselves. Similarly, Jens Schröter argues that the synoptic formulation of sayings has influenced Thomas in specific instances, but rejects the direct literary dependence of Thomas

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816011000381 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Thomas we have fundamental evidence for the potential of the Jesus tradition to develop differently, rather than evidence for the once-cherished assumption that non-canonical traditions tend to corrupt canonical ones.

2) The *Gospel of Thomas* is a list, and therefore was likely written in many stages over many years.[5] This makes it very difficult to date. Some of its sayings probably originated with Jesus, and could well come from early collections of Jesus sayings that were later gathered together into the *Gospel of Thomas*; others will have been added relatively late, even as late as the fourth century, when our sole surviving complete copy of the text was created by an anonymous Coptic scribe. Nonetheless, as I have argued elsewhere, the relative paucity of influence from the synoptic texts, together with the relative simplicity of many of its synoptic

upon the synoptic gospels (*Erinnerung an Jesu Worte: Studien zur Rezeption der Logienüberlieferung in Markus, Q und Thomas* [WMANT 76; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997] *passim*). While variation and nuance now characterize the discussion, a consensus around the position of basic independence, or autonomy is beginning to emerge. There are exceptions: the recent study by Nicholas Perrin (*Thomas and Tatian: The Relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and the Diatessaron* [Academia Biblica 5; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002]) revives the older thesis of Han Drijvers ("Facts and Problems in Early Syriac-Speaking Christianity," *SecCent* 2 [1982] 157–75) that Thomas is dependent on Tatian's *Diatessaron*. Another exceptaion is Harry Fleddermann's theory that Thomas is dependent on Mark based on the hypothesis that Mark is dependent on Q; see his *Mark and Q: A Study of the Overlap Texts* (Leuven: Peeters, 1995). Neither of these novel contributions has attracted a following among Thomas specialists.

[5] The fact and its implications was pointed out first, perhaps, by Robert McL. Wilson in "Thomas and the Growth of the Gospels," *HTR* 53 (1960) 231 (see also his *Studies in the Gospel of Thomas* [London: A. R. Mowbray, 1960] 9, 145). He called it the "snow-balling" effect, drawing from Henry Chadwick's similar observations made about another early sayings collection, the *Sentences of Sextus* (*The Sentences of Sextus: A Contribution to the History of Christian Ethics* [Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1959] 159). But many have made the point similarly; see, e.g., Ernst Haenchen, "Literatur zum Thomasevangelium," *ThR* 27 (1961/62) 306–7; Henri-Ch. Puech, "The Gospel of Thomas," in *New Testament Apocrypha* (ed. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher; trans. Robert McL. Wilson; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963; repr. of *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1959]) 1:305; Wolfgang Schrage, *Das Verhältnis des Thomas-Evangeliums zur synoptischen Tradition und zu den koptischen Evangelienübersetzungen: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur gnostischen Synoptikerdeutung* (BZNW 29; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1964) 10; Stephen J. Patterson, "The Gospel of Thomas and the Synoptic Tradition," 65; idem, "Understanding the Gospel of Thomas Today," in Stephen J. Patterson, James M. Robinson, and Hans–Gebhard Bethge, *The Fifth Gospel: The Gospel of Thomas Comes of Age* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998) 35–36; idem, "The Gospel of Thomas and the Historical Jesus," in *Coptica—Gnostica—Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (ed. Louis Paichaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier; Biblioteque Copte de Nag Hammadi, Section "Études" 7; Laval: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2006) 672–73; and Werner Kelber, "Die Anfangsprozesse der Verschriftlichung in Frühchristentum," *ANRW* 26.1:26: "Listen haben weder Anfang noch Ende." The general point is made also by Kevin V. Neller, "Diversity in the Gospel of Thomas: Clues for a New Direction?" *SecCent* 7 (1989/90) 1–17, and more recently by April DeConick in "The Original *Gospel of Thomas*," *VC* 56 (2002) 167–99, and then programmatically in her recent two-volume treatment of Thomas: *Recovering the Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth* (LNTS 286; London: T&T Clark, 2005), and *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation, with a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel* (LNTS 287; London: T&T Clark, 2006).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816011000381 Published online by Cambridge University Press

parallels, probably indicates that the collection we know as the *Gospel of Thomas* generally originated relatively early, before the synoptic gospels had reached their eventual ascendant status, and when oral tradition was still the dominant mode of communicating the Jesus tradition. A reasonable guess would be that the *Gospel of Thomas* originated in the closing decades of the first century, or perhaps the early second—in other words, that it was roughly contemporaneous with the canonical gospels.[6] For the purposes of the present argument, more precision than this is unnecessary.

3) The Gospel of Judas Thomas, as it should properly be called, comes originally from the region of Osrhoëne or eastern Syria, and more specifically from Edessa, the major town there. This position, which is widely held, rests on the identification of Judas Thomas with Edessa, a connection that appears to be very old.[7] This is

[6] Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 113–18. This conclusion is hardly original; see, e.g., the remarks of Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt regarding P. Oxy. 1 in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (London: Henry Frowde [for the Egypt Exploration Fund] 1904) 1:2: "(it is) earlier than 140 A.D., and might go back to the first century"; similarly Helmut Koester, "Introduction" (to the Gospel According to Thomas) in *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2–7 together with XII,2*, Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1), and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655* (ed. Bentley Layton; 2 vols.; NHS 20–21; The Coptic Gnostic Library; Leiden: Brill, 1989) 1:39–41; or more recently Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel According to Thomas* (New Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1997) 12–21, who dates it to the early second century. Older estimates of a mid-second century date usually mistakenly credited Grenfell and Hunt with this view; see e.g., Puech, "Gospel of Thomas," 305; Wilson, *Studies*, 7; Bertil Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961) 271–72; Haenchen, "Literatur," 155; Johannes Leipoldt, *Das Evangelium nach Thomas Koptisch und Deutsch* (TU 101; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1967) 17. The argument for a very late date, after the appearance of Tatian's *Diatessaron*, made first by Drijvers ("Facts and Problems," 172–3) and recently revived by Perrin (*Thomas and Tatian*), fails to reckon with the date of P. Oxy. 1 at the end of the 2d cent./ beginning of the 3rd cent. Attempts to date it earlier, say on the basis of formal similarity to Q (e.g., Stevan Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Wisdom* [New York: Seabury, 1983] 14–17) also skate on thin ice.

[7] See Puech, "The Gospel of Thomas," 286; Gilles Quispel, "L'Évangile selon Thomas et les Clémentines," *VC* 12 (1958) 181–96; idem, "L'Évangile selon Thomas et le Diatessaron," *VC* 13 (1959) 87–117; idem, "The Syrian Thomas and the Syrian Macarius," *VC* 18 (1964) 226–35; idem, "L'Évangile selon Thomas et les origins de l'ascése Chrétienne," in *Aspects du judéo-christianisme : Colloque de Strasbourg 23–25 avril 1964. Travaux du Centre d'études supérieures spécialisé d'histoire des religions de Strasbourg* (Bibliothèque des Centre d'études supérieures spécialisés; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965) 35-52; Wilson, *Studies,* 10; Gärtner, *Theology,* 271–72; A. F. J. Klijn, "Das Thomasevangelium und das altsyrische Christentum," *VC* 15 (1961) 146–59; idem, "Christianity in Edessa and the Gospel of Thomas: On Barbara Ehlers, Kann das Thomasevangelium aus Edessa stamen?" *NovT* 14 (1972) 70–77; Koester, "*GNOMAI DIAPHOROI*," 126–28; idem, *Introduction to the New Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 2:152; idem, "Introduction," (*The Gospel of Thomas*) 40; idem, *Ancient Christian Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990) 79; Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1987) 360–64, 377; John D. Crossan, *Four Other Gospels* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston, 1985) 23–26; Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 118–20; Neller, "Diversity in the Gospel of Thomas," 7–8; Jens Schröter and Hans–Gebhard Bethge, "Das Evangelium nach Thomas [Einleitung]," in *NHC I,1–V,1* (vol. 1 of *Nag Hammadi Deutsch*; ed. Hans-Martin Schenke, Hans-Gebhard Bethge, and Ursula Ulrike Kaiser; Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte 2/8; Koptisch-gnostische Schriften 2; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001) 151–63, at 156–57; Uwe-Karsten Plisch, *Gospel of Thomas: Original Text with Commentary* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2008) 17–22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816011000381 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not to say that parts of the collection may not have originated elsewhere—perhaps Jerusalem, where James "the Just" (*Gos. Thom.* 12) was likely a key figure. But the *Gospel of Thomas* as a whole appears to have been at home in Edessa, both in its apostolic claim and in its theological orientation. As we shall soon see, it shares with other early Christian texts from Edessa a tendency to read the Jesus tradition in a "Platonizing" way.

In these basic assumptions the initial course of this essay is suggested. First, we shall ask about the distinctive theological voice of the *Gospel of Thomas*. Second, we shall ask what is distinctive about Edessa in the family of ancient cities that played host to early Christian communities. Finally, we shall see if the answers to these first two questions are illuminating when considered together.

What is Distinctive About the *Gospel of Thomas*?

Thomas is a very different gospel. It is a wisdom gospel.[8] Formally this is seen in the focus on Jesus' wise and revelatory words: Thomas is a sayings collection. The first saying in the collection asserts this orientation: "Whoever finds the meaning of these words will not taste death" (*Gos. Thom.* 1).[9] As with many sayings collections, Thomas invites a certain hermeneutic of sustained reflection,[10] admonishing "the one who seeks to continue seeking until he finds" (*Gos. Thom.* 2). It is within this framework that Thomas includes dozens of aphorisms and parables of Jesus, many of them familiar: "Love your brother like your soul" (*Gos. Thom.* 25); "When you cast the beam out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to cast the speck from your brother's eye" (*Gos. Thom.* 26); "Do not be concerned from morning until evening about what you shall wear" (*Gos. Thom.* 36); "Grapes are not harvested from thorns" (*Gos. Thom.* 45). The form of these aphorisms is well-suited to the wisdom genre, as they invite reflection. So do the parables: a fisher who releases his entire catch only to retain a single large and beautiful fish (*Gos. Thom.* 8); a sower who sows carelessly and yet still reaps an abundant harvest (*Gos. Thom.* 9); a rich farmer who dies before he can enjoy his wealth (*Gos. Thom.* 63)—the parables are stories designed to spark the imagination and encourage deeper thought.

But there is more to Thomas's theological framework than the simple sayings collection form would suggest. The wisdom theology espoused in the *Gospel of Thomas* was steeped in the thought of Plato, especially as it reemerged in the late

[8] The point was originally made with respect to form by James M. Robinson in "*LOGOI SOPHON*: Zur Gattung der Spruchquelle," in *Zeit und Geschichte: Dankesgabe on Rudolf Bultmann* (ed. E. Dinkler; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1964) 77–96; revised: "*LOGOI SOPHON*: On the Gattung of Q," in Robinson and Koester, *Trajectories,* 71–113. It has been underscored more recently with respect to content by Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom,* and Thomas Zöckler, *Jesu Lehren im Thomasevangelium* (NHMS 47; Leiden: Brill, 1999).

[9] The translation of all materials from the *Gospel of Thomas* are that of the author.

[10] John Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (SAC; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 302, 305.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816011000381 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hellenistic renaissance of Platonic thinking known as Middle Platonism.[11] In this gospel the search for Jesus' kingdom of God begins with the self: "The kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, you will become known and you will realize you are children of the living Father" (*Gos. Thom.* 3). "Know thyself"—one marks in this restatement of the Delphic Maxim the influence of Platonism, which is manifest not only in saying 3 but throughout this gospel.[12] Those who read and valued the *Gospel of Thomas* would have been at home among those Hellenized Jews who held the Jewish scriptures in one hand and Plato in the other.[13] Like other Jews who shared this philosophical interest, those who read Thomas might have found a certain concurrence between Plato and Genesis. Like Philo, they perhaps would have read Genesis 1:27 and thought of the first human, Adam, as both male and female, an androgyne ("male and female he created them"), and believed that the perfect unified form of male and female was the ideal human state to which everyone might one day return (*Gos. Thom.* 22).[14] They would have read Gen 2:7 and seen there the echoes of Plato's anthropology: that a person consists of both a body (σῶμα) and a soul (ψυχή) conjoined in an oft-troubled mixture (*Gos. Thom.* 87, 112), but that each person also possesses a spirit (πνεῦμα), a piece of the divine dwelling as a resident alien within the mortal

[11] The interpretation of the *Gospel of Thomas* as deeply influenced by Middle Platonism is argued more fully by the author in "Jesus Meets Plato: The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas," in *Das Thomasevangelium, Entstehung—Rezeption—Theologie* (ed. Jörg Frey, Enno Edzard Popkes, and Jens Schröter; BZNW 157; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008) 181–205. The influence of Plato in this gospel is also argued by Jon Ma. Asgiersson, "Conflicting Epic Worlds," in *Thomasine Traditions in Antiquity: The Social and Cultural World of the Gospel of Thomas* (ed. Asgiersson, April DeConick, and Risto Uro; NHMS 59; Leiden: Brill, 2006). See also Howard Jackson, *The Lion Becomes the Man: The Gnostic Leontomorphic Creator and the Platonic Tradition* (SBLDS 81; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1983) for the Platonic background for saying 7. Others have also indicated in passing the relevance of Middle Platonic concepts to Thomas: Hans–Gebhard Bethge and Jens Schröter, "Das Evangelium nach Thomas [Einleitung]," 155; Enno Edzard Popkes, *Das Menschenbild des Thomasevangeliums. Untersuchungen zu seiner religionsgeschichtlichen und chronologischen Einordnung* (WUNT 206; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 331–33; the assumption of Bethge, Schröter, and Popkes that such Platonic speculation would take Thomas decisively out of the Jewish milieu and into a later time frame is unwarranted.

[12] Patterson, "Jesus Meets Plato," 184–86. For the significance of the Delphic maxim in Middle Platonism see Hans-Dieter Betz, "The Delphic Maxim ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ in Hermetic Interpretation," *HTR* 63 (1970) 465–84.

[13] Many scholars have noted the relationship of Thomas's theology to Hellenistic Judaism, including Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (also, later, his essay "The Christology and Protology of the Gospel of Thomas," *JBL* 111 [1992] 662–82); John Dominic Crossan, *Four Other Gospels*, 31–35; and Elaine Pagels, "Exegesis of Genesis 1 in Gospel of Thomas and John," *JBL* 118 (1999) 477–96.

[14] See, e.g., Philo, *Opif.* 134; for discussion see esp. A. F. J. Klijn, "The 'Single One' in the Gospel of Thomas," *JBL* 81 (1962) 271–78. The idea may derive originally from Plato, *Symp.* 189D–192E; for discussion see Dennis R. MacDonald, *There is No Male and Female: The Fate of a Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism* (HDR 20; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 25–26.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816011000381 Published online by Cambridge University Press

human being (*Gos. Thom.* 29).[15] They might also have thought of this spirit as the image of God, the true self concealed within the earthly self (*Gos. Thom.* 84)—a concept familiar both to Middle Platonists and to Hellenistic Jews with an interest in philosophy.[16] The goal in this tradition was to recover the lost image of God (*Gos. Thom.* 22) and return to the heavenly realm of the Father, whence all the elect, the "children of the living Father," have originally come (*Gos. Thom.* 49–50). The elect are "people of light" (*Gos. Thom.* 24; cf. *Gos. Thom.* 61, 83), who have "come from the light," and who will someday return to the "place where the light came into being" (*Gos. Thom.* 50).[17]

The world in this tradition is not evil—a fact that distinguishes this view from what is commonly known as Gnosticism. It is simply something dead (*Gos. Thom.* 56, 80), and as such a distraction (*Gos. Thom.* 21, 28), which one should rightly view as inferior and unworthy of devotion (*Gos. Thom.* 110–111). Withdrawal from the world is therefore appropriate; a temperate strain of asceticism is probably to be presupposed.[18] People should "fast from the world" (*Gos. Thom.* 27). Many of the countercultural sayings of Jesus, which are familiar from the synoptic gospels and appear here as well, are to be understood in this light: "No prophet is accepted in his own village" (*Gos. Thom.* 31); "Whoever does not hate his father and mother cannot be my disciple" (*Gos. Thom.* 55); "If you have money . . . give it to someone from whom you will not get it back" (*Gos. Thom.* 95); "Seek his unfailing and enduring treasure, where no moth comes near to devour and no worm destroys" (*Gos. Thom.* 76). In this way, the platonizing worldview of the *Gospel of Thomas* provided a home for those world-denying sayings of Jesus that placed him at odds with many who heard him in the early days of the Jesus movement.[19]

Missing from this picture are some of the staples of early Christianity as commonly conceived. First, as noted above, there is no passion narrative in Thomas, and very little interest in Jesus' death. In saying 55 Jesus does speak of taking up one's own cross "in my way," but the concern here is with emulating Jesus' lifestyle,

[15] For this typically Middle Platonic anthropology see, e.g., Plutarch, *Mor. (de facie)* 943A; Philo, *Leg.* 2.2, etc. The Platonic seed of this idea is to be found in *Tim.* 30AB and *Phaedr.* 247C–248B. For a discussion of these ideas in Thomas, see Patterson, "Jesus Meets Plato," 186–90. Asgiersson also sees the Platonic framework behind these sayings, but assumes that they take a more polemical stance over against the Genesis account ("Conflicting Epic Worlds," 162–71).

[16] For the true self as the image of God, see e.g., *Alc* 1.133BC; for the concept among the later Middle Platonists and Stoics, see, e.g., Cicero, *Leg.* 1.22.59; Seneca, *Ep.* 31.11; Philo, *Opif.* 69; for discussion of the various other Jewish expressions of the idea, see Jacob Jervell, *Imago Dei* (FRLANT 76; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960); Hans-Martin Schenke, *Der Gott "Mensch" in der Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962) 120–43; and Jarl Fossum, "Gen 1:26 and 2:7 in Judaism, Samaritanism, and Gnosticism," *JSJ* 16 (1985) 202–39.

[17] See Seneca, *Ep.* 102.21–28; Plutarch, *Mor. (de facie)* 943–945; Philo, *Opif.* 70–1; for discussion, see Patterson, "Jesus Meets Plato," 196–97.

[18] On the asceticism of the *Gospel of Thomas* see Richard Valantasis, "Is the Gospel of Thomas Ascetical? Revisiting an Old Problem with a New Theory," *JECS* 7 (1999) 55–81.

[19] On the continuity of the Thomas Christianity with the social radicalism of the early Jesus movement, see Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 121–214.

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not the development of a theological interpretation of his death.[20] The resurrection of Jesus also is not in view. Although some have argued that the Christological designation "living Jesus" in the Prologue to the gospel ought to be equated with the "risen Jesus," so that the entire collection would presuppose the resurrection,[21] the theological perspective of Thomas is protological, not eschatological. What matters is not the end but the beginning, when God created the human one and breathed into him the divine spirit, the breath of life, immortality. In Thomas the "living Jesus" is the *immortal* Jesus who brings to others the secret of immortality.[22]

Second, there is in Thomas little of what might be called the apocalyptic perspective so much in evidence in the canonical text. As noted, it assumes the protological perspective of much of Hellenistic Judaism, in which things ultimately return to their primordial original perfection. For this reason, sayings that carry an apocalyptic perspective are rare in the *Gospel of Thomas*—though not absent entirely.[23] There is simply no attempt to describe the world or current events in apocalyptic terms.

Third, the polemical engagement with other forms of early Judaism is very little in evidence in Thomas. The "Pharisees and scribes" appear as the subject of criticism in *Gos. Thom.* 39; the Pharisees are cursed in *Gos. Thom.* 102; and in

[20] Other possible allusions to Jesus' death are few and equivocal: *Gos. Thom.* 12 refers to a time when Jesus will be absent; *Gos. Thom.* 71 commands "destroy this house," but the reference is unclear; saying 66, alongside saying 65, appears to refer to Jesus' death/resurrection (compare Mark 12:10–11), but, presented as a separate saying, it may have a different referent altogether (see John Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine* [WUNT 195; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006] 257).

[21] So, e.g., Robert M. Grant and David Noel Freedman, *The Secret Sayings of Jesus* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960) 118; Gärtner, *Theology,* 98; Jacque–E. Ménard, *L'Évangile selon Thomas* (NHS 5; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 76–77.

[22] So, variously, Joseph Fitzmyer, "The Oxyrhynchus Logoi of Jesus and the Coptic Gospel according to Thomas," in idem, *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (SBLSBS 5; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1974) 368–9; Leipoldt, *Evangelium nach Thomas,* 55; Koester, "One Jesus, Four Primitive Gospels," 167; James M. Robinson, "Jesus—From Easter to Valentinus (Or to the Apostles' Creed)," *JBL* 101 (1982) 23; Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 81–85; Marvin Meyer, "The Beginning of the Gospel of Thomas," *Semeia* 52 (1990) 164–65.

[23] Sayings 11 and 111 might be considered apocalyptic; sayings 10 and 16 are apocalyptic sayings in their synoptic contexts, but here less clearly so; the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (*Gos. Thom.* 57) could be understood as an allegory for the apocalypse, as it probably is in Matthew (13:24–30). Margaretha Lelyveld's attempt to ground Thomas more thoroughly in Jewish apocalyptic (*Les Logia de la vie dans l'Évangile selon Thomas* [NHS 34; Leiden: Brill, 1987]) has met with little support in the literature. More recently DeConick has tried to identify an early apocalyptic core of speeches in Thomas (*Recovering the Gospel of Thomas*, 113–55), but most of the sayings she considers to be apocalyptic are not necessarily so. Often the saying in question takes on an apocalyptic cast—either by context, or through allegorization—in the synoptic tradition, which is missing in Thomas. Thomas's Parable of the Feast (saying 64), for example, is considered by DeConick to have apocalyptic significance. In Matthew and Luke (and perhaps Q) it does, but in Thomas there is nothing to suggest it. One of the most distinctive things about the Thomas tradition is that so many of the apocalyptic sayings and parables from the synoptic tradition are found here as wisdom or prophetic sayings and simple metaphoric stories.

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Gos. Thom. 43 the disciples are compared unfavorably to "the Jews." Otherwise, a handful of sayings take up questions that Jews moving in Gentile areas would find relevant: *Gos. Thom.* 14 (on eating unclean foods), 53 (on the necessity of circumcision), and 89 (on ritual washing). But there is nothing like the sustained argument against the "scribes and Pharisees" one finds all through the Gospel of Mark, let alone the extended diatribe against the Pharisees in Matthew 23, the extended rants against "the Jews" in John, or the decision reflected in the passion narrative to lay blame for the death of Jesus at the feet of the Jews. In Thomas the anti-Jewish polemic is minimal.[24]

Before leaving this subject it should be noted that much of what has been said here about the *Gospel of Thomas* can also be said about the other texts we might count as evidence for Christianity as it developed east of the Euphrates in the region of Edessa up to the end of the second century. This would include the other texts associated with Thomas: the Acts of Thomas and the Book of Thomas (the Contender), as well as the *Odes of Solomon*, Tatian's *Oratio ad Graecos*, Bardaisan's *Liber Legum Regionum*, and (perhaps) also the *Gospel of Philip*. All of these texts share to an extent the orientation to Platonism—or Middle Platonism—found in Thomas, as well as, of course, the brand of Hellenistic Judaism reflected in Philo of Alexandria.[25] And the absences we have just noted are just as noteworthy in these texts as well. The cross is mentioned just once in the Odes of Solomon (27.3), and Ode 42 is probably a meditation on Jesus' death as God's persecuted righteous one. But beyond this the death of Jesus plays virtually no role in this literature. Apocalyptic is also foreign to it. Tatian speaks of a resurrection of the dead at the end of time,[26] but this is not accompanied by an apocalyptic scenario; likewise, Bardaisan apparently spoke of a new world to come, but it was not to be ushered in with violent signs of the times.[27] The Book of Thomas borrows the Greek notion

[24] The point is perhaps debatable—see, e.g., Antti Marjanen, "Thomas and Jewish Religious Practices," in Uro, ed., *Thomas at the Crossroads*, 163–82. But Paul argues against circumcision and abrogates kashrut, and yet by most accounts should still be understood as he understood himself, that is, as a Jew. To engage in debate over Jewish practices, especially in the context of the Jewish diaspora, is not necessarily a manifestation of anti-Judaism. In any event, the pertinent point is that the Thomas community did not engage in recrimination against their fellow Jews, blaming them for the death of Jesus or even the destruction of Jerusalem in the Jewish revolt.

[25] The influence of Middle Platonism on Tatian is extensive; see Martin Elze, *Tatian und seine Theologie* (Forschungen zur Kirken-und Dogmengeschichte; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960) 27–33; and Han Drijvers, "Early Syriac Christianity: Some Recent Publications," *VC* 50 (1996) 173. For Bardaisan, see Han Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (SSN 6; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966) 96–126 and 218–25. In the *Acts of Thomas* the Hymn of the Pearl is probably to be understood as the Platonic journey of the soul in mythic form (Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 367); for Middle-Platonic anthropology, see esp. *Act. Thom.* 94. The *Book of Thomas (the Contender)* advocates asceticism based on a Platonic anthropological dualism (see John Turner, "The Book of Thomas the Contender [II,7]" in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* [ed. James M. Robinson; rev. ed.; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988] 200; also, generally, Drijvers, "Facts and Problems," 174).

[26] *Or. ad Graec.* 6.

[27] *Book of the Laws of the Countries* (trans. Han Drijvers; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1965) 63.

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of Hades, with its fiery torments, but restricts this idea to the afterlife.[28] In general, this literature is simply not interested in an apocalyptic interpretation of current events. Finally, most of these works presuppose the Jewish identity of both author and audience and reveal no animosity between the Jesus-followers who might have read or heard them and the larger Jewish community of which they seem to have been a part. Only the Gospel of Philip suggests that the term "Hebrew" designates someone who is something less than enlightened.[29] To be sure, there were probably a good number of Marcionites in the area later,[30] but our second century sources do not reveal a Marcionite orientation, and Bardaisan is said by Eusebius to have written dialogues against them.[31] Tatian's conversion to Christianity came from reading the Jewish scriptures.[32]

Why are these things—reflection on Jesus' suffering and death, apocalyptic eschatology, and anti-Jewish polemic—absent from these texts? Were their authors unfamiliar with these themes in other early Christian literature? This seems doubtful. Tatian, recall, had been to Rome, studied with Justin, and created the *Diatessaron* from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And the *Gospel of Philip* is clearly familiar with a variety of New Testament texts, even quoting at one point from the passion narrative itself.[33] It is not that Jesus-followers in Edessa did not know one could interpret the Jesus tradition apocalyptically, or that Jesus-followers in other places saw Jesus' significance to lie primarily in his death. And they must surely have been aware of the animosity growing between Jesus-followers and other Jews further to the west. They must have known these things. They simply chose to go in another direction. Why? To answer this question we will need first to ask a little more about the place of their origin: Edessa.

Edessa, East of the Euphrates

Edessa was a caravan town located on the great road proceeding east from Antioch, the first place of consequence reached after crossing the Euphrates River at Zeugma.[34] It also hosted traffic on the north/south trade route connecting Armenia

[28] *Thom. Cont.* 142.26–143.7.

[29] *Gos. Phil.* 62.6.

[30] Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (trans. Robert Kraft et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 16–17.

[31] *Hist. eccl.* 4.30.1.

[32] *Or. ad Graec.* 29.1.

[33] *Gos. Phil.* quotes Mark 15:34 (see 68.26–28), and elsewhere refers to the tearing of the temple veil (see 84, 24–35).

[34] Modern treatments include A. F. J. Klijn, *Edessa, die Stadt des Apostels Thomas* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965); Judah B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970); Han Drijvers, "Hatra, Palmyra, and Edessa·Die Städte der syrisch-mesopotamischen Wüste in politischer, kulturgeschichtlicher und religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung," *ANRW* 2.8:863–96; Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 BC–AD 337* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) 472–81; and Steven K. Ross, *Roman Edessa: Politics and Culture on the Eastern Fringes of the Roman Empire, 114–242* C.E. (London: Routledge, 2001).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816011000381 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the north with Egypt to the south. Its location on ancient east/west and north/south trade routes would have made it a multicultural place in the late first and early second centuries, where elements of east and west, north and south met and mingled. In the mix were Greek-speaking Jews[35] who would have migrated up the trade routes from Syro-Palestine to settle in cities like Edessa and Nisibis. Adiabene, with its famous Jewish queens and kings, lay further east. The Jews in these cities seem to have flourished in the first two centuries C.E., and no doubt played an active role in the unique religious and intellectual culture thriving there.[36]

The *Gospel of Thomas* represents a development of the Jesus tradition that would have been at home—or at least relevant—in this environment. It offers a perspective on the worldly life of the caravan town—the fortunes made and lost, the temptation to immerse oneself in the shallow life of commerce and its various fleeting pleasures: "If you have money, do not lend (it) out at interest. Rather give [it] to someone from whom you will not get it (back)" (*Gos. Thom.* 95); "If you do not fast to the world, you will not find the kingdom" (*Gos. Thom.* 27); "Blessed are the beggars, for yours is the kingdom of heaven" (*Gos. Thom.* 54); "Become passers-by" (*Gos. Thom.* 42). It is easy enough to see how Thomas speaks to this cultural context with a clear alternative understanding of the life well-led—the countercultural wisdom of the Jesus tradition, dressed up with a dash of Plato's more sophisticated world-renouncing philosophy, is offered as the true wisdom of the living Jesus. Tatian's ideas, too, are at home here, as are those of Bardaisan in the second half of the second century, and later the *Acts of Thomas* and the *Book of Thomas*. All of them develop a Platonizing reading of the Jesus tradition that serves to relativize the claims of the world on the life of the Jesus-follower.

But there is something else to be noted about Edessa as well, something unique about it in the family of great cities that played host to Jesus-followers as they wandered out from the Jewish homeland: it lay east of the Euphrates River. At the end of the first century the Euphrates still marked the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. Edessa, like the other cities that lay beyond it, was an independent city-state loosely aligned with Rome's principal rival to the east, Parthia.[37] This was true until 114 C.E., when Trajan pushed across the Euphrates and began his major offensive against the Parthians, advancing all the way to the Persian Gulf before insurrection throughout the newly conquered lands forced him into retreat.[38] By 117

[35] Han Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (EPRO 82; Leiden: Brill, 1980) 190–2; idem, "Syrian Christianity and Judaism," in *The Jews Among the Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (ed. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak; London: Routledge, 1992) 127–29. Segal (*Edessa*, 42) notes that there are Jewish names as well as inscriptions in Hebrew and Greek in the cemetery of Kirk Magara. Jews buried there also carry Macedonian, Roman, and Parthian names.

[36] For a general account see Jacob Neusner, *A History of Jews in Babylonia*, vol. 1: *The Parthian Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

[37] Strabo. *Geogr.* 11.9.2; Dio Cass. 40.14; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 5.88; for discussion, see Michael Rostovtzeff, *Caravan Cities* (trans. D. and T. Talbot Rice; Oxford: Clarendon, 1932).

[38] On Trajan's Parthian War, see Ross, *Roman Edessa*, 30–33.

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C.E. he had withdrawn his forces back beyond the Euphrates and soon thereafter set sail for Rome. He died en route and was succeeded by Hadrian. But Hadrian, who had been governor in Syria, saw little promise in prosecuting Trajan's war in those vast territories east of the Euphrates, and so, the ancient river became once again the easternmost limit of Roman rule.[39] With minor exceptions, it remained so for another century, and Edessa continued to exist as an independent city-state until Caracalla made it a Roman colony in 214 C.E.[40] Edessa suffered at least one violent attack during Trajan's offensive,[41] but apart from this it was a place of relative peace, where Jews and Christians could blend into the cityscape and live free of serious conflict with the civic authorities.

This is really quite different from the experience of Jesus-followers living to the west, on the other side of the Euphrates, in what we will now call the Roman East. Consider especially the situation that must have obtained for Jesus-followers in western Syria at precisely the same time that the *Gospel of Thomas* was coming into use in eastern Syria. The Jews who lived in the Roman East were just then entering what would certainly become one of the most dangerous and tumultuous periods in their remembered history. The Judean revolt of 66–70 C.E. had just ended in disaster, the Temple was in ruins, and ahead lay the even more devastating Bar Kokhba rebellion, the second bookend to a period of deep distress and unrest in the Jewish homeland.[42] This was a time in which Jews living in places like Antioch, Damascus, and Caesarea-Philippi would have lived on edge. At the outbreak of the first revolt Josephus offers a troubling portrait of persecution and slaughter all throughout the region, as Greek cities purged their populations of Jews.[43] For the most part, Jesus-followers would have shared the fate of other Jews living in those regions. They too would have experienced the war and its aftermath as a dangerous and humiliating time. Let us take, to illustrate, the events that unfolded in Caesarea-Philippi immediately following the war, a city where John Wilson finds reason to locate those early Christian communities that developed the cycle of stories associated with Caesarea-Philippi in the synoptic gospels.[44] Josephus says that Titus took his troops there following the siege of Jerusalem to relax and recuperate in the spa-like atmosphere of Agrippa's famous capital.[45] With them they brought many prisoners of war (Josephus says thousands, perhaps exaggerating),

[39] Dio Cass. 68.33.

[40] Dio Cass. 78.12; Drijvers, "Hatra, Palmyra, and Edessa," 878–89; Segal, *Edessa*, 13–14.

[41] Dio Cass. 68.30; see Ross, *Roman Edessa*, 34–35.

[42] For discussion, see Maurice Sartre, *The Middle East Under Rome* (trans. Catherine Porter and Elizabeth Rawlings; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005) 117–31.

[43] *J.W.* 2.457–98.

[44] John Francis Wilson, *Caesarea Philippi: Banias, the Lost City of Pan* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004) 78–84. He discusses Peter's confession at Caesarea-Philippi (Mark 9:27–30 and pars.), the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8 and pars.), and the healing of the demon-possessed boy (Mark 9:14–29 and pars.).

[45] *J.W.* 7.23–25.

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whom Titus used in staged contests, games, and reenactments of battles won. On the occasion of the birthday of Titus's brother, Domitian, Josephus says that 2,500 Jewish captives were killed "in contests with wild beasts or one another or in the flames."[46] In Caesarea-Philippi, and in any number of other cities and towns in the Roman East, Jews, and among them the Jesus-followers, were facing difficult questions about the meaning of violence, the significance of history, and the trouble with being Jewish in the wake of the failed Judean revolt.

But elsewhere, further west, in Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome, the Jesus-followers did not find themselves any more at home in the Roman Empire. When Christians first appear on the Roman scene, it is because Nero chose to take advantage of their unpopularity and use them as scapegoats after the great Roman fire of 64 C.E.[47] When next we hear of them, in Bithynia-Pontus, it is because Pliny suspects them of disloyalty and has inquired of his emperor, Trajan, whether it is advisable to execute them because they refuse to sacrifice "to our gods."[48] We encounter this experience from the other side in the literature of the Jesus-followers themselves. Much earlier, in the 50s C.E., we have the correspondence of Paul writing to the Jesus-followers in Philippi from an imperial prison cell, apparently struggling to stay alive (Phil 1:19–26). It is worth noting that in this predicament, Paul finds solace in relating his own fate to that of Jesus, who also suffered and died at the hands of the empire, by recalling for his readers the hymn so well known now from Philippians 2:6–11. Later, at about the time that Trajan was approving Pliny's policy of executing recalcitrant Christians in Asia Minor, we have from the Roman East the letters of Ignatius, written as he was being transported to Rome for execution. He too finds meaning in his own death by relating his fate to that of Jesus: "Let there come to me fire and cross and fighting with wild animals . . . , only that I might hit the mark of Jesus Christ."[49] Like many martyrs in the Christian west, he drew a direct correlation between his own suffering, death, and hoped-for resurrection and Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. Moreover, his denunciations of docetism in the letters underscores how important this connection was for him: if Christ's suffering was to have real significance for his own real suffering, then Christ's suffering would need to have been real as well.[50]

None of this was the case in that far off place east of the Euphrates, where the Thomas gospel was at home. When Tatian left Rome after the death of his teacher, Justin Martyr, and returned home to his native Osrhöene, he was returning to an entirely different world. Here the Jesus-followers were part of the Jewish community. They were not dissidents in an empire intolerant of dissent. There were

[46] *J.W.* 7.37–38.

[47] Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Sulpicius Severus, *Chron.* 2.29.

[48] *Letters* 10.96–97.

[49] Ign. *Rom.* 5:3.

[50] So, e.g., Ign. *Trall* 10.1; Ign. *Smyrn* 2.1–3.3.

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no martyrs in Edessa.[51] They had not needed to survive two spasms of revolutionary violence, each countered by the overwhelming crush of Roman military power. The gospel that developed among these Jesus-followers was quite different, because their lives were quite different.

Difference Makes a Difference

By placing the *Gospel of Thomas* more clearly in its Edessene context, we are perhaps in a better position to understand why the *Gospel of Thomas* lacks some of the elements we have come to take for granted in the synoptic gospels: a focus on Jesus' death and resurrection, an apocalyptic scenario locating the gospel community near the end of the present era, and a running polemic with other Jewish groups—the scribes and the Pharisees, the priests, etc. These features are not present in the *Gospel of Thomas* because they were not relevant. Those who made use of this gospel in eastern Syria, east of the Euphrates, did not face death or serious persecution, so they did not spend time meditating on the death of Jesus. They did not face a cataclysmic war, so they did not turn to apocalyptic scenarios that could place that sort of violence in a theological context. And they seem to have blended into the Jewish community in Edessa in a relatively harmonious way such that anti-Jewish polemic would have been pointless. Context makes a difference. In Edessa, the caravan town, a different sort of Christianity grew up, one that found a resonance in the lives of men and women wishing to follow the wisdom of Jesus, to escape the shallowness of the worldly life of commerce, and to arrive at a self-understanding that lent dignity and value to each human being as a "child of the living Father."

Hopefully, this analysis will stand up as more or less a straightforward accounting of the distinct features of the *Gospel of Thomas*. Edessa was a different sort of place; from it emerged a different sort of gospel. But is that all Thomas might mean for our understanding of early Christianity? Is it simply an exotic relic from a little-known caravan town, a historical side-trip out to the heretical fringe, away from the more important centers of early Christianity in the west—Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, or Rome? It would be easy to fall into such presumptions, but they must be resisted. After all, the center is defined geographically and historically by one's own place and perspective. Edessa, too, was a center of nascent Christian activity. As such, it offers the historian a vantage point from which to gaze back across the Euphrates and see developments there—developments we have often taken for granted as original or natural—in a new light. Thomas demonstrates that the possibilities for interpreting the Jesus tradition were multiple. The cross and resurrection were not the only possible foci for early Christian preaching; the

[51] Cf. the remarks of Susan Ashbrook Harvey: "Christians in this region had little if any direct experience with persecution until the fourth century." ("Syria and Mesopotamia," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 1: *Origins to Constantine* [ed. Margaret Mitchell and Francis Young; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006] 363).

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coming apocalypse was not the only way of imagining the future; antipathy toward "the Jews" was not a necessity for early Christian self-definition. The absence of these elements from Thomas has elicited many explanations, including the one offered here. But their absence from Thomas should call with equal urgency for some explanation of their presence in the canonical tradition.

Consider: the canonical gospels were all written by Jesus-followers who lived as part of a dissident community within the Roman Empire. What is more, at least three of the four—Mark, Matthew, and John—were written during or in the aftermath of the Jewish War, and all gained prominence during the extraordinarily violent time bracketed by that war and the equally disastrous Bar Kokhba rebellion sixty years later. Their authors had considerable experience with violent death. They had considerable experience with the violence and chaos of war. And they had seen Jews intimidated and driven from their homes in the Roman East in the aftermath of the rebellion. Their questions are easily imagined. What is the meaning of death at the hands of your enemies? Does the violence and chaos of war have a larger purpose in some unseen plan? Why has disaster come upon our people, and are they, indeed, still our people? And so, the story of Jesus was told as the story of his martyrdom; his appearance was understood as part of a larger, divine plan, in which Jesus does cosmic battle with the forces of evil and chaos; and his own people would come to be seen as his principal enemies, whose demise at the hands of Rome's legions was the result of their own recalcitrant rejection of the messiah. As natural and original as the canonical story appears to those who have inherited it as scripture, when viewed from across the Euphrates looking back, it seems more clearly to have been a choice. What we have marked as an absence from the *Gospel of Thomas* is to be marked just as clearly as a presence in the canonical gospels. To narrate the story of Jesus as a martyrdom, as part of an unfolding cosmic drama, in which "the Jews" are cast in the role of adversaries—these are not simply the natural ingredients of the Jesus story. They were chosen for their value in asserting the meaning of contemporary events and the experience of Jesus-followers living as dissidents in the Roman Empire.

Choices

Far to the west of the Euphrates, and half a century before the Thomas gospel was becoming popular in Edessa, Paul sat down in another early Christian center to dictate a letter to a cluster of Jesus-communities he had helped to create in the Roman provincial capital of Corinth. Paul had likely fled Corinth little more than a year earlier after running into difficulties with Roman authorities there. It seems that a new teaching had now taken hold among the Corinthian Jesus-followers, a teaching that differed from Paul's own. But the new ideas were not terribly unlike the ideas we later encounter in the *Gospel of Thomas*.[52] Apparently some of the

[52] The Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom background of these chapters is well-known: Jacques Dupont, *Gnosis: La connaissance religieuse dans les épitres de Saint Paul* (Paris: Gabalda, 1949) 172–80;

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Corinthians had come to understand baptism as initiation into the teachings of certain great teachers—Paul, Peter, Apollos, even Christ (1:13–17).[53] It appears from Paul's rhetoric that some were presenting themselves as purveyors of word (λόγος) and wisdom (σοφία), conveyed as the secret teaching of God (μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ[54]) (2:1). These partisans must have understood themselves to be "spirituals" (πνευμάτικοι), though Paul disparagingly downgrades them to mere "psychic" (ψύχικος) or "fleshly" (σάρκινος) status (2:14; 3:1–4). From the rest of the letter we might infer that these "spirituals" engaged in asceticism (7:1–40). They also experimented liturgically with a gender-bending manner of dress (or possibly hairstyle[55]) when engaging in prayer and prophecy (1 Cor 11:2–16), so that in these moments of sacred communion with the divine, the male and the female would be one and the same, and the male would not be male, and the female would not be female (cf. *Gos. Thom.* 22).[56] And some had arrived at the conclusion that "there is no resurrection of the dead" (15:12). This last statement is, of course, a source of great controversy not to be settled here.[57] But Thomas offers another theological context for understanding Paul's charges of a realized eschatology in 1 Cor 4:8: "Already you are filled! Already you have become rich! Apart from us you have begun to rule!" Recall that in the *Gospel of Thomas* the search for insight leads one ultimately to "rule over the All."[58] And this can only mean that immortality—

Ulrich Wilckens, *Weisheit und Torheit. Eine exegetische-religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu 1. Kor 1 und* 2 (BHTh 26; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1959); Birger Pearson, *The PNEUMATIKOS-PSYCHIKOS Terminology in 1 Corinthians* (SBLDS 12; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1973); Richard Horsley, "PNEUMATIKOS vs. PSYCHIKOS: Distinctions of Spiritual Status among the Corinthians," *HTR* 69 (1976) 269–88. The tendency of Pearson and Horsley to use Jewish Wisdom categories (rather than "Gnosis") to account for the Corinthian position is to be preferred. For the relationship of this theological perspective to the *Gospel of Thomas* see Helmut Koester, "Gnostic Writings," 248–50; idem, *Ancient Christian Gospels,* 55–62; Stephen J. Patterson, "Paul and the Jesus Tradition: It is Time for Another Look," *HTR* 84 (1991) 36–40.

[53] For the likely role of baptism in the *Gospel of Thomas*, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Garments of Shame," *HR* 5 (1965/66) 235–36; Wayne Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *HR* 13 (1974) 193–94; and Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom*, 117–37.

[54] As the text reads in P^{46}.

[55] That the question in 11:2–17 is one of hair style rather than "veils" is shown by Jerome Murphy O'Connor, "Sex and Logic in 1 Cor 11:2–16," *CBQ* 42 (1980) 482–500; idem, "1 Corinthians 11:2–16. Once Again," *CBQ* 50 (1988) 265–74.

[56] That the background of the Corinthian practice was the myth of primordial androgyny well-known from Hellenistic Judaism and attested in the *Gospel of Thomas* is suggested by Meeks ("The Image of the Androgyne," 202) and argued in detail by Dennis R. MacDonald, *There is No Male and Female,* 92–111.

[57] For discussion, see Christopher Tuckett, "The Corinthians Who Say 'There is no resurrection of the dead.' (1 Cor 15,12)," in *The Corinthian Correspondence* (ed. Reimund Bieringer; BETL 125; Louvain: Peeters, 1996) 247–75.

[58] Koester makes note of the connection between *Gos. Thom.* 2 and Paul's ironic statement in 1 Cor 4:8b (*Ancient Christian Gospels*, 60); generally, see Ernst Haenchen, *Die Botschaft des Thomasevangeliums* (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 6; Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1961) 71–72.

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the "rest of the dead" (or possibly "resurrection of the dead")[59]—is not a future reality that lies beyond the grave, but a present state to be realized already now (*Gos. Thom.* 51).

It should not be surprising to find this kind of theologizing so early in the Jesus movement. After all, the philosophical tools that were available to the Edessene Christians at the end of the first century had been available for a long time. Philo of Alexandria, among Jews, had honed them to a fine edge. It is probably not just coincidence that they appear in Corinth simultaneously to the appearance of the wandering disciple from Alexandria, Apollos. They were, of course, also available to Paul, who appears to have mastered at least enough of the basics of this theology to conjure up a pretty fair imitation of it in his own counterargument to the partisans.[60] While his initial impulse is to eschew wisdom altogether (1:18–25), in 2:6–13 he famously reverses course and introduces his own true "secret and hidden wisdom of God" meant only for the mature (τέλειοι). It is in this context that Paul then quotes a saying from some as-yet unknown written source that bears a striking resemblance to saying 17 of the *Gospel of Thomas*:[61]

> "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him," God has given to us through the Spirit. (1 Cor 2:9–10a)

Compare:

> Jesus said, "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." (*Gos. Thom.* 17)

This saying, built perhaps upon Isa 64:4 and attributed to the *Apocalypse of Elijah* by Origen,[62] may also have been known to the author of Q, who includes a beatitude that appears closely related to it: "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see and the ears that hear what you hear . . ." (Luke 10:23; Matt 13:16).[63] Whatever the

[59] The Berliner Arbeitskreis für koptish-gnostische Schriften, whose text and translation of Thomas appears in the 15th edition of the *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, proposes that the text be emended at this point to read ἀνάστασις rather than ἀνάπαυσις, on the assumption that a scribe has assimilated the beginning of saying 51 to the end of saying 50; for discussion, see Plisch, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 132.

[60] So Pearson, *PNEUMATIKOS-PSYCHIKOS Terminology*, 27–42; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 57–60.

[61] The similarity was pointed out by Helmut Koester in "One Jesus, Four Primitive Gospels," 186; see also later, idem, "Gnostic Writings," 248–50; and idem, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 55–62; also Patterson, "Paul and the Jesus Tradition," 36–38.

[62] *Comm. Matt.* 5.29. For a critical evaluation of this attribution, however, see Josef Verheyden, "Origen on the Origin of 1 Cor 2,9," in *The Corinthian Correspondence*, 491–511.

[63] Koester, "One Jesus, Four Primitive Gospels," 186; idem, "Gnostic Writings," 249–50; see also James M. Robinson, "Kerygma and History in the New Testament," in idem and Koester, *Trajectories*, 42–43.

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saying's ultimate provenance,[64] what is of importance for our purposes here is the difference between Paul's use of the sayings and Thomas's. In Thomas it needs little explanation: Jesus the revealer speaks of the wisdom, hidden through the ages, which he now reveals. But this will not do for Paul. He must frame the saying in such a way as to move it exegetically in a very specific direction. Observe:

> Yet among the mature we do communicate wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are being made superfluous. We communicate a secret and hidden wisdom of God declared before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had known, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. But as it is written, "What no eye has seen . . ." (2:1–9)

In Paul's understanding, the reason he may speak of wisdom hidden from the world is the fact that the world revealed its ignorance by crucifying its messenger. Why is this? Why must Paul's understanding of Jesus first of all be defined by the crucifixion and the themes of suffering and humiliation that go with this concern? It is because for Paul, the life of the true apostle is defined by the prospect of rejection, even death (1 Cor 4:9). This is apparently how he experienced his own calling. The true apostle is a fool, not wise; weak, not strong; shamed, not honored; hungry, thirsty, poorly dressed, beaten up, and homeless (1 Cor 4:10–11). This is what Paul believes it means to follow Jesus, the crucified messiah. If Paul will tolerate any wisdom theology, it is only when it is qualified as cruciform wisdom—that is, "the foolishness of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18–25). He rejects the Corinthian wisdom theology because he fears it will denigrate the meaning of the crucifixion (1 Cor 1:17).[65] For this reason the *Gospel of Thomas* and its entire approach to the Jesus tradition would have been entirely inadequate to Paul, as the Corinthian wisdom teaching was. It simply did not make sense of his own experience as a follower of the crucified messiah, a dissident in a hostile empire. The authorities who crucified the messiah were the same authorities under which he would live and suffer. When he chose to follow this messiah, he understood himself to be choosing the way of the cross.

[64] For a thoughtful critique of Koester, Robinson, and the author's own position, see Christopher Tuckett, "Paul and the Jesus Tradition: The Evidence of 1 Corinthians 2:9 and Gospel of Thomas 17," in *Paul and the Corinthians: Studies on a Community in Conflict Essays in Honour of Margaret Thrall* (ed. Trevor Burke and J. Keith Elliott; NovTSup 109; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 55–73. Tuckett raises important questions about whether the same saying is reflected in Q 10:23 and whether Paul and the Corinthian partisans knew the saying as a saying of Jesus. He does not, however, dispute the striking similarity between the theological position of the Corinthian partisans and that of the *Gospel of Thomas*, which must also play a role in any explanation of the relationship between 1 Cor 2:9 and Thomas 17.

[65] So Birger Pearson, "Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom Speculation in Paul," in *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. R. L. Wilken; Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1975) 57–58.

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In the history of Christianity as it grew up in the west, it would be difficult to overestimate the defining effect this choice would come to have in the shaping of Christian faith. Paul, with his theology of the cross, became the great apostle of the west. He rejected the wisdom theology that would come to flourish in the lands east of the Euphrates. And so in the annals of Christian history this wisdom theology came to be known as the Corinthian heresy—unfit because it did not give due weight to the cross and the future-oriented apocalyptic eschatology favored by Paul. But this was clearly a choice. Paul's cross-theology seemed the only right choice for him because it interpreted his experience of suffering and humiliation, an experience he believed one could not avoid if one were truly to embrace the life of Jesus. But far to the east, east of the Euphrates, Christianity was taking hold in another world. In that world the Jesus-followers were not dissidents. They were not harassed by the authorities, imprisoned, or martyred; neither were their fellow Jews, among whom they settled. So their theological choices were different. They came to see Jesus as a wisdom teacher, a purveyor of words to be contemplated, interpreted, and followed. Their Jesus was not the crucified messiah in whom Paul found his compass. Their Jesus was the "living Jesus," whose insights would guide them back to the source of life, the "living Father." The faith of Jesus, it turns out, did not have relevance only for those who found themselves in the role of the dissident disciple of the dissident, crucified messiah. East of the Euphrates, beyond the bounds of Roman imperial authority, the faith of Jesus became relevant in a different way. Here his words became the key to wise living, and signaled the hope that the world of buying, selling, the embrace of conventional ambition, even family life, was not the end of things. To know oneself as a "child of the Living Father" was to know that there is more to life than this. This represents a very different theological choice.

The discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas* has opened the way to understanding how the Jesus tradition could develop in very different, sometimes surprising ways. But it has also opened the way to a deeper understanding of the more familiar texts and traditions that have come down to us as the New Testament. Paul, John, and especially the synoptic gospels have so shaped the way we understand earliest Christianity that it has become almost impossible to imagine Christian origins in a different way. The Pauline kerygma of the death and resurrection was, it seemed, *the* early Christian kerygma. *Of course* the sayings of Jesus would find their most natural frame in the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This is what we in the west have come to assume the religion of Jesus is all about. But against the alternative framework of the *Gospel of Thomas*, we can now see that this was not the only way the Jesus tradition could prove helpful to those who cherished and cultivated it in the years following Jesus' death. We can now see that the life, death, and resurrection framework represents a choice, a response to the common experience of being a dissident follower of the dissident messiah in the Roman imperial east. The religion of the crucified messiah was born in the crucible of protest

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816011000381 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and resistance. But the theological potential of the Jesus tradition was greater than just this. There is in the sayings of Jesus also a wisdom tradition that offers insight about life lived deeply, without regard for the merely transient, that watches for God in the midst of life, the kingdom of God, "spread out upon the earth," waiting for people to see it. The Jesus tradition was, and is, polyvalent.[66] Mark, Paul, John, Thomas—each represents a piece of the potential of this tradition to bring insight to a variety of human experiences and circumstances. This polyvalence invites the exploration of its variety and depth, a task too long delayed by a diminished vision of the acceptable range of its meaning.

[66] The term, originally coined by Crossan to describe the parables of Jesus (see, e.g., *Cliffs of Fall* [New York: Seabury, 1980]), has been revived by Jacobus Liebenberg to describe the Jesus tradition more broadly (*Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* [BZNW 102; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001]).

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