

Lecture Eight

The Coptic Gospel of Thomas

Scope: Undoubtedly the most significant of the documents discovered in the Nag Hammadi library was the Gospel of "Thomas, a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, with no narrative context or reference to Jesus' miracles, death, or resurrection. It is possible to categorize the sayings of the Gospel of Thomas into three groups: Some are very similar to sayings found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke); others are similar to such Synoptic sayings but with a kind of gnostic twist; others are quite unlike anything in the New Testament and can best be seen as conveying secret gnostic teachings. The author indicates that anyone who learns the meaning of these sayings "will not taste death." Even though this collection was evidently made in the early second century, some of its sayings appear to go back to the historical Jesus himself.

Outline

- I. We have spent the past several lectures considering some of the intriguing gnostic texts, of various kinds, that have survived from antiquity.
 - A. In this lecture, we will address the most famous and controversial text discovered at Nag Hammadi: the Coptic Gospel of Thomas.
 1. The Gospel of Thomas contains many teachings and sayings of Jesus not found in the New Testament.
 2. Scholars question when the text was written and whether it was influenced by Gnosticism.
 3. I will take the position that the document is from the second century, to be understood in light of the gnostic religions that were developing at a later period.
 - B. Because of the importance of this text. I have decided to devote two separate lectures to it.
 - C. One matter of ongoing debate is whether the Gospel of Thomas is Gnostic at all. I contend that even though Thomas does not describe the gnostic mythology, it appears to presuppose it. and that knowing something about the way Gnostics understood the world can help in our interpretation of the sayings of Jesus that are found in the Gospel of Thomas.

- D. That will be the subject of the next lecture; in this lecture, I would like to say a few words about the character and layout of the gospel.
- II. The Gospel of Thomas consists of 114 sayings of Jesus.
- A. There are no narratives in this account, no stories about anything Jesus did or experienced (including his death and resurrection).
 - B. The opening statement of the Gospel gives us some clue as to the character of the collection (Saying 1): These are the secret sayings of Jesus, the correct interpretation of which will lead to eternal life
 - C. The sayings do not appear to be arranged in any particular thematic order, but more or less at random; they are not numbered in the surviving manuscript (the verse numbers have been assigned by the editors).
 - D. Even though the text survives only in Coptic, it was originally composed in Greek—as evidenced in some surviving Greek fragments of its text (with sayings given in a different sequence)—probably someplace in Syria.
 - E. The title calls writing the "Gospel of Thomas" and, in the first verse, the author calls himself Didymus Judas Thomas. Who was this person?
 1. The word Didymus means "twin" in Greek; the word Thomas means "twin" in Aramaic. The person's actual name was Judas or Jude. Here he is called, "Jude, the twin." The twin of whom?
 2. In the New Testament, Jesus is said to have several brothers, one of whom is called Jude. Interestingly enough, some ancient Syriac traditions (such as the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas) indicate that Jesus and Jude were not just brothers but identical twins.
 3. The Syriac texts that preserve this tradition do not indicate how Jesus could have an identical twin if he was miraculously conceived by a virgin.
 4. In any event, the Gospel of Thomas appears to claim to be written by the twin brother of Jesus! Who better to know his secret teachings that can lead to eternal life?
 - F. The Gospel of Thomas made such a stir when it was discovered, and continues to make such a stir among scholars today, because among these 114 sayings of Jesus are many that were previously unknown, raising a

host of questions.

1. When was this gospel written?
2. Did its author make use of the gospels of the New Testament for his sayings? If not, where did he acquire these sayings?
3. Could any of these other sayings actually go back to the historical Jesus?
4. What is one to make of a gospel that does not proclaim the importance of Jesus' death and resurrection?
5. Finally, how is one to understand the individual sayings of the gospel and the gospel as a whole? Is this a gnostic gospel that presupposes the gnostic understanding of the world, of Christ, of humans, of salvation?

III. The opening verse of the gospel can tell us a good deal about the nature of this text and may hint at its gnostic character (Saying 1).

A. These sayings are said to be secret (cf. the gnostic emphasis on secret knowledge).

B. And the key to eternal life is interpreting them, correctly.

C. One can contrast the New Testament gospels and the writings of Paul, for whom Jesus' death and resurrection are the key for eternal life.

IV. One way to approach these sayings is to consider them in relation to the more familiar materials of the New Testament.

A. Some sayings sound like those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the Synoptic Gospels):

1. Saying 20, the parable of the mustard seed; cf. Mark 4:30-31.
2. Saying 26, removing the speck from your brother's eye; cf. Matt. 7:3-5.
3. Saying 34, the blind leading the blind; cf. Matt. 15:14.
4. Saying 54, blessed are the poor; cf. Luke 6:20.
5. Strikingly, some of these sayings are briefer, pithier forms than their New Testament counterparts. Could they be more authentic forms of the sayings?

B. Other sayings start out sounding like what we can find in the Synoptic Gospels but are then given an unfamiliar twist, a twist that may presuppose the gnostic myth; thus, Saying 2 (cf. Matthew 7:7-8), Saying 72 (cf. Luke 12), Saying 113 (cf. Mark 13:4 or, esp., Luke 17:20-21).

- C. Other sayings make sense particularly in light of the gnostic myth; thus, Sayings 1, 29, 37, 56, 70, which can be seen as references to the divine spark, trapped in the material world, that needs to be set free.
- V. What, then, is the relationship of Thomas to the New Testament gospels, and, in a related question, when was it written?
- A. Because there are so few actual verbal parallels, it does not appear that Thomas used the New Testament gospels as one of its sources.
 - B. In a general way, Thomas appears very much like the lost source that scholars have long called "Q" (for *Quelle*, the German word for "source," a written account of Jesus' sayings available to Matthew and Luke).
 - C. If Thomas did not use the gospels of the New Testament, is it possible that it was written earlier than they were?
 1. Some sayings found in Thomas may have been spoken by Jesus himself (and, thus, were around before the New Testament gospels).
 2. Other sayings appear to presuppose the gnostic mythology, which cannot be reliably dated before the second century.
 3. The best guess, then, is that even though Thomas preserves a number of important sayings of Jesus, the book itself, and some of its sayings, originated later, some time during the first half of the second century.
 4. In the next lecture, we'll consider further the character of these sayings and try to unpack some of the overarching emphases of this significant early gospel.

Essential Reading:

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, reading 37.

Ron Cameron, "Thomas, Gospel of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. VI, pp. 535-540.

John Dart, Ray Rigert, and John Dominic Crossan, *Unearthing the Lost Words of Jesus: The Discovery and Text of the Gospel of Thomas*.

Supplementary Reading:

Risto Uro, ed., *Thomas at the Crossroads: Essays on the Gospel of Thomas*.

Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How do you suppose one could go about establishing that when Thomas and the New Testament gospels preserve a similar saying of Jesus, the form found in Thomas is more authentic?
2. Read through the Gospel of Thomas, and see if it is possible to interpret some of the non-New Testament sayings without appealing to the gnostic myth. What kind of interpretations would you come up with?