

The Gospel of Thomas

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INTRODUCTION

In 1945, or perhaps a year or two earlier, some peasants in Upper Egypt accidentally dug into an early Christian tomb. In it they found a large jar containing thirteen leather-bound papyrus codices. These codices proved to contain forty-eight or forty-nine separate works, mostly Coptic translations from Greek.¹ One of the codices was acquired by the Jung Institute in Zurich, whence it is now known as the Jung Codex.² Its chief importance lies in the fact that it contains a Coptic version of the *Gospel of Truth*, a speculative meditation on the Christian message emanating from the Valentinian school of Gnosticism, and quite possibly composed by Valentinus himself (c. A.D. 150).³ The remaining codices are housed in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, and it is one of these codices that contains the *Gospel of Thomas*.⁴

The discovery was made in the vicinity of the ancient town of Chenoboskion ('goose-pasture'), on the east bank of the Nile, about thirty miles north of Luxor. Here one of the earliest Christian monasteries was founded by Pachomius (c. A.D. 320). The documents are frequently referred to as the Nag Hammadi papyri, presumably because it was in Nag Hammadi, west of the river, that the discovery was first reported. Nag Hammadi is the nearest modern town to the scene of the discovery.

The documents belong to the fourth century A.D. or thereby, but the Greek originals were composed a century or two earlier. Some of

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them are known to have existed in the time of Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180), and some go back to the first half of the second century. Practically all of them are Gnostic treatises, and bear eloquent witness to the Gnostic influence in early Egyptian Christianity.

Gnosticism took a bewildering variety of forms, but basically it teaches salvation through knowledge (*gnosis*). Its underlying philosophy is a dualism which regards matter as inherently evil, the product of a demiurge or master-workman who is an inferior being to the Supreme God. The Supreme God, being pure spirit, naturally cannot allow Himself to contract defilement by coming into contact with matter in any way. (Hence Gnosticism cannot accept in their fullness the biblical doctrines of creation, incarnation or resurrection.) One Gnostic

¹ See W. C. van Unnik, *Newly Discovered Gnostic Writings* (London, 1960); J. Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (London, 1960).

² See F. L. Cross (ed.), *The Jung Codex* (London, 1955).

³ First edited by M. Malinine, H. C. Puech and G. Quispel, *Evangelium Veritatis* (Zürich, 1956); cf. K. Grobel, *The Gospel of Truth* (London, 1960).

⁴ First edited by A. Guillaumont, H. C. Puech, G. Quispel and Y. Abd al-Masih, *The Gospel according to Thomas* (Leiden and London, 1959). An excellent account is given by R. M. Grant and D. N. Freedman in *The Secret Sayings of Jesus*, with an English translation by W. R. Schoedel (London, 1960). Cf. also J. Doresse, *l'Évangile selon Thomas* (Paris, 1959).

Sect, the Naassenes,⁵ held the serpent (Hebrew *nahash*) in honour because he defied the ban which the demiurge had placed on the impartation of knowledge (this reinterpretation of the fall narrative of Genesis reminds us that the demiurge was commonly identified with the God of the Old Testament, as distinct from the God whom Jesus revealed). In this life men are souls imprisoned in material bodies; it is by true knowledge that they can be liberated from this imprisonment and from the entanglements of the material universe, and thus ascend to the upper world of light where the spiritual nature has its home. Jesus appears in Gnosticism as the redeemer who came to communicate this saving knowledge and effect this liberation; He communicated the knowledge to selected disciples in the interval between His resurrection and ascension, that they in turn might impart it to a spiritual élite.

Hitherto much of our knowledge about Gnosticism has been derived from orthodox writers like Irenaeus and Hippolytus who refuted the Gnostic systems in detail; now, when the recently discovered documents are published in full and available for study, we shall have a most valuable arsenal of source-material from the Gnostic side.

SAYINGS OF JESUS

The document with which we are concerned at present, the *Gospel of Thomas*, does not bear a Gnostic appearance on its face. Only when we examine it more closely do we see how well adapted it is to the literary company which it keeps.

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This document is a compilation of about 114 sayings ascribed to Jesus. It is described in the colophon as *The Gospel according to Thomas*. The significance of this title is amplified in the opening words of the document:

These are the secret words which Jesus the Living One spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said: 'Whosoever finds the interpretation of these sayings shall never taste death.'⁶

Jesus said: 'Let not him who seeks desist until he finds. When he finds he will be troubled; when he is troubled he will marvel, and he will reign over the universe.'⁷

It is not the sayings themselves that are secret, but their interpretation; and that was evidently an interpretation in line with the principles of a particular Gnostic school.

This emerges more clearly from a curious variant of the Caesarea Philippi incident which is related in the *Gospel of Thomas* (Saying 13):

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Compare me and tell me who I am like.' Simon Peter said to him: 'You are like a holy angel.' Matthew said to him: 'You are like a wise man and a philosopher.' Thomas said to him: 'Master, my face is quite unable to grasp who you are like, that I may express it. 'Jesus said: 'I am not your Master, for you have drunk; you are intoxicated with the bubbling spring which belongs to me and which I have spread

⁵ Cf. Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*, v. 1-6. They were also called Ophites, from the Greek word for 'serpent' (*ophis*).

⁶ Didymus (Greek) and Thomas (Aramaic) both mean 'twin'. The name Judas Thomas suggests a Syrian origin; in the Old Syriac Gospels Judas not Iscariot of John xiv. 22 is identified with Thomas.

⁷ A Johannine expression (cf. John viii. 51 f.), recurring elsewhere in the *Gospel of Thomas*.

abroad.' Then he took him and drew him aside, and spoke three words to him. When Thomas came back to his companions, they asked him: 'What did Jesus say to you?' Thomas answered: 'if I tell you one of the words which he spoke to me, you will take stones and throw them at me, and a fire will come out of the stones and burn you up!'⁸

One of the Gnostic sects, the Naassenes, believed stones to be animate beings, and held that the existence of the world depended on three secret words—*Canlacau*, *Saulasau*, *Zeesar*.⁹ These words certainly

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convey an impression of mystery, until one realises that they are simply corruptions of the Hebrew phrases in Isaiah xxviii. 10, 13, translated 'line upon line', 'precept upon precept', and 'here a little'! And it is probably more than a mere coincidence that Hippolytus refers to a *Gospel of Thomas* which he says was used by the Naassenes.¹⁰

About half of the sayings preserved in this document are identical with, or quite similar to, sayings recorded in our canonical Gospels. Some of the others were already known from quotations in early Christian writers, or from the fragmentary sayings of Jesus found on some papyrus scraps from Oxyrhynchus.

About the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth considerable excitement was caused by the announcement that papyri had been found at Oxyrhynchus containing sayings of Jesus most of which were previously unknown. From an unfortunate association of these sayings with the Dominical Logia mentioned by Papias they came to be widely known as the Oxyrhynchus Logia. Seven of these sayings were found in Oxyrhynchus Papyrus i, discovered in 1897; six years later six further sayings were found in Papyrus 654 and two or three in Papyrus 655.¹¹

It is now established that these fragments belong to the Greek original of the compilation which has now come to light in a Coptic translation as the *Gospel of Thomas*. The Coptic version indeed seems to represent a somewhat different recension from that represented by the Oxyrhynchus papyri, but there can be little doubt about the essential identity of the two.

It is plain from our canonical Gospels that Jesus was accustomed to say memorable things in a memorable way, and it is in any case unlikely that none of His sayings was remembered apart from those which the four Evangelists have recorded. In fact one saying is explicitly attributed to Him in Acts xx. 35 which has no precise canonical parallel: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' There may be other echoes of His words in the New Testament which we cannot detect so certainly because they lack an express ascription to Him. Christian writers in the post-apostolic generations preserve other sayings which they ascribe to Him. These sayings are commonly

⁸ Thus saying (No. 2 in the *Gospel of Thomas*) is quoted by Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies* ii. 45. 5; v. 96.3) as coming from the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*; it appears in Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 654.

⁹ Hippolytus, *op. cit.* v. 3.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.* v. 2. Hippolytus quotes a passage from the *Gospel of Thomas* which is paralleled in Saying 4 of our Coptic version and in Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 654, but is either quoted very freely or taken from yet another recension.

¹¹ The English reader will find all these fragmentary sayings conveniently translated in Grant and Freedman, *op. cit.* pp. 44 ff.

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denoted by the term *agrapha*—a misleading term, for it means ‘unwritten things’, and these sayings are not unwritten; the term is applicable only in so far as the sayings in question are not written in the canonical Gospels.

Memorable words of great men are frequently remembered in their own right, without being related to a firm context. We can see this happening in the case of one of our own great contemporaries, Sir Winston Churchill. Some sayings are attributed to him in oral tradition whose authenticity is doubtful at best, and of those that may be accepted as genuine many are not securely attached to a historical setting. But from this oral tradition one fact emerges with clarity: Sir Winston Churchill is the kind of man to whom such pithy sayings are credibly assigned; no one would assign a typical Churchillism to his wartime colleague Earl Attlee!

Another example comes to mind. For a couple of generations many pulpits in the Church of Scotland have been occupied by men who studied under Principal James Denney. One thing above all characterises Denney’s men; they can never stop quoting him. Great numbers of Denney’s pointed sayings have thus passed into common circulation; but it is difficult, if not impossible, to give chapter and verse for them. They have a quality which makes their authenticity unmistakable, even if Denney himself never put them on paper. Being preserved in oral tradition, they have no doubt been subjected to those influences to which form critics draw our attention, and they may have had attached to them some anonymous sayings which are sufficiently like the sort of thing that Denney said to deceive all but Denney’s own students. When once Denney’s last student has gone the way of all flesh, it will be very difficult for anyone who is challenged to demonstrate the authenticity of any particular one of Denney’s *agrapha*; yet there is a self-consistency about the bulk of them which will continue to serve as a general guarantee.

Similarly, when we find sayings attributed to Jesus which are not recorded in our primary sources, but are sufficiently in keeping with those which are so recorded, we may accord them a high rating of probability. When, on the other hand, we find sayings attributed to Him (as sometimes we do in the *Gospel of Thomas* and related writings) which are wildly out of character, we need not hesitate to regard them as spurious and to look to other sources than the apostolic tradition for their motivation.

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SAYINGS WITH CANONICAL PARALLELS

Saying 10 in the *Gospel of Thomas* is practically identical with Luke xii. 49:

Jesus said: ‘I have cast fire on the world, and see, I am watching over it until it sets it aflame!’

Saying 16 is closely related to this, and has a canonical parallel in Matthew x. 34-36 and Luke xii. 51-53:

Jesus said: ‘Verily, people think that I have come to send peace on the world. But they do not know that I have come to send on earth dissensions, fire, sword and war. Verily, if there are five in a house, they will find themselves ranged three against two and two against three—father against son and son against father—and they will rise up in isolation.’

'They will rise up in isolation' means that they will isolate themselves from their families, severing all family ties (see p. 13 below).

Those sayings which have canonical parallels do not help us to establish the original text of those parallels, apart possibly from one or two exceptional places. But from the way in which the canonical sayings are modified or amplified in the *Gospel of Thomas* we can gather something of the outlook of the compilers of the anthology. Thus the saying in Luke xvii. 21, 'the kingdom of God is within you', probably meant in its original context that the divine kingdom was present in the midst of Jesus' contemporaries by virtue of His ministry among them. But the saying is given a curious twist in the *Gospel of Thomas* (No. 3a):

If those who entice you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in heaven!'—then the birds of heaven will be there before you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea!'—then the fishes will be there before you. But the kingdom is within you—and without as well.

This is one of the sayings which were already known from one of the Oxyrhynchus papyri (No. 654), although there are verbal differences between the two recensions. It was on the Oxyrhynchus form of the saying that Francis Thompson based his beautiful lines beginning, 'O world invisible, we view thee'.

Papyrus 654, it is now clear, represents the beginning of the compilation, in which this saying is one of a group dealing with the question

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of seeking and finding. In the *Gospel of Thomas* this saying follows immediately on the opening words of the document, quoted above on p. 5. The group of sayings represents a recasting of Jesus' injunction 'Seek, and ye shall find' (Matt. vii. 7; Luke xi. 9) together with His words about seeking the kingdom (Matt. vi. 33; Luke xii. 31), and to this recast version of His words the saying about the presence of the kingdom is attached. Whereas in the canonical context of these sayings they are closely related to the historical circumstances of Jesus' ministry, in the *Gospel of Thomas* they are dehistoricised and given the status of general truths.

Here is another saying about the kingdom (No. 113):

His disciples said to him: 'When will the kingdom come?' 'It will not come when it is expected. They will not say "See, here it is!" or "See, there it is!"—but the kingdom of the Father is spread abroad on the earth and men do not see it'.¹²

Again, the kingdom has been detached from the historic mission of Jesus and given a universal reference.

One saying (No. 39) is immediately recognisable as a variant of Luke xi. 52 (cf. Matt. xxiii. 13):

Jesus said:

¹² Thus saying plainly goes back to the same original as No. 3a (Luke xvii. 20 f.; see p. 8); cf. the beginning of No. 37 (p. 19).

'The Pharisees and the scribes have taken the keys of knowledge and hidden them; they have neither entered in themselves nor allowed those who wished to enter in to do so.'¹³

'Knowledge' is no doubt given the more technical sense of saving *gnosis*.¹⁴ A commentator might well sum up these words by saying that Jesus condemns the 'dog-in-the-manger' attitude of the scribes (referring to one of Aesop's fables). It is remarkable that another saying in the *Gospel of Thomas* (No. 102) uses the picture of the dog in the manger in this very way:

Jesus said: 'Woe to them, the Pharisees, because they are like a dog lying on a pile of fodder, who will not eat it of himself and will not allow it to be eaten by anyone else.'

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CANONICAL SAYINGS AMPLIFIED OR CONFLATED

No. 31 runs:

Jesus said: 'A prophet is not welcomed in his own town, and a physician works no cure on those who know him.'

The saying about a prophet appears in all four canonical Gospels (Matt. xiii. 57; Mark vi. 4; Luke iv. 24; John iv. 44); the Synoptic writers quote it with reference to Nazareth, the Fourth Evangelist with reference to Judaea. But it is probably from Luke's version, or a version akin to Luke's, that it found its way in this form into the *Gospel of Thomas*, for it is only in Luke that it stands in close association with a saying about a physician.¹⁵ And there are several features of the *Gospel of Thomas* which suggest dependence on Luke's Gospel in particular.

Saying 25 is at first blush in line with those canonical sayings of Jesus which enjoin brotherly love:

Jesus said: 'Love your brother as your own soul; guard him like the apple of your eye.'

We may also compare the words quoted by Jerome¹⁶ from the 'Hebrew Gospel': 'And never be joyful except when you look upon your brother in love.' But in the *Gospel of Thomas* it is quite likely that 'brother' is understood in the sense of 'fellow-Gnostic'.

In No. 47 we have quite an elaborate conflation of originally independent sayings:

Jesus said: 'No man can mount two horses or draw two bows at once. And no servant can serve two masters, otherwise he will honour the one and be roughly treated by the other. No man ever drinks old wine and desires the same instant to drink new wine; new wine is not poured into old skins, lest they burst, nor is old wine poured into new skins, lest it spoils. And no one sews an old patch on to a new garment, for a rent would be made.'

¹³ The saying continues: 'But as for you, be prudent as serpents and harmless as doves' (cf. Matt. x. 16); Naassenes or Ophites may have seen special significance in the reference to serpents.

¹⁴ Cf. Saying 3b: 'When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will know that you are the children of the living Father....'

¹⁵ Luke iv. 23: 'Physician, heal thyself.'

¹⁶ *Commentary on Ephesians*, v. 4.

Here the saying about the impossibility of serving two masters (Matt. vi. 24; Luke xvi. 13) is amplified by two illustrations from life, and followed by sayings contrasting the old order and the new, sufficiently similar to Mark ii. 21 f. and its parallels—Matthew ix. 16 f. and Luke v. 36-39, especially the Lukan parallel—but with curious differences

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whose secondary character is plain. The pouring of old wine into new skins is not envisaged in the canonical sayings, still less the pointless patching of a new garment with an old piece of cloth. These divergences from the canonical wording are no doubt deliberate: the true Gnostic will not allow his new doctrine to be encumbered with relics from the past.

Another addition to a canonical saying appears in No. 100:

Jesus was shown a gold coin. and was told: 'Caesar's people are demanding the taxes from us.' He said to them: 'Give Caesar what is Caesar's; give God what is God's; and give me what is mine!'

For once, the historical setting of the saying is tolerably well preserved—except that in the original form it was not a gold coin that He was shown, but a (silver) denarius (Mark xi. 15 and parallels). But the added words 'and give me what is mine' blunt the point of the incident, so far as its historical meaning is concerned. They do, however, make a new point. It has been noted that this is the only place in the *Gospel of Thomas* where 'God' is mentioned. Here probably it is the Old Testament God,¹⁷ the demiurge, that is intended, so that we have an ascending order of dignity: Caesar, God and Jesus. Jesus is viewed as the Gnostic Revealer and Redeemer, and the true Gnostic will make it his chief concern to follow the requirements of saving *gnosis* and so give Jesus His due.

NEW SAYINGS

Some of the sayings have no proper canonical counterpart. Such is No. 77:

Jesus said: 'I am the Light which shines upon all. I am the All; All has gone forth from me and All has come back to me. Split the wood, and I am there; lift the stone and you will find me there!'

The first words of this saying, of course, remind us of various passages in the Fourth Gospel, where Jesus is presented as the Light of the world, coming into the world to provide light for every man (John i. 9, iii. 19, viii. 12, ix. 5). But it is not the Incarnate Word who speaks

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here in the *Gospel of Thomas* but something much more like the pantheistic Logos of Stoicism. The final sentence of the saying has been known since the discovery of Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1 in 1897; it has sometimes been treated as a variant of the words of Jesus in Matthew xviii. 20 ('For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them'); but in reality it means something quite different.

¹⁷ Where the Supreme Being, the God revealed by Jesus, is intended, the *Gospel of Thomas* regularly speaks of the Father'.

Jesus said: 'He who is near me is near the fire, and he who is far from me is far from the kingdom.'

This saying (No. 82) was known to Origen, who expressed some doubt about its authenticity: 'I have read somewhere that our Saviour said—and I wonder whether someone has falsely assumed our Saviour's role, or recalled the words from memory, or if in fact it is true that He said so—"He who is near me..."'¹⁸ If the fire is to be understood in the same sense as in Saying 10 (quoted above on p. 8), then this is another saying about the contention that is the sequel to taking sides with Jesus. But the fire here may be more particularly the fiery trial by which the faith of true disciples must be tested. Joachim Jeremias¹⁹ is disposed to accept this as a genuine saying: those who decide to follow Jesus must be prepared to pass through the fire, but it is only through the fire that they can attain the kingdom. If it is a genuine saying, however, its original meaning need not be identical with the meaning which it had for the compiler and readers of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Another saying (No. 42) in which Jesus says to His disciples, 'Be like those who pass over', has a parallel in an unexpected place. On a gateway of the mosque erected in 1601 in Fatehpur-Sikri, south of Delhi, by the Mogul Akbar, these words are inscribed: 'Jesus, on whom be peace, said: "This world is a bridge. Pass over it, but do not build your dwelling there."' Akbar evidently derived this saying from Muslim tradition: it is ascribed to Jesus quite early in Arabic literature.²⁰

The principle that the eater assimilates what he eats, taken along with the idea of gradation in the scale of being, leads to a saying like this (No. 7):

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Jesus said: 'Happy is the lion whom the man eats, so that the lion becomes man; but woe to the man whom the lion eats, so that the man becomes lion!'²¹

A man descends in the scale of value by being assimilated to the lion that devours him; but a lion would be ennobled by being eaten by a man. For some Gnostic schools, indeed, being devoured by a wild beast would mean being confined more securely than ever in a prison-house of flesh. (This is a very different attitude from that with which Ignatius faced the prospect of being devoured by wild beasts.)

BEATITUDES

The saying last quoted is a combined beatitude and woe. Quite a number of beatitudes occur in the *Gospel of Thomas*, several of them being echoes of those in the Sermon on the Mount, especially in its Lukan form. Such, for example, are No. 54:

Jesus said: 'Happy are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven';

¹⁸ Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah*, xx; Didymus of Alexandria (on Ps. lxxxviii. 8) quotes it from Origen.

¹⁹ *Unknown Sayings of Jesus* (London, 1957), pp. 54 ff.

²⁰ Cf. J. Jeremias, *op. cit.* pp. 99 f.

²¹ Cf. W. C. Till, *BJRL*, 41 (1958-59), p. 457. The same principle is expressed at the beginning of Saying 11b: 'Today you eat dead things and make them alive...'—and even more simply in Walter de la Mare's short poem, 'Little Miss T—'.

No. 68:

Jesus said: 'Happy will you be when you are hated and persecuted; but they will find no room in this place till they have driven you forth!';

and No. 69:

Jesus said: 'Happy are those who have been persecuted in heart. It is they who have come to know the Father. Happy are they who are famished, because they will be filled and satisfied.'

Others are new, like No. 49:

Jesus said: 'Happy are the solitary and the chosen ones, for you will find the kingdom. Because you have come forth from it, you will return there again.'

The 'solitary' are probably those who have disowned family ties, like those described in Saying 16, who 'rise up in isolation, after contention has broken out in their family circle (see p. 8 above).²² The

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kingdom is evidently the upper world of light, from which the souls of men have come and to which they may return if they are liberated by *gnosis* from their material environment.

A previous existence in the upper world of light is probably implied also in No. 19a:

Jesus said: 'Happy is he who existed before he came to birth.' In an orthodox sense this might refer to Jesus Himself, but a wider reference is more likely in the context of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Here is a conflation of two quite independent beatitudes, which have an accidental verbal contact which lends itself to a very different interpretation from that which both had in the canonical tradition (No. 79):

In the crowd a woman said to him: 'Happy the womb that gave you birth and the breasts that suckled you!' He said to her: 'Happy are those who have heard the Father's word and keep it. Verily, the days will come when you will say: "Happy the womb that never gave birth and the breasts that never suckled children!"'

The first part of this saying, found in Luke xi. 27, originally implies that there is something more wonderful than being the mother of Jesus—namely, doing the will of God. But here this saying is linked to the following one in such a way as to suggest that the bearing of children is contrary to the Father's will, and that those who renounce marriage and family life are to be congratulated. This, of course, completely dehistoricises the second part of the saying, where Jesus in Luke xxiii. 29 is not laying down a permanent principle, but telling the weeping

²² Cf. No. 75: 'Many stand outside at the door, but it is only the solitary who will enter the bridal chamber.' Thus saying, with its companion-piece No. 74, 'there are many round the opening but no one in the well'—quoted by Celsus from the Ophite *Heavenly Dialogue* (Origen, *Against Celsus*, viii. 15 f.)—is reminiscent of the canonical 'Many are called, but few are chosen' (Matt. xxii. 14).

women on the Via Dolorosa that, when the impending distress overtakes Jerusalem, childless women will have something to be thankful for.

PARABLES

Several of the parables familiar to us from the canonical Gospels reappear in this collection, such as the parables of the sower (No. 9),²³

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the rich fool (No. 63), the vineyard (No. 65) and the great feast (No. 64). But there is no exact New Testament parallel to No. 8:

Then he said: 'Man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea. He brought it up out of the sea full of little fishes, in the midst of which this wise fisherman found a large, excellent fish. He threw all the little fishes back into the sea; without hesitation he chose the big fish. He that has ears to hear, let him hear!'

This parable is quite unlike the New Testament parable of the dragnet (Matt. xiii. 47 ff.); so far as its lesson is concerned, it bears a closer resemblance to the New Testament parables of the hidden treasure and the costly pearl (Matt. xiii. 44-46).

The parables of the treasure (No. 109) and the pearl (No. 76) both appear in the *Gospel of Thomas*, along with several others which begin with some such words as 'The kingdom is like...'; these include the parables of the mustard-seed (No. 20), the tares (No. 57), the leaven (No. 96), and the sheep that went astray (No. 107). But the kingdom in these parables, as understood by the community to which we owe the *Gospel of Thomas*, is not the kingdom of the Synoptic Gospels; it is that spiritual realm to which the Gnostic is admitted by his cultivation of *gnosis*. Sometimes the original form of the parable has to be modified in order to make it bear this new significance. Contrast, for example, the Synoptic parable of the stray sheep with Saying 107 in the *Gospel of Thomas*:

Jesus said: 'The kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them, the biggest, wandered away. He left the ninety-nine others and sought this single sheep until he found it. After taking this trouble, he said to the sheep: "I love you more than the ninety-nine others!"'

Here the shepherd takes extra trouble over the hundredth sheep because it is the biggest one, and more valuable than all the others—probably representing the Gnostic in contrast to the many who make up the rank and file of the faithful.

The parable of the costly pearl is conflated with another saying of Jesus, about laying up treasure in heaven (Matt. vi. 19 ff.; cf. Luke xii. 33 f.). When the merchant has sold all his load to buy the one pearl, the admonition is added:

Do you also seek for his [the Father's] imperishable treasure, which abides, where the moth does not enter and eat it up nor does the worm destroy it.

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²³ Cf. No. 21c for a parallel to the Markan parable of the seed growing secretly.

The parable of the hidden treasure has an uncanonical ending: when the buyer of the field had acquired the treasure, then (we are told):

he began to lend money at interest to whomsoever he would.

This addition is probably not drawn from Matt. xxv. 27 or Luke xix. 23, where the unprofitable servant is told that he might at least have allowed his master's money to accumulate interest if he was unable or unwilling to trade with it more remuneratively.

Here are two uncanonical parables of the kingdom. First comes No. 97:

Jesus said: 'The kingdom of the Father is like a woman carrying a jar full of meal and walking along a long road. The handle of the jar broke, and the meal poured out behind her on the road without her knowing it or being able to do anything about it. When she reached home, she set down the jar and found that it was empty.'

This may be a warning against self-confidence, against thinking that one possesses the saving knowledge when in fact one has lost it.

No. 98 points a different kind of moral:

The kingdom of the Father is like a man who wishes to kill a magnate. In his own house he unsheathes his sword and thrusts it into the wall to make sure that his hand will be steady; then he kills his victim.

The lesson of this odd parable seems to be much the same as that of the parables of Luke xiv. 28-32; anyone who embarks upon a costly enterprise must first make sure that he has the resources to carry it out. The magnate who is attacked in the parable may further be identified with the strong man whose house is invaded and whose goods are plundered in Matthew xii. 29 and Luke xi. 21,²⁴ the strong man being understood as the demiurge or ruler of the material order. It is unlikely that the wall into which the sword is first thrust should be allegorised.

FASTING, CIRCUMCISION, MARRIAGE

There are sayings about fasting and circumcision which reflect a thoroughly emancipated and non-ascetic attitude towards these institutions. In such matters there were considerable differences of outlook among Gnostic sects. In the *Gospel of Thomas* fasting and

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related religious practices can be performed in a purely external manner which is positively sinful. So Saying 14 insists:

Jesus said to them: 'When you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves; when you pray, you will be condemned; when you give alms, you will injure your spirit. When you enter any land and go through the countryside, when you are entertained, eat what is set before you and heal the sick in those places. For nothing that enters into your mouth will defile you, but what comes out of your mouth, that is what will defile you.'

²⁴ Thus canonical saying is paralleled in No. 35.

The opening words about fasting, prayer and almsgiving represent a summarised reworking of Matthew vi. 1-18, and they have had appended to them passages from the commission to the seventy (Luke x. 8 f.) and Jesus' teaching about the source of real defilement (Mark vii. 14 f.).

Here is another saying on the subject (No. 104):

They said: 'Come, let us pray and fast today.' Jesus said: 'What sin have I committed, or what omission am I guilty of? When the bridegroom comes forth from the bridal chamber, one never fasts or prays then.'

The introduction of the bridegroom into a context where fasting is under discussion is reminiscent of Mark ii. 19 f.; but the form which Jesus' reply takes is similar to the account in the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* of Jesus' rejoinder to His family's suggestion that they should go and be baptised by John: 'What sin have I committed, that I should go and be baptized by him?'²⁵

True fasting, however, is inculcated, as in Saying 27:

If you do not fast in relation to the world, you will not find the kingdom. If you do not make the sabbath the (true) Sabbath, you will not see the Father.

And the character of this true fasting and related religious observances is indicated in No. 6:²⁶

His disciples questioned him; they said: 'Do you wish us to fast? How shall we pray and give alms, and what shall we feed upon?' Jesus said: 'Tell no falsehood and do not [to others] what is hateful to yourselves; for all these things are manifest in the sight

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of heaven. Nothing hidden will fail to be revealed and nothing concealed will fail to be published abroad.'²⁷

With this transformation of religious obligations into ethical injunctions we may compare the process revealed in the Western text of Acts xv. 20, 29, where the terms of the Apostolic Decree have been ethicised and amplified by the addition of the Golden Rule (in its negative form, as here).

As for circumcision, it has no value unless it is spiritualised. According to Saying 53:

His disciples said to him: 'Is circumcision useful or not?' He said to them: 'If it were useful, men's mothers would have borne them to there: fathers circumcised already. But it is the true circumcision in the spirit that is profitable.'

A modern reader will find the references to women and to marriage out of keeping with the general tenor of the canonical Gospels. Sexual life and the propagation of children are discouraged, as we have seen in Saying 79 (p. 14 above). The ideal state is to be as free from

²⁵ Quoted by Jerome, *Against Pelagius*, iii. 2.

²⁶ Partially preserved in Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 654.

²⁷ With the last sentence in thus saying cf. Mark iv. 22 and its parallels (Luke viii. 1-7; also Matt. x. 26 and Luke xii. 2).

sexual self-consciousness as little children are.²⁸ There are several sayings to this effect which are obviously related to words ascribed to Jesus in the *Gospel according to the Egyptians*, another work of Naassene affinities. In the *Gospel according to the Egyptians* this attitude is summed up in the statement: 'I came to destroy the works of the female.'²⁹ This statement is not reproduced in the *Gospel of Thomas*, but others from the same source and to the same effect are found. Thus Saying 22 contains the words:

Jesus said to them: 'When you make the two one³⁰ ... and when you make the male and the female one, so that the male is no longer male and the female no longer female.... then you will enter the kingdom.'³¹

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And Saying 37 runs thus:

His disciples said to him: 'When will you appear to us? When shall we see you?'³² Jesus said: 'When you disrobe yourselves without being ashamed, when you take off your garments and lay them at your feet as small children do, and trample on them, then you will become the sons of the Living One, and you will have no fear.'³³

Just as the primal sin in Eden was followed by sexual awareness and a sense of fear and shame at the consciousness of being naked, so the restoration of original innocence will be marked by a loss of sexual awareness (and indeed of sexual distinction) and an absence of any sense of embarrassment at appearing unclothed.

Women, one gathers, cannot attain to the higher life. This is the implication of Saying 114:

Simon Peter said to them: 'Let Mary depart from our midst, because women are not worthy of the life [that is life indeed].' Jesus said: 'See, I will so clothe her that I may make her a man, in order that she also may become a living spirit like you men. For every woman who becomes a man will enter into the kingdom of heaven.'

In spite of her faithfulness as a disciple, even Mary Magdalene can enter the kingdom only by being changed into a man (perhaps in a future phase of existence). We may infer that women, because of their function in conception and childbirth, were judged incapable of ever achieving complete liberation from material entanglements.

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JAMES THE JUST

²⁸ Thus is how Saying 22 in the *Gospel of Thomas* reinterprets the canonical saying that only by becoming like little children can one enter the kingdom (Matt. xviii. 3).

²⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* iii. 9. This statement might almost be regarded as the text of Robert Graves' *King Jesus* (London, 1946).

³⁰ Cf. the opening words of Saying 106: 'When you make the two one, you will become sons of man....'

³¹ In the *Gospel according to the Egyptians* words like these are spoken by Jesus to Salome (Clement of Alexandria, *op. cit.* ii. 13). They could represent a Gnostic interpretation of the words of Paul in Gal. ii. 28: 'there can be no male and female.'

³² Perhaps a rewording of the question of Mark xiii. 4 and parallels (Luke xxi. 7 and more especially Matt. xxiv. 3). Cf No. 113 (p. 9).

³³ Thus saying survives in a fragmentary form in Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 655. The passage from the *Gospel according to the Egyptians* quoted on p. 18 above includes a reference to 'trampling on the garment of shame'.

Other Gospel personages who are mentioned by name in the *Gospel of Thomas* are John the Baptist and James the Just. Saying 46 recasts a well-known canonical reference to John (Matt. xi. 11; Luke vii. 28) Jesus said:

‘From Adam to John the Baptist, among those who have been born of women none is greater than John the Baptist. But lest your eyes [should be blinded] I have said: “He among you

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who is least will come to know the kingdom, and will be more exalted than john.” ’

But in the present context the meaning of the words is that the true Gnostic is more exalted than even the greatest of men belonging to the old order. Another canonical saying about John (Matt. xi. 7 f.; Luke vii. 24 f.) is reproduced in Saying 78, but the reference to John is omitted:

Jesus said: ‘Why did you go out to the open country? Was it to see a reed shaken by the wind, or to see a man dressed in fine apparel? [No; such persons are found in the houses of] your kings and magnates, those who are so dressed; but they do not know the truth.’

Here the contrast is not between the well-to-do and John, but between the well-to-do and those who know the truth (that is, the Gnostics).

We know the answer which the disciples received from Jesus in the canonical Gospels when they asked who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven.³⁴ A different answer is given in Saying 12 in the *Gospel of Thomas*:

The disciples said to Jesus: ‘We know that you are going to leave us: who will be greatest over us?’ Jesus said to them: ‘In the place where you go, you will betake yourselves to James the just, on whose behalf heaven and earth alike were made.’

This idea evidently goes back to that wing of the Church of Jerusalem which regarded James as high priest and representative of the new Israel. According to Hippolytus (*Refutation* v. 2) the Naassenes claimed to derive their doctrines from James.

CONCLUSION

The most careful sifting will be necessary before we can venture to accept some of the uncanonical sayings preserved in this collection as genuine utterances of Jesus. Certainly the collection has no claim to be described as a ‘Fifth Gospel’ alongside the canonical four. Even a collection of genuine sayings of Jesus would not be a gospel in the proper sense of the term. For example, the digest of Jesus’ sayings which is thought to underlie the non-Markan material common to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (the ‘Q’ material) cannot be called a Gospel, if only because it seems never to have contained a

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passion narrative. The sayings of Jesus can be appreciated properly only in the context of His life, death and resurrection. It is these events that constitute the basis of the gospel; the

³⁴ Matt. xviii. 1 ff.; cf. Mark ix. 34; Luke ix. 46, xxii. 24 ff.

sayings of Jesus help us to understand the events. But not only the passion narrative, but even sayings of Jesus relating to His passion, are conspicuously absent from the *Gospel of Thomas*.

The *Gospel of Thomas* presents us with the product of an oral tradition of the sayings of Jesus within a circle whose basic presuppositions differ considerably from those of apostolic Christianity. The relationship of the sayings which it contains to the Synoptic and Johannine traditions is difficult to assess, and cannot be stated in a simple sentence. In a number of places where the Synoptic tradition is followed fairly closely, the resemblance is closest to the Lukan form of that tradition. Probably the *Gospel of Thomas* is partly dependent on the canonical Gospels, and partly on separate traditions. But in either case, the original material appears to have been subjected to some Gnosticisation.

A further difficulty arises from the probability that a collection like the *Gospel of Thomas* has an inner development of its own. The Oxyrhynchus fragments suggest that different recensions of the collection were current, and one would like to have a second-century Greek text of the collection as complete as the fourth-century Coptic translation which is now available. Then perhaps we could speak with greater confidence about the relation of the work to the canonical Gospels.

At one point it has been suggested that a passage in the *Gospel of Thomas* goes back to an independent version of Jesus' Aramaic wording that is in the parable of the sower (No. 9) where the *Gospel of Thomas* says that some seed fell *on* the road, not *by* the road, as the Greek Gospels (and the Coptic versions of the Greek Gospels) say. It has frequently been pointed out that the Aramaic preposition was no doubt 'al, which can mean either 'on' or 'by' according to the context, and that *epi* would have been a preferable Greek rendering of it in this context to *para*. The Coptic preposition used in Saying 9 presupposes Greek *epi* rather than the canonical *para*.

When we come to the most important question of all—the testimony which this document bears to Jesus—we feel that we are no longer in touch, even remotely, with the evidence of eyewitnesses. The Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas* is not the Jesus who came to serve others, not the Jesus who taught the law of love to one's neighbour in the way portrayed in the parable of the good Samaritan. The religion of the

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Gospel of Thomas, as of Gnosticism in general, is an affair of the individual. Unlike the Bible, the *Gospel of Thomas* sets forth the ideal of the 'solitary' believer. When the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas* speaks of His mission in the world, this is what he says (Saying 28):

I stood in the midst of the world and I manifested myself in the flesh to these. I found them all intoxicated; I found none thirsty among them. And my soul was grieved for the children of men, because they are blind in heart and do not see; because they have come into the world empty, they still seek to go out of the world empty. But may someone come and set them right! Then, when they have slept themselves sober, they will repent.

No doubt there is a real concern for the blindness and ignorance of men expressed in these words, but on the whole it is the concern of one who has come to show them the true way rather than of one who has come to lay down his own life that true life may be theirs. What the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas* has come to give is secret knowledge, as Saying 17 once more snakes plain:

Jesus said: 'I will give you what eye never saw, what ear never heard, what hand never touched, and what never entered the heart of man.'

This reminds us at once of the words quoted by Paul from some unknown source in 1 Corinthians ii. 9. The *Gospel of Thomas* is not the only work to ascribe them to Jesus; they are so ascribed in other second-century apocrypha.³⁵ But in the present context they may well have formed part of a Naassene formula of initiation, referring to the secret knowledge imparted to the initiates under oath. And this underlies an essential difference between New Testament Christianity and Gnosticism. In the context where Paul quotes words similar to these he does indeed speak of the hidden wisdom which the Corinthian Christians are incapable of receiving, but the reason for their incapacity is their spiritual immaturity. And this spiritual immaturity has more to do with ethics than with intellect; the Corinthians' deficiency was not in *gnosis* but in *agape*. To mature Christians this wisdom is freely imparted, not to a select minority, but to all.

So, too, the First Epistle of John opens with a declaration that the writer is about to share with his readers everything that he and his companions had seen and heard of the Word of Life. To all his readers without distinction—children, young men, and fathers—he can say:

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'you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know' (1 John ii. 20, R.S.V.). And this anointing which gives them all access to the true knowledge is the anointing which binds them all together with God in the community of that love which funds its crowning revelation in the self-sacrifice of Christ. 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren' (1 John iii. 16). It is the absence of this self-sacrificing love more than anything else that puts the *Gospel of Thomas* and similar works into a class apart from the New Testament writings?³⁶

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<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

³⁵ E.g. in the *Acts of Peter*, cxcix.

³⁶ Since this paper was read to the Victoria Institute, two important studies of the subject have appeared in English: R. McL. Wilson, *Studies in the Gospel of Thomas* (London, 1960), and B. Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas* (London, 1961).