

“He Who Finds Interpretation of These Sayings Will Not Taste Death.”
The Hermeneutic of the Gospel of Thomas

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INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Thomas is a text which proves as enigmatic to modern scholars as it no doubt did to its original readership. As a collection of 114 separate logia connected loosely by the phrase “Jesus said,” it lacks the narrative elements and clarifying embellishments by which the reader might gain a sure interpretive foothold and by which a historical context or ideological agenda might be discerned with greater precision. Its sayings hop from one theme to the next with seemingly no rhyme or reason, presenting no obvious theological arc. Its sayings collection format further frustrates attempts to arrive at a more precise date and location of composition, for texts of this type are able to accommodate additions and emendations at any point and time with little redactional evidence. It shares roughly half of its content with the synoptic gospels, but just as many of its sayings are unattested in other contemporaneous literature. Even those familiar ones sound a rather more enigmatic note when inscribed into this new context, and although echoes of gnostic thought are also discernible, it defies a gnostic classification as well.

In the words of Stevan L. Davies, “We are like the blind men who encounter an elephant. One holds the tail and finds it to be like a snake, one holds an ear and finds it to be like a rug, and so forth.”¹ Yet it is this very impenetrability which has rendered the Gospel of Thomas among the most significant and prolifically treated apocryphal Christian texts, and as new theories concerning its composition and provenance, historical and ideological context, and literary and oral influences are proffered, its mystery only seems to multiply. The only consensus, it seems, is that the Gospel of Thomas has the potential to contribute something new to our understanding of the early

¹ “Oracles of the Gospel of Thomas.” Paper presented to the Thomasine Christianity Consultation, SBL 1994 Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois. Quoted in Risto Uro, *Thomas: Seeking the Historical Context of the Gospel of Thomas*, (London: T&T Clark, 2003), p. 2.

Christian milieu and its texts, but underlying each attempt to locate its importance lies an answer to the same perennial question: whether the value of the Gospel of Thomas is found in the world *behind* the text - in its potential to shed light upon the sources and oral and scribal cultures which contributed to its composition - or whether it lies in the world *of* the text, in the meaning it generates for its readers. No matter what the answer, some part of its story will inevitably remain neglected. A preoccupation with the search for the Gospel of Thomas's meaning runs the risk of obscuring the text's compositional and historical complexity, but if we approach the Gospel of Thomas as a deposit of conflicting data which must be sorted out and separated, we forego the conceptual framework necessary to understand how it was reckoned both by the people who embraced it and by the author or editor who wove these discrete elements into a single text.

The present essay is primarily concerned with the world of the text, and I recognize the limitations of this choice. Yet it is no more justifiable to assume that the text was composed *ex nihilo* than it is to assume that acknowledgment of its complicated and composite development is tantamount to a conclusion that the sum of its parts cannot converge to create a self-sufficient, coherent whole. I propose, therefore, that the literary climate of Christianity during the first and second centuries provides a viable context in which the poles of the world of the text and the world behind it may attract. This was a time during which strands of tradition collided in new ways and a time when new genres of distinctly Christian literature were being improvised and the delicate balance between the original oral proclamation of Jesus and the emerging authority of the New Testament scriptures was being negotiated. Each of the gospels represents the convergence of

various literary and traditional influences with the efforts of authors to shape these circulating sources into new, distinctly Christian literary traditions. Just as the canonical evangelists synthesized a number of sources and literary and oral mediums to craft their accounts, so too does the complex matrix of the Gospel of Thomas emerge as a series of authorial choices culminating in a strong statement about who the person of Jesus is and how he must be represented and understood.

In the present essay, I will argue that the Gospel of Thomas's strongly articulated position regarding how Jesus' proclamation must be literarily represented and encountered in text contributes to the formation of a hermeneutic which, in turn, implements an ideological coherence upon the whole, illuminating and reinforcing the author's compositional choices and offering the key by which the Gospel of Thomas as a completed text asks to be defined. In the first chapter, I will discuss the interplay between orality and textuality within the Gospel of Thomas, addressing arguments that its apparent disorganization and unrefined form suggest that its eventual composition owes to the simple 'scribing down' of oral units of tradition with little authorial intervention. By bringing the Gospel of Thomas into conversation with the tensions between orality and textuality which accompanied both the development of the New Testament gospels and the transition within the proto-orthodox Church from oral to scriptural tradition, I will argue that the Gospel of Thomas's heavy-handed privileging of orality and oral mediums represents an intentional response to the same theological and literary issues which concerned the New Testament evangelists, but with purposively different results. By embracing the oral character of the genre of the sayings collection, it encourages a hermeneutic exclusively occupied with the interpretation of Jesus' words, constituting an

alternative perspective on the function of the literary gospel as a means to capture Jesus' original oral proclamation in text and to preserve the interpersonal immediacy of the oral encounter, the loss of which is acknowledged in the medium of writing.

In the second chapter, I will further explore the Gospel of Thomas's relationship to the New Testament literary tradition by an analysis of its use of synoptic sources. With its appropriation of pre-synoptic units of tradition and its redaction of later synoptic material, coupled with its simultaneous refusal to conform to the synoptic gospels' generic conventions, I argue that the author understands his text as the true culmination of the synoptic tradition and his compositional choice to retain the primitive form of the sayings collection as the means by which to provide the truest representation of Jesus' original proclamation as the author understands it. Furthermore, I will argue that the text and the compositional choices which contribute to its final shape represent a hermeneutical critique of the synoptic gospels on the grounds that the narrative and biographical frameworks in which these gospels embed Jesus' proclamation delimits the agency of Jesus' words and removes the reader from the direct hermeneutical engagement which the Gospel of Thomas attempts to provide.

In the final chapter, I will explore the practical implications of the Gospel of Thomas's literary choices by considering its popular reception as a gnostic text. Although its ideological outlook does not ultimately land on the side of the orthodox, I contend that it cannot be classified as a gnostic appropriation of synoptic sources. Because of its arguably conservative orientation toward the use of synoptic and pre-synoptic materials and resistance to the gnostic viewpoint so often ascribed to it, the Gospel of Thomas finds itself in a unique position to reveal more about the early Church's decisions concerning

its scriptures than that anything secondary to what is perceived as the original apostolic gospels must be rejected. Rather, the hermeneutical and literary critique which distinguishes the Gospel of Thomas invites the question of what role gospel texts are required to fulfill for the needs of the tradition if they are to be rendered scriptural, and I argue that it is the Gospel of Thomas's own choices regarding the literary presentation of its gospel, as well as the hermeneutic formed thereby, which render the text and its portrayal of Jesus' proclamation vulnerable to gnostic incursion in a way that the New Testament gospels are not. By seeing how the form of the text fails to establish a concrete point of origin through which Jesus' original gospel may be traced, we can see how the text of the Gospel of Thomas and its literary method of recapturing and conveying Jesus' presence fails to meet the scriptural needs of the Church and of the tradition. In turn, the circumstances surrounding the Gospel of Thomas's rejection from the canon directs our gaze toward the hermeneutical and scriptural function that the narrative gospels are able to fulfill.

CHAPTER 1: Orality, Textuality, and the “Gospel According to Thomas”

It need hardly be mentioned that the Christian tradition did not come equipped with a body of texts of its own, but only the original oral proclamation of Jesus which, in the years directly following his death, continued to be disseminated orally. This proclamation was eventually scribed down for its preservation, but even in the early stages of the textualization process, oral mediums were preserved in the form of sayings collections which related instances of spoken communication between Jesus and his original audiences. These sayings collections were not texts in the sense that they were the distinct creations of an author who carefully selected and molded his material. It was only later, with the advent of Mark’s narrative gospel and Matthew and Luke’s appropriation of it that what we see a truly literary gospel tradition crystallizing. As Luke explains in his prologue and as evidenced by his decision to embed the sayings collection Q within Mark’s narrative framework, he intends to cohere the oral accounts spread by eye-witnesses within a discrete literary composition:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (1:1-4)

The Gospel of Thomas, to the contrary, seems to preserve the primitive form of the sayings collection, and its privileging of the oral is repeatedly emphasized by introducing each logia with the phrase “Jesus said” or, alternatively, by leading in to Jesus’ speeches with dialogues initiated by the disciples. This has led some to conclude

that the Gospel of Thomas is orally constituted and that its apparent disorganization owes to the fact that it was not beholden to the conventional rules of literary composition. The question, then, is whether the Gospel of Thomas's express preference for orality and oral mediums is sufficient to explain the composition of what does ultimately come to be a completed text. Do we find here a genuine instance of Christianity's earliest literary engagement with Jesus' words preserved? Or do we find an intentionally crafted gospel, albeit conforming to a different literary standard? In the following chapter, I will argue in favor of the latter. By addressing arguments for the Gospel of Thomas's oral composition, I contend that, while it does explicitly privilege instances of oral encounter over the more literary forms of biography and narrative, there is a tension within the text itself between orality and textuality and that the Gospel of Thomas, not unlike Luke, represents an alternative attempt to transition from oral kerygma to written scripture.

I. An Oral Model of the Gospel of Thomas's Development

A vocal proponent of the Gospel of Thomas's orally constituted character is April DeConick. In *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and its Growth*, she claims, "Most continue to impose upon the ancient authors a 'literate imagination,' suggesting that composition occurred by cutting and pasting information from written sources into their new text by editors or redactors."² She argues that the Gospel of Thomas's seemingly structureless use of sources and lack of a cohesive narrative offer incontrovertible evidence that a fixed written account was not being consulted during composition, and, therefore, that it is illegitimate to ascribe its

² *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and its Growth*, (London: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 47-8

composition to the literary activities typically employed by authors or editors. As an alternative to the literate model, she proposes that the Gospel of Thomas is better understood as a 'rolling corpus' in which its original 'kernel' sayings date directly back to the primitive oral Jesus tradition but withstood accretions and interpretive additions throughout the course of several oral re-performances.³

She explains that, in cultures in which information is primarily transmitted verbally, the orator is permitted to take a phrase or idea held within the communal memory and retell it with new details and in new patterns to respond to the needs and concerns of the audience of that particular performance.⁴ It follows that the Gospel of Thomas and other sayings collections of its ilk were initially scribed down to update and record performances,⁵ and because she imagines the performances of the Gospel of Thomas as occurring in public settings in which a living community had access to the 'living' memory of Jesus, the particularity of his words and the facts of his life were of little concern. These events were squarely situated in the past, but it was Jesus' teachings which could be brought to bear upon the changing circumstances and concerns of the community. According to DeConick, this act of adapting a saying or parable to a new context was not considered a violation of the original message:

It appears that, in cultures dominated by oral techniques of transmission, once a written text of the performance is established, it does not become for another performer or author the fixed 'original' that has to be transmitted verbatim. Rather, the future performance or composition continues to develop the traditions in order to transmit their 'truth' to new audiences.⁶

³ DeConick, pp. 55-63.

⁴ DeConick, p. 29.

⁵ DeConick, p. 35

⁶ DeConick, p. 34.

As long as the community had access to Jesus' living memory, precision and consistency in the recording of this memory was neither necessary nor preferable to the immediacy of the verbal encounter as it was reenacted through performance. It follows that the gospel functioned in the community as an interactive corpus and its evolving content as the legitimate responses of the ever-present, post-resurrection Christ in their midst.

According to DeConick, "They continued to update their gospel with new sayings which they believed were answers from Jesus himself."⁷

She further argues that this was common practice throughout the early Christian world, supporting her claim with a statement made by Papias, the second-century bishop of Hierapolis, whom she understands as articulating this absolute preference for personal memory and indirectly corroborating her proposal that a literate model is insufficient for understanding gospel development: "I shall not hesitate to set down for you, along with my interpretations, everything that I learned well from the elders and have remembered well, for I can guarantee its truth...For I did not imagine that what came out of books would help me as much as what came from a living and abiding voice."⁸ DeConick takes this to mean that Papias places his trust only in his own reconstructed memories, and so too the members of the Thomas community.⁹ She asserts, moreover, that it was not just the Gospel of Thomas, but all gospels which operated with this perspective. She interprets Luke's prologue similarly:

He is literate and aware of written accounts which, in his opinion, had tried to capture the traditions handed down from the eyewitnesses. But he questions their accuracy and instead launches his own investigation into

⁷ DeConick, p. 249.

⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, 39.

⁹ DeConick, p. 33.

the matter. He then reshapes the story in his own composition that his reader may finally ‘know the truth’ about the traditions.¹⁰

DeConick sees Luke’s and Papias’ testimonies as reflections of an oral consciousness in a culture which had not fully transitioned to literacy and thus did not recognize the authority of written accounts which they did not construct for themselves from the ever-evolving body of oral traditions they received.¹¹ This leads her to conclude:

This means that the ‘final’ form of the traditions preserved in our Gospels is thus the result of their reperformance over a lengthy period of time. Our texts are accumulations of traditions that have been spoken and respoken, collected and recollectd, arranged and rearranged, written and rewritten to promote various theologies by multiple agents during the formative years of early Christianity.”¹²

Therefore, in DeConick’s view, the gospel texts as we have them represent the culmination of a long and dialectical process between oral tradition and community. The transition from oral to written accounts arose in response to the deaths of eyewitnesses when communities were confronted with the loss of their traditions, and it was only in light of these circumstances that the original oral transmission of tradition came to adopt more literary forms.¹³ It follows that the Gospel of Thomas and the synoptics shared a similar developmental process until the moment of their ultimate composition, but the Gospel of Thomas remains unique in that it “affords us the optimal opportunity to restore one of these first gospels because it was not rewritten into a narrative or theological discourse as was the case with the Synoptics and John. Nor is it a reconstructed text developed out of a source hypothesis like Quelle.”¹⁴

¹⁰ DeConick, p. 33.

¹¹ DeConick, p. 33, 36.

¹² DeConick, p. 36.

¹³ DeConick, p. 86-87.

¹⁴ DeConick, p. 36.

DeConick does acknowledge that the Gospel of Thomas's incipit identifies the text as a written composition. It reads, "These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke, and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said: 'He who shall find interpretation of these words shall not taste of death.'" In DeConick's view, however, "the living Jesus" is a technical christological title and thus indicative of a later theological development, leading her to place it at the final stage of the text's evolution near the year 120 C.E. where it functions as the Thomas community's retrospective reflection upon its gospel as a living corpus and the contents therein as the true responses of the spirit of the "living Jesus" in their midst. The textualization implied by the incipit, then, is little more than a passing acknowledgement of the Gospel of Thomas's eventual scribing down,¹⁵ which is inorganic to the content and thus not suggestive of a genuine literary sensibility underlying the text's composition. The Gospel of Thomas thus reflects a more innocent and unself-conscious compositional process with only the minimal effort of the incipit to gesture toward its eventual written form.

However, if we are to assume DeConick's position that all of the gospels began with an elastic sense of historical accuracy but that the Gospel of Thomas stands alone in retaining this fluid oral stage of gospel development, we are left with the question of why other gospel evangelists would choose to fix their living memories of Jesus' words into biographical narratives, and why the Gospel of Thomas continued to resist this tendency throughout the duration of its circulation. Ultimately, DeConick's attempts to unite both the composition of the Gospel of Thomas and the New Testament gospels under a single oral rubric complicates our understanding of the Gospel of Thomas's development even further. The somewhat ironic implication of her conclusion is that, despite a shared

¹⁵ DeConick, p. 87.

heritage, the Gospel of Thomas radically breaks with the dominant literary trajectory followed by the majority of gospel authors. For instance, we see most explicitly in Luke's prologue that he, as an individual, not only claims personal authorship of his text, but that he conceives of his literary contribution as a complete and authoritative account which he has intentionally undertaken to compose in writing. This account is shaped into a coherent story with a clearly defined beginning and end, marking an obvious departure from the free flow of oral memory and interpretation. Moreover, Luke does not disregard the importance of written reports per se in favor of his own ability to create new truth from the oral sources available to him. While it is true that he does not consider these other written accounts particularly authoritative and that he recognizes a need to develop a more comprehensive version of the eyewitness testimonies on which these accounts are based, he acknowledges the historical importance of this testimony and undertakes to record these sources as accurately as possible, claiming authority for his text on the grounds that he has thoroughly researched and compiled his original sources into what he understands as a complete and polished text. This is not to say, however, that Luke's gospel does not take authorial liberties with his sources, and DeConick is certainly correct in her observation that gospels texts do not trace neatly back to the historical Jesus and that the transmission of tradition entails additions and interpretations. But there is no evidence within the New Testament gospels themselves to suggest that the free flow of communal memory is ultimately responsible for 'authoring' them or that this authoring was unfettered by the desire for historical accuracy - or, to put it more squarely, by the desire to make a claim to historical accuracy. If, as DeConick claims, a 'literate imagination' is an undue imposition upon an ancient sensibility, then it is one which

these ancient authors have imposed upon themselves, and a finer distinction must be drawn between oral memory and transmission and the act of incorporating them into a completed text. As Risto Uro warns, “One should be cautious not to adopt too romantic a picture of a free ‘savage mind’ living in a state of sheer orality.”¹⁶

It is necessary, then, to reconsider the extent to which the Gospel of Thomas may resemble this free savage mind. Although it is true that it retains a more primitive form than the other literary gospels and that this form more closely reflects oral modes of transmission, we must acknowledge that at some point throughout its compositional process, it became conscious of its textuality and that its self-identification as text is a part of the gospel as it was received by subsequent communities of readers. Regardless of the date one assigns to the incipit, it must be acknowledged that this too is a part of the Gospel of Thomas’s development and that with its inclusion, whatever oral function the contents once had is recast with a new literary purpose. If the collection began as an open list as DeConick suggests, then the addition of the incipit recasts this freeform list as a self-sufficient whole, and although the Gospel of Thomas does not, like its narrative counterparts, have a discrete beginning and end, its promise of immortality to anyone who can interpret is as clear a claim to comprehensiveness as one might hope to find.

Furthermore, there is no evidence within the text itself to suggest that the content and the incipit are at conceptual odds or that the community did not simply regard the Gospel of Thomas as testimony to the things that the living Jesus said while he was, in the most literal sense, alive. There are several sayings within the Gospel of Thomas that

¹⁶ “Thomas and the Oral Gospel Tradition,” *Thomas at the Crossroads*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 14.

clearly evoke a pre-resurrection Jesus,¹⁷ but none which explicitly indicate that the spirit of the risen Christ is speaking in the presence of the community. Moreover, although the authorial voice is downplayed such that it is nearly inaudible, with each interjection of the phrase “Jesus said,” the author reasserts his control of the text’s content. The constant repetition of this phrase reads as insistence, that *these* are the words which the living Jesus spoke, and it is significant that the text claims to have been penned not only by a direct eyewitness, but by one of Jesus’ original disciples. It thus stakes its authority on the basis of direct apostolic testimony with a clear claim to historicity as well as a clear denial that it contains anything other than Jesus’ original proclamation. If nothing else, the incipit articulates the authorial choice to keep the sayings of the Gospel of Thomas in this form and to claim that this list of sayings is all one needs to understand Jesus’ true significance. To say that, like the end of a game of musical chairs, the text as we have it is where the Gospel of Thomas happened to be standing when the music stopped is not a satisfactory explanation for the textual role it comes to occupy, and for this reason, it is constructive to consider the meaning of the term ‘gospel’ as it was understood by gospel authors in order to further assess the extent of the Gospel of Thomas’s participation in this literary movement.

II. The Gospel of Thomas as Gospel

David Aune defines the literary gospel as “a discrete prose narrative devoted exclusively to the portrayal of the whole life of an individual perceived as historical”¹⁸ - or, in specifically Christian terms, a story about the teachings, activities, and events of the

¹⁷ Notable are logia 60, 99, and 100, in which Jesus responds to external circumstances and observations made by the disciples in his company.

¹⁸ *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), p. 64.

life of Jesus. Because the Gospel of Thomas is not consistent with the narrative and biographical framework ascribed to the literary gospel genre, this title has received little scholarly consideration, for its application to texts beyond the New Testament is not inherently meaningful. After the canonical gospels, complete with their popular titles, had gained widespread recognition, dozens of texts which would come to bear this label proliferated and represent a multiplicity of formal presentations which often have very little to do with the subject matter of the gospel as we have come to understand it. The putative scenario is that sayings collections of this type circulated for some time without titles, first accruing introductions or incipits before more shortened labels like the “Gospel According to Thomas” were appended.¹⁹

If we are to rely upon the conventional definition of the gospel genre, then the sayings of the Gospel of Thomas certainly do not fall within this rubric. However, the literary conventions we expect of the gospel genre were not operative during the time when the gospels were composed. Although the canonical gospel authors synthesized a variety of literary forms recognizable in other contemporaneous literature, their combination in the literary gospel is a phenomenon *sui generis* to early Christianity. In its most basic sense, the word ‘gospel’ (εὐαγγέλιον) simply meant ‘good news,’ and of the dozen times that the word appears in the New Testament gospels, it refers exclusively to

¹⁹ James M. Robinson, “LOGOI SOPHON: On the Gattung of Q,” *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, eds. James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 78-9. For example, the apocryphal Gospel of Philip, an anthology of Valentinian gnostic sources with little to no mention of Jesus’ life and teachings, receives the gospel designation with the simple ‘good news’ connotation (Bentley Layton, “Introduction to The Gospel of Philip,” *The Gnostic Scriptures*, ed. Bentley Layton. (London: SCM Press, 1987) p. 325.). The Gospel of the Egyptians does identify itself as a gospel in its concluding paragraph, but the postscript, where the title usually appears, reads “The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit,” suggesting that its author conflates the term ‘gospel’ with any holy book.

a message proclaimed by Jesus himself and proliferated by his followers.²⁰ It is with this sense that Mark employs the term in his opening verse, beginning not with a title but with a description of the content to follow: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God” (1:1). Throughout the New Testament, this distinction between the originary gospel of Jesus and its written retelling is preserved, as Matthew refers to his composition with the neutral designation of ‘book’ (1:1) and Luke describes his simply as a ‘narrative’ (1:1). According to Hans von Campenhausen, “The ‘Gospel,’ to which appeal is normally made (in the first two-thirds of the second century), remains an elastic concept, designating the preaching of Jesus as a whole in the form in which it lives on in church tradition. The normative significance of the Lord’s words, which is the most important point...is not transferred to the documents that record them.”²¹ The use of the term ‘gospel’ to refer to written works only began to emerge with the increasing acceptance of the four New Testament gospels as authoritative, and because these compositions share the same narrative and biographical frameworks, they have come to serve as the benchmark for the production and recognition of texts of this type. We must remember, then, that the characteristics ascribed to the conventional gospel genre are essentially reconstructions built from texts whose authors were not yet beholden to any particular generic paradigm. The originary gospel is reckoned by the New Testament evangelists as

²⁰ Mat 4:23, 9:35, 24:14, 26:13; Mar 1:14-15, 8:35, 10:29, 13:10, 14:9, 16:15. The term does not appear in the Gospel of Luke, but in Acts 20:24 it reads, as expected, “But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the good news of God’s grace.”

²¹ *Formation of the Christian Bible*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 129.

paramount,²² and the gospel texts resulted from their endeavors to record this oral kerygma in writing.²³

Justin Martyr's *1 Apology*, ca. 155 C.E., is an example the earliest extant step toward the use of the term to refer to individual written texts: "For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them."²⁴ But even then, and with Irenaeus' use of the term in the decades following Justin Martyr, a strong sense of the original oral nature of the gospel continues to operate. In his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus seems to base his argument for the reliability of these texts on the fact that they are stable written documents which contain the truth of Jesus' proclamation, criticizing the heretics because "they allege that the truth was not delivered by means of written documents, but rather through the living voice."²⁵ It seems at first glance that this statement represents a bounding leap from an oral tradition to a scriptural one. Irenaeus' language strongly echoes that of Papias', appearing to constitute a direct response to Papias' declaration that the transmission of tradition through written texts is subordinate to the oral encounter. As Irenaeus continues, however, it becomes clear that it is not the oral transmission of tradition per se about which he expresses his skepticism, but only those oral traditions which are not faithfully handed down through the Church.²⁶ In Irenaeus' view, the heretics' appeal to oral tradition as a means to justify their beliefs is erroneous only in that it serves as a means for them to play fast and loose

²² In the words of Paul, "We put up with anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (1 Cor. 9.12).

²³ Aune, pp. 21-22.

²⁴ 66.3.2

²⁵ *A.H.* 3.2.1

²⁶ *A.H.* 3.2.2

with the true gospel entrusted to the Church.²⁷ He thus shows his awareness of the tension between orality and textuality which Papias clearly articulates, attempting to bridge the gap between a proclamation that was once oral and the necessity of establishing the authority of written accounts in order to fortify the tradition against heretical attempts to justify different beliefs through the unchecked fluidity of oral culture.

We see this tension between orality and textuality enacted within the Gospel of Thomas. For example, logion 52 reads, “His disciples said to him, ‘Twenty-four prophets spoke in Israel, and they all spoke of you.’ He said to them, ‘You have abandoned the living one before your eyes, and spoken about the dead.’” As Vernon Robbins notes, “an amazing fact about the Gospel of Thomas is its complete lack of appeal to written text. In contrast to the canonical gospels, the narrator never says, ‘As it is written in Isaiah the prophet’ (Mark 1.1)...or ‘For these things took place that the writing might be fulfilled’ (John 19:36).”²⁸ He concludes from this observation that “the Gos. Thom. reveals a status of orally transmitted sources,”²⁹ but to assume that the text’s privileging of oral encounter is necessarily indicative of oral transmission is a fallacy. We see in logion 52 both a direct acknowledgement and a rejection of the tendency to embed this gospel within other prevalent scriptural traditions. Werner Kelber explains:

What one observes in the case of the *Gos. Thom.* is a genre at once produced by the technology of writing and yet still faithful to oral interests and sensibilities. In the terminology of media studies, it constitutes an interface, bordering both on orality and textuality, and seeking a rapprochement between both worlds.³⁰

²⁷ Annette Yoshiko Reed, “EYAPTEAION: Orality, Textuality, and Christian Truth in Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses*,” *Vigilae Christianae*, 56 (Feb. 2002), pp. 21-22.

²⁸ “Rhetorical Composition and Sources in the Gospel of Thomas, *SBL 1997 Seminar Papers*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), p. 88.

²⁹ Robbins, p. 102.

³⁰ “In the Beginning Were the Words: The Apotheosis and Narrative Displacement of the Logos,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58, (1990), p. 78.

An overt denial of scriptural traditions is not tantamount to a total lack of interest in written mediums, for, of course, the Gospel of Thomas is written. Rather, the juxtaposition of ‘the one who is living in your presence’ and ‘those who are dead’ implies the author’s strong stance about textuality and how it must be used to represent Jesus’ gospel. It is these ‘dead’ writings, writings situated in the distant past, which this logion claims do not evoke the immediacy of encountering Jesus in speech, and, therefore, cannot contribute to the purpose of the gospel account as the author understands it.

It seems, therefore, that the intentions and motivations under which the ultimate shaper of the Gospel of Thomas operates are similar to those of the New Testament evangelists, but that he assumes a different stance regarding the proper way to take the original oral proclamation of Jesus and preserve it in text. Thus, the complications introduced by DeConick’s oral model are fruitful ones, calling attention to the privileging of the spoken encounter which pervades the Gospel of Thomas and drawing notice to the pre-literary oral sensibility which the New Testament tradition once shared and which the Gospel of Thomas opted to retain, rendering all the more meaningful the conspicuous refusal to conform to the narrative conventions employed by the other gospel authors. Their respective literary decisions create strong statements about who the person of Jesus was and how he must be portrayed in text. For this reason, it is constructive to further explore how this expressed tension between orality and textuality contributes to the final shape of the Gospel of Thomas and what hermeneutical function it serves.

III. Seeking an Oral Metaphysics of Presence: The Gospel of Thomas's Hermeneutic

DeConick is correct to note that the need to create written accounts is, to a degree, an unfortunate circumstance arising in response to the deaths of eyewitnesses or to moments when the interpersonal immediacy of oral transmission was threatened, and this is a circumstance about which the Gospel of Thomas is acutely aware and seeks to resolve. According to Jacques Derrida, the whole of Western thought has been dominated by what he terms 'logocentrism,' the privileging of the spoken word as the result of the desire for unmediated access to meaning. It is the conviction that the purity of an idea may be translated undiluted from a speaker to his audience, "a full speech that was fully *present* (present to itself, to its signified, to the other, the very condition of the theme of presence in general)."³¹ Thus, the passage of time requires a means by which to preserve the effect of Jesus' original presence despite his bodily absence in the post-Easter world, and the author of the Gospel of Thomas broaches this issue by choosing to format his text as a collection of Jesus' sayings. Again, it is necessary to draw an operational distinction between genre as a category under which texts with certain formal characteristics are subsumed and genre as a generator of the readerly effect of that text. Formally, the Gospel of Thomas is quite obviously a collection of sayings, but because it has been bookended with a descriptive incipit and the eventual title "Gospel According to Thomas," it begs a working definition of genre which attends to the authorial intentions inherent within the choice to present the content as a collection of sayings.

According to Paul Ricoeur, the function of genre is "to mediate between speaker and hearer by establishing a common *dynamics* capable of ruling both the production of

³¹ *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 8.

discourse as a work of a certain kind and its interpretation according to the rules of its genre.”³² In other words, an author chooses a genre which fits the type of information he intends to convey and the type of reading he intends to evince. In turn, he works within the conventions of his chosen genre so that the reader, holding the knowledge of this genre in common with the author, proceeds to interpret the content according to the hermeneutical rules attending it. By this definition, the choice of genre is the first step towards meaning-making, both the space in which the author makes his intentions known and the space where these intentions and the interpretive work of the reader meet. The Gospel of Thomas represents a genre exclusively composed of oral units of speech and dialogue without attendant narrative. By entirely de-emphasizing the theological significance of the Passion in this manner, the Gospel of Thomas relocates the most significant aspect of Jesus’ interactions with the world in his words. While narrative events can only happen once and written words can only describe but not recapture them, Jesus’ words were already words. They can be written, read, and re-read. The hearer can interact with them just as she would if she were hearing them live, and the relationship established through the recreation of verbal encounter escapes reliance upon past events as the means to access the impression of Jesus’ living presence. With the inevitability of time, such events become ever more distant from subsequent Christian communities, but the spiritual significance of Jesus’ teachings can continue to be shared. As we have seen in logion 52, the author articulates this disapproval of situating accounts of Jesus within the mythological past, and this disapproval similarly extends to the application of the narrative framework employed within the New Testament gospels. Kelber explains:

³² “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” *Philosophy Today* 17, p. 137.

Writing itself puts everything in the past, and writing a narrative enhances its retrospective orientation. Unimpeded by narrative's spatio-temporal framework, and in control of the discrete items of his proclamation, the 'living Jesus' of the *Gos. Thom.* seeks to elude entrapment in the past...all converge in the text's strategic design to extend the metaphysics of oral presence.³³

While the text does acknowledge its secondary status to Jesus' original speech in that it admits to having been retrospectively written, it uses the sayings-gospel genre, with its rapid fire presentation of information and apparent disorganization, to bypass the problem of the passage of time by placing the reader in an active role, creating a carefully articulated hermeneutic which seeks to maintain the effect of the oral encounter by establishing a direct link between the idea held in the speaker's mind and the hearer's efforts to access it. Thus, the Gospel of Thomas explicitly positions the issue of interpretation at the very forefront of its sayings, opening with a surprising hermeneutical challenge: "He who finds interpretation of these sayings will not taste death." Because the words recounted in the text have been spoken in the past, it must then be the reader's continual interpretive grappling with them which keeps the relationship alive, and by choosing to present his content as a collection of sayings attributed directly to Jesus, and by constantly reinforcing this generic choice with the repetition of the phrase "Jesus said," the author forces his readers to consider only Jesus' words with no recourse to existing interpretation and without the luxury of being passively led to a neat narrative climax. By rendering Jesus himself as the speaking subject or responder, and by avoiding any mention of the details and events of his life, the author sets strict hermeneutical parameters: the only thing to be interpreted and the only salvational meaning to be found is in Jesus' own words. Any attempts to fit them into secondary mythological and literary

³³ Kelber, p. 79

frameworks are necessarily artificial and represent a step away from the pure agency of these words. As in logion 108, “Jesus said, ‘He who drinks from my mouth will become like me, and I will become like him, and the hidden things will be revealed to him.’”

It is this hermeneutic which endows the Gospel of Thomas’s seemingly unconnected list of aphorisms with an ideological coherence, and the interpretive method it demands seeks to create a mutually informed relationship between the objects and subjects of interpretation such that attempts to find the significance of the sayings are unsuccessful if they do not begin with the proper orientation toward the search for Jesus’ significance and its location in relation to the self. This hermeneutic is made explicit in instances when it is ‘taught’ to the reader by means of Jesus’ dialogues with his disciples. He measures the disciples’ understandings by measuring the quality of their questions, and his evaluations are evident in the types of responses he gives. When questions are ill-conceived or miss the point of the larger message as it is presented throughout gospel, he dismisses the question by providing a response that appears to be a non-sequitur but which ultimately serves to turn the disciples’ gazes in a more suitable direction. Logion 51 serves as an example of this corrective: “His disciples said to him, ‘On what day will the rest of the dead come into being, and on what day will the new world come?’ And he said to them, ‘What you await to has come, but you do not know it.’” When read within the broader context of the text, this response evokes neither a realized eschatology nor the possibility of escaping the constraints of this world in the present life. It instead shifts the conversation away from eschatological questions entirely, criticizing the belief that total fulfillment must come when time itself has been fulfilled. Alternatively, it emphasizes the critical present moment, the moment in which Jesus is here as a living voice imparting his

knowledge. Because of Jesus' ironic response, it is reasonable to assume that "what they await" does not refer to the rest for the dead and the new world after all. In logion 38, this desire for things to come is pitted directly against the fact that the true object of desire has already arrived, and it is none other than Jesus and his words: "Jesus said, 'Many times have you desired to hear these words which I speak to you, and you have no other from whom to hear them. Days will come when you will seek me and you will not find me.'" The concern for the end of days is here characterized as a distraction from the present significance of Jesus, an unjustified deferral of the realization of Jesus' soteriological relationship to the world which is instead found in the ability to engage with the deeper meaning of his words in the here and now, regardless of where that may fall in history.

This theme is further developed in logion 24: "His disciples said, 'Show us the place where you are, because it is necessary for us to seek it.' He said to them, 'He who has ears, let him hear! There is light within a man of light, and he lights the whole world. If he does not shine, there is darkness.'" The disciples' question echoes the second logion, which follows hot on the heels of the incipit's hermeneutical challenge. It reads, "Jesus said, 'He who seeks, let him not cease seeking until he finds; and when he finds he will be troubled, and when he is troubled, he will be amazed, and he will reign over the All.'" The reversed sequence of first achieving the assumed goal by finding the thing sought to instead becoming ever more unsettled by it inverts the disciples' expectations that the Jesus, in his essence, is an entity external to themselves that they must attempt to grasp. Rather, the true object of their search is nothing other than the wisdom they now receive and the relationship to Jesus which is fostered through interpreting it. Without

establishing the proper epistemological continuity between the knowledge imparted and its ability to illuminate the spiritual self, then the world outside - the one in which the disciples ironically look for Jesus and the fulfillment of his sayings - is dark.

Logion 37 further heightens this division between the two types of knowing, the difference between encountering something in the world and truly internalizing it. It reads, “His disciples said, ‘On what day will you be revealed to us, and on what day shall we see you?’ Jesus said, ‘When you unclthe yourselves and are not ashamed, and take your garments and lay them beneath your feet like the little children and trample on them, then you will see the son of the living one, and you will not be afraid.’” The disciples again appear to be asking an eschatological question, but, as Uwe-Karsten Plisch notes, the question seems only loosely tied to the answer. One would expect such a response to be paired with an inquiry similar to what is found in the Gospel of the Savior: “Will you remember us, send for us, and take us out of the world so that we will come to you?” (99.33-39). To the contrary, the question as it appears in the Gospel of Thomas seems to have been secondarily formulated to tie in to the original Jesus logion through the catchword “see.”³⁴ With Plisch’s observation, and with Jesus’ negative attitude toward such eschatological concerns established elsewhere throughout the text, we can identify the construction of this dialogue with an authorial design. In this sense, it seems that DeConick is correct to say that the voice of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas is being brought to speak to the questions of a later community, for this logion cannot make sense if it is read literally. Jesus is obviously already with them if they are holding this conversation, but the disjunction between the inquiry and its answer suggests that the

³⁴ *The Gospel of Thomas: Original Text with Commentary*, trans. Gesine Schenke Robinson, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2008), p. 108.

dialogue was formulated not to illustrate that the memory of Jesus is already present, but rather to instruct the disciples in *how* to access Jesus in the absence acknowledged by the nature of the question. The lesson is that a present relationship to the living Jesus can be realized, but that it begins with the proper perceptivity necessary for successful interpretive engagement. When the disciples disregard their external concerns - their metaphorical garments - and become like children, they will look with fresh eyes unencumbered by the assumption that they must seek meaning from the outside in as passive receivers of the knowledge of events of history. In this manner, the Gospel of Thomas leads the reader's interpretive relationship to Jesus inward, endowing Jesus' words with an active agency that allows the moment of their utterance to escape spatio-temporal bounds and be renewed for each individual reader through active hermeneutical engagement.

IV. Conclusions

As a result of the articulation of this hermeneutic throughout the Gospel of Thomas, we can see that author is keenly aware of the problem of Jesus' absence and that he endeavors to reconcile the temporal space between the historical Jesus and subsequent communities of readers by shifting emphasis to the ongoing activity of interpreting Jesus' oral proclamation. The text's primitive literary genre is consistent with this explicit hermeneutical position, and for this reason, we cannot describe the text of the Gospel of Thomas as a relatively untampered with deposit of oral traditions the likes of which the canonical evangelists manipulated into more developed literary forms. Arguments that the Gospel of Thomas is an orally constituted text which does not not profess an interest

in historical accuracy or later efforts to textualize the oral proclamation of Jesus fall short of telling the whole story of the Gospel of Thomas's composition, but such observations contribute a great deal to our understanding of the compositional decisions which shape the textual form that these oral units come to assume. By revealing the depth of the Gospel of Thomas's affinity with orality and oral mediums, DeConick's theory not only draws crucial attention to the privileging of the living Jesus' voice which pervades the text and shapes its ideology, but also draws attention to the text's strong stance concerning what the significance of Jesus is and how it must be represented in text. It is because of this orientation toward orality that we are able to place the Gospel of Thomas within the same literary atmosphere as the canonical evangelists, representing an intentional attempt to bridge the gap between the presenced oral encounter and the necessity to produce written accounts, an attempt to draw continuity between the original event of Jesus' proclamation and the historical moments of its readers. Like the New Testament gospels, the Gospel of Thomas positions itself as a self-conscious participant in the transition from oral tradition to its preservation in text, and for this reason it is a gospel in the most original sense of the term, seeking to provide for its readers a self-sufficient account which captures the essence of Jesus' time in the world as the author understands it.

CHAPTER 2: Kinship and Critique: The Gospel of Thomas and the Synoptic Tradition

In the previous chapter, I argued that the Gospel of Thomas participates in the same literary gospel movement as the canonical evangelists, but the questions of a direct textual relationship to the synoptic gospels and the degree to which the author of the Gospel of Thomas is a self-conscious participant in this particular literary tradition remain to be considered. The correlations to synoptic literature which dominate more than half of the text are striking, but the determination of when and through what point of contact these materials became incorporated remains a fraught and difficult task. Some of the Gospel of Thomas's sayings show priority or independence from the synoptic tradition while others are demonstrably later and suggest a conscious awareness of synoptic sources. The combination of the two with the Gospel of Thomas's own evidently original material renders it difficult to draw a sure conclusion, and scholarship on this subject is at loggerheads concerning how deeply or superficially the Gospel of Thomas relates to synoptic literature and its sources.

The stakes of this question appear to be quite high for our appreciation of the Gospel of Thomas in its literary environment. The working assumption is that, if the Gospel of Thomas's shared content with synoptic literature is simply derivative, then it has very little new to contribute to our understanding of the emergence of the Christian scriptures and their underlying sources. As Stephen J. Patterson asks, "Does the Gospel of Thomas represent an exotic spin-off from the mainstream of synoptic Christianity, or is it, like John, the document of yet another early Christian school of thought, what one

might call ‘Thomas Christianity?’”³⁵ Through an evaluation of the conflicting evidence within the Gospel of Thomas and of arguments for its literary independence from the later stages of the synoptic tradition, I will propose in the following chapter that the answer must be both and neither, that the use of early and unredacted material positions the text as an independent example of the shaping of early synoptic sources, but that the concomitant use of later and redacted material creates a tension within the text which constitutes a direct critique of how the synoptic gospels present the same content. This critique, as I will argue, is a hermeneutical one, further developing the articulation of the Gospel of Thomas’s own by creating a rhetorical opposition to the synoptic gospels and the hermeneutic products of their literary presentations.

I. Arguments for and Against the Gospel of Thomas’s Literary Independence

Arguments for the Gospel of Thomas’s independence from the synoptic tradition are based upon three primary observations: that it fails to mirror the ordering and verbiage of its parallels in the synoptic gospels, that the text (or certain of its sayings) can be shown to pre-date the synoptics, thus rendering it an impossibility for the Gospel of Thomas or some of its elements to be derivative of them, and that there is not sufficient evidence for redaction on which to base a claim that the Gospel of Thomas’s author or editor was interacting with synoptic materials to any significant degree.

First, the synoptic parallels within the Gospel of Thomas do not follow the ordering presented in their synoptic counterparts, and despite the substantial number of such parallels, none are identical in wording. These observations are taken to suggest that the author or editor of the Gospel of Thomas could not have been directly consulting

³⁵ *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1993), p. 16.

synoptic texts during composition, a conclusion largely based upon comparison with the more obvious literary interplay between Matthew and Luke with Mark. According to April DeConick, “The exact verbal agreement, lengthy sequences of words, and secondary features shared between the Triple Tradition versions and the Quelle versions far exceed anything we find in the Gospel of Thomas.”³⁶ The implication, then, is that the burden of proof for proponents of a literary relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and the synoptics has been set rather high. Stephen Patterson articulates the criteria:

My assumption is that in order to be convincing, a theory of literary dependence must show not just that two texts share a good deal of material in common, but specifically that 1) between the texts in question there is a consistent pattern of dependence, i.e., that one author can be seen regularly to build upon the text of the other, rather than on yet another shared source (oral or written); and that 2) the sequence of individual pericopae in each text is substantially the same.³⁷

Patterson also cites the presence of doublets within the Gospel of Thomas as further evidence for its relative independence, arguing that these doublets, particularly when coupled with the factors mentioned above, offer incontrovertible proof that an author or redactor could not have been moving methodically through a text or texts: “How is it to be explained that the Thomas author/editor created two different versions of the same saying, including them both as single, independent sayings? This alone seems to rule out dependence on the synoptics.” Building upon the insights of Helmut Koester, who suggests that the Gospel of Thomas was the work of a “collector or compiler who used a number of smaller units of collected sayings, some perhaps available in written form, and composed them randomly,”³⁸ Patterson argues that the Gospel of Thomas was composed

³⁶ *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation: With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 23.

³⁷ Patterson, p. 16.

³⁸ : *Their History and Development*, (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990), p. 81-82.

of primitive oral and written traditions which, at this early stage, may have intersected with the sources used by the synoptic gospels. He stipulates, however, that although the Gospel of Thomas grew from the same roots as the synoptics, it proceeded from that point forward along its own autonomous course. This course, as he understands it, preserves a purer form of the original Jesus tradition in contrast to the synoptic gospels who “absorb and defuse the sayings tradition by embedding it in a biographical narrative.”³⁹

Consequently, he assigns the early date of 70 C.E. to the completion of the text, before all but one of the synoptic gospels had been composed and long before any had begun to gain normative authority or broad circulation. If this date is accurate, then it explains why the Gospel of Thomas seemed to remain immune to the literary influence of the synoptics. However, Patterson’s argument for dating is circular. It seems that the text is early because he identifies its form as primitive, and it is primitive because he identifies it as early. What constitutes a ‘consistent pattern of dependence’ needs refinement, then, if it is to serve as a viable criterion. Some consecutive sayings in the Gospel of Thomas do, in fact, reflect the order in which they appear in the synoptics,⁴⁰ and at certain points, a single sentence within the Gospel of Thomas is drawn half from a Lucan iteration and half from a Matthean iteration.⁴¹ As Nicholas Perrin shrewdly notes, “For any given pericope in Matthew or Luke, certifiable Mattheanisms or Lucanisms are

³⁹ Patterson, p. 105.

⁴⁰ R. McL. Wilson notes that logia 32 and 33 follow the succession of their parallels in Matthew 5:14-15, and that 44-45 follow Matthew 12:31-35 (“Thomas and the Growth of the Gospels,” *Harvard Theological Review* 63 (1960), p. 245. Simon Gathercole adds to this list logia 92-94 as successive parallels to Matthew 7:6-8 (*The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: Original Language and Influences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 131).

⁴¹ Logion 16, for example, appears to represent a harmonization of Matthew 10:34 and Luke 12:51.

relatively uncommon. How many such sure marks of written synoptic tradition would one need in order for Patterson to reverse himself?”⁴²

To be sure, Patterson does concede that, in some instances, the Gospel of Thomas undeniably contains the trademark language of its synoptic counterparts and that, given its numerous if oblique affinities with the synoptic texts, it would be irresponsible to claim that at no point throughout Gospel of Thomas’s circulation did its scribes or editors manifest some awareness of synoptic literature. He responds by positing that explicitly synoptic influences crept in by the hands of later scribes who were better acquainted with the synoptic traditions, and who, either intentionally or unintentionally, brought the Gospel of Thomas in line. The unavoidable inclusion of scribal interference as part of the Gospel of Thomas’s development, however, renders problematic the claim that it ran purely parallel to the synoptic tradition throughout its entire evolution while accumulating only nominal synoptic influence. One must then reconsider the question of how deeply the Gospel of Thomas’s affinities with the synoptic tradition actually run.

This is not to say that there are not some sayings within the Gospel of Thomas that show priority. For example, its rendering of the parable of the sower reads:

Jesus says, “Listen, the sower went out, he filled his hand and cast the seed. Some fell upon the road; the birds came, they gathered them. Others fell upon the rock, and struck no root in the ground, nor did they produce any ears. And others fell on the thorns; they choked the seed and the worm ate them. And others fell on the good earth, and it produced good fruit. It yielded sixty per measure and a hundred and twenty per measure.”(9).

There is substantial agreement between this version of the parable and the ones found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but by form critical standards, the Thomas version is considered earliest based upon its relative simplicity and brevity and its lack of the

⁴² *Thomas: The Other Gospel*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2007), p. 29

secondary interpretations provided by the synoptic authors. Despite some minor additions, like the exaggerated abundance of the seed sown in good soil and that the sower first fills his hand, it appears that Thomas's simpler version is closer to the original one which had been expanded to a greater degree by the synoptic authors.⁴³

Yet while this particular logion may well represent an earlier stage of the parable's transmission, one must assess the significance of this observation within the broader matrix of the Gospel of Thomas. In its rendering of the parable of the wheat sown among the tares, for example, the flow of tradition seems to run in the opposite direction:

Jesus says, "The kingdom of the Father is like a man who had good seed. His enemy came by night and sowed weeds among the good seed. The man did not allow them to pull up the weeds. He said to them, 'Lest you go pull up the weeds, and pull up the wheat with it. For on the day of the harvest, the weeds will be manifest; they will be pulled up and burned. (57).

This version is obviously much more terse than the one found in Matthew 13:24-30, but the form critical rule of thumb that the shorter version is earlier or more original does not apply in this case. Thomas's rendering hits on the high points of Matthew's parable, but the narrative elements of the subsequent growing of both kinds of plant and the introduction of the slave characters and their dialogue with the householder are conspicuously absent. The lucidity of Thomas's version suffers without these elements, as the pronoun 'you' stands alone with no expressed antecedent or narrative context. For this reason, the parable as it appears in the Gospel of Thomas seems to presuppose Matthew's version; thus, it represents a later stage of development.

⁴³ Gerd Ludemann writes, "On the whole we must regard the version of Thomas as older than that of Mark, because it is simpler." (*Jesus After 2000 Years: What He Really Said and Did*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001, p. 28). See also: Robert W. Funk and Roy H. Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1993), p. 478.

If, in the unlikely case that this were the original version which Matthew instead had edited and expanded, then we are left with the question of why the author of the Gospel of Thomas would not have shared in Matthew's desire to 'correct' the problem. Assuming that the compiler of the Gospel of Thomas naturally shared in the typical impulse to harmonize the sayings with the normative traditions he knows, as Patterson's theory stipulates, we are left with the question of why this author or editor would do so with no care for consistency, and why he would excise Matthew's clarifying details rather than embrace them. The rendering of the same story in less lucid terms runs so counter to the established form critical principles that this editorial choice appears significant in and of itself. It is exceedingly difficult to imagine that an editor would allow the text to remain at the brink of unintelligibility when other options were readily available - unless, of course, there was some reason governing this choice.

James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester posit that these questions are easily resolved by the identification of the Gospel of Thomas's genre. They identify the text as a collection of 'logoi sophon,' or sayings of the wise, which consist of brief aphorisms and pithy maxims unaccompanied by narrative embellishments.⁴⁴ They argue that Q, the no longer extant sayings source from which Matthew and Luke drew their common content in addition to their uses of Mark's gospel, is an example of the logoi sophon genre, and in Koester's view, this Gattung is a particularly flexible one in which it is neither necessary nor in keeping with generic convention for the author or editor to "deliberately compose his book according to a general master plan."⁴⁵ If it can be verified that the whole of the

⁴⁴ James M. Robinson, "LOGOI SOPHON: On the Gattung of Q," in *Trajectories Through Early Christianity*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 79-81. Helmut Koester, "GNOMAI DIAPHOROI: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity, (Ibid.), p. 135.

⁴⁵ *Ancient Christian Gospels*, p. 82.

Gospel of Thomas either predates the synoptics or the time when they began to gain normative authority - or if it can be demonstrated that the Gospel of Thomas did not interact with the synoptics in any significant degree throughout the entire course of its development - then the classification of the Gospel of Thomas as a genuine example of the primitive sayings collection is sufficient. However, if Robinson and Koester are correct that Gospel of Thomas is the sole survivor of a genre that had otherwise been absorbed into other literary forms, one wonders why the original text of Q, for instance, had not been treated with equal care, or why the Gospel of Thomas continued to be scribed and translated as an apparently unadulterated collection of sayings until at least the middle of the fourth century when it landed in the Nag Hammadi library.

However, when we consider what was excised from the parable of the wheat sown among the tares, we find a glimpse into the author's motivation to keep his text consistent with its primitive genre. As Joachim Jeremias notes, "It will be seen that the ending is shorter than in Matthew, who, anticipating his allegorical interpretation, may have somewhat overelaborated the separation of wheat from tares."⁴⁶ In the interpretation in Matthew 13:37-43, each of the narrative elements included in the parable are assigned symbolic referents, and, as is readily apparent, Thomas's rendering retains none of the allegorical treatment which Matthew appends. Yet while succinctness is characteristic of Thomas's formal presentation, it is clear that the presumed editor was far busier with his scissors than simply lopping off Matthew's subsequent interpretation. If one is left with Thomas's version alone, it would be difficult to reach Matthew's reading. Without the reapers, there can be no angels (13:39), and without the sower's declaration that he will direct the reapers to burn the weeds, the allegorical relationship between the sower and

⁴⁶ *The Parables of Jesus*, (New York: SCM Press, 1963), p. 224.

the divine agency of the Son of Man is far less vivid (13:37, 41-2). Thus, the Gospel of Thomas not only reshapes synoptic materials into a form consistent with its chosen genre, but this reshaping also constitutes a rejection of Matthew's and the synoptics' narrative modes of presentation and tendency to provide secondary interpretations.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the Gospel of Thomas employs the sayings-gospel genre as a means to retain an oral metaphysics of presence, stressing engaged interpretation as the means by which subsequent readers can assume an active relationship with Jesus' words rather than a passive stance as receivers of his biography. This suspicion of narrative extends even to its abbreviated form in parable. As Richard Valantasis notes, "The sayings cajole the audience into thinking, experiencing, processing information, and responding to important issues of life and living without providing more than a brief time to consider the question fully."⁴⁷ It follows that if the Gospel of Thomas's readers are provided with readymade interpretations, then the interpretive dynamism necessary to enact this relationship is forfeited. Thus, the Gospel of Thomas cannot include those narrative elements which facilitate the allegorical interpretations of its parables if it is to remain faithful to its professed hermeneutic theology. Moreover, because a substantial subset of the Gospel of Thomas's sayings reveal not only an awareness of the synoptics' sources but also of the synoptic gospels themselves, we must consider the extent to which its hermeneutical emphasis constitutes a reaction against what is found in its synoptic counterparts. A return to the discussion of this hermeneutic as it pertains specifically to synoptic texts and the religious concerns they address reveals that the product of the author's compositional choices represents a

⁴⁷ *The Gospel of Thomas*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 7.

critical revision of what this author perceives as the synoptic tradition's failure to capture Jesus' presence and establish an active relationship between Jesus and his believers.

II. The Gospel of Thomas's Hermeneutical Critique

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Gospel of Thomas uses the interrogative dialogue as a device by which to demonstrate which lines of inquiry it deems appropriate and to communicate its stance concerning the issues raised in the question. Of the exceptionally few examples of well-received questions within the Gospel of Thomas, one is logion 21 in which Mary inquires after what it means to be a true disciple:

Mary said to Jesus, "What are your disciples like?" He said, "They are like little children living in a field that is not theirs. When the owners of the field come, they will say, 'Give us back our field.' They take off their clothes in front of them in order to give it back to them, and they return their field to them. For this reason I say, if the owners of a house know that a thief is coming, they will be on guard before the thief arrives, and will not let the thief break into their house and steal their possessions. As for you, then, be on guard against the world. Prepare yourselves with great strength so the robbers can't find a way to get to you, for the trouble you expect will come. Let there be among you a person who understands..."

The metaphor of clothing used here operates in much the same way as it does in logion 52, in which these garments belong to some other, external domain and should be happily renounced. But whereas in logion 52 the removal represents the first step toward the proper hermeneutical perceptivity required to "see the son of the living one," the use of the clothing metaphor in logion 21 applies to a more explicit discussion of the seeker's relationship to other prominent cultural and religious contexts. The tension between the domain of Gospel of Thomas's true seekers and the jurisdiction of conventional religious authority is established through the chiasmic juxtaposition of the first unit of the response,

in which the disciples are characterized as squatters on someone else's property, and the second in which they are addressed as the property owners themselves. In the first half, the disciples' relationship to other dominant social and religious authorities is described as superficial, but the acknowledgement of the superficiality of this relationship is cast in a positive light. The second half of the response, on the other hand, represents an inversion of the first. By loosing the fetters of their routinized identities, they are able to take their places as true disciples, and the ostensible owners of the tradition in turn become the trespassers.

Because the implications of Mary's question are explored by differentiating between true discipleship and false discipleship rather than distinguishing between Christians and other dominant religious cultures, it is clear that the tension being drawn is between the Thomas Christians and the larger Christian tradition. Yet there is another, subtler hierarchy operating within this saying. After Jesus responds to Mary's initial query, he abruptly switches the pronoun and the thrust of his response with the phrase "As for you," establishing a hierarchy even among the disciples in his midst. Throughout the Gospel of Thomas, the stock disciples typically model the incorrect way to question, and they demonstrate both the inept application of the Gospel of Thomas's hermeneutic of questioning and the type of people who perpetrate it. Through an analysis of the types of ill-conceived inquiries they make, the nature of the Gospel of Thomas's hermeneutical critique of the New Testament gospels may be defined with greater precision.

For example, logion 6 reads, "His disciples said to him, 'Do you want us to fast? And in which way should we pray and give alms? And what diet should we serve?'"

Rather than answering them directly as one might expect, Jesus replies with the cryptic, “Do not lie, and do not do what you hate. For everything is disclosed in view of the truth. For there is nothing hidden that will not become revealed, and there is nothing covered that will remain undisclosed.” By refusing to entertain the question, Jesus utterly denies the significance of public demonstrations of religious piety, creating a complete disjuncture between such outward displays of faith and the disciples’ own moral integrity. The message is that the standard for true piety and the source for true spiritual fulfillment is found first and foremost within the self and that to be preoccupied with conventional demonstrations of devotion is to miss this fundamental point. Jesus does provide an actual response to the question in logion 14 when he explicitly rejects these same ritual practices, but by isolating the response from the question, the ignorance of the questioners is further emphasized and occasion is provided for Jesus to subordinate these practical social concerns to the superior spiritual knowledge which is instead achieved through the proper practice of the Gospel of Thomas’s hermeneutic. The thrice repeated theme of hidden truths becoming exposed reinforces the position that spiritual attainment does not flow from the outside in through adherence to established conventional practices - the domain of routinized religion. Rather, it is the inward preparation of the self which equips the seeker to access the deeper mysteries embedded within Jesus’ sayings and to ensure that the seeker’s relationship to this meaning is not filtered through the imposition of external religious rules.

But it is not only the questioners who receive Jesus’ critique in logia 6 and 14. At the compositional stratum, this saying also implicates Matthew’s gospel for operating at the wrong level of thinking. While these verses do not parallel Matthew 6:1-18 per se,

they certainly seem to constitute a direct response to it. In Matthew, Jesus explains precisely how to execute the same ritual practices after which the disciples inquire in Thomas, and although in Matthew Jesus is critical of the manner in which some others execute these rituals, he does not deny their importance. In logion 6, however, those misguided cares are placed in the mouths of disciples whose ignorance is revealed through this very question, and in logion 14, Jesus proceeds to reject the importance of such mundane concerns completely, both acknowledging and critiquing Matthew's gospel by extension. In this manner, a correlation is drawn between Matthew and the misguided disciples who receive Jesus' direct opprobrium, and in logion 13, the critique of Matthew and of traditional Christian authority is made even more explicit, as it is here that the lower class of disciples becomes associated with specific names:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Compare me to something and tell me what I am like." Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a just messenger." Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher." Thomas said to him, "Teacher, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like." Jesus said, "I am not your teacher. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended." And he took him, and withdrew, and spoke three things to him. When Thomas came back to his friends, they asked him, "What did Jesus say to you?" Thomas said to them, "If I tell you one of the things he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me, and fire will come from the rocks and devour you."

Given the Gospel of Thomas's general avoidance of christological titles and Jesus' dismissive response, Jesus is not here seeking a literal answer to his question. Rather, he sets up an opportunity to emphasize not only which types of responses are inadequate, but whose, and it is none other than the traditional Church authorities of Matthew and Simon Peter who voice the incorrect interpretations. Matthew's and Simon Peter's adhere most closely to the routine conceptions of divine figures as heavenly messengers or transcendentally wise, and it is their failure to understand Jesus' true ineffable nature that

prevents them from receiving the special knowledge earned by Thomas through his superior understanding. Although Thomas's characterization of Jesus as teacher seems also to be dismissed, it is only dismissed with qualification. Jesus *was* a teacher to Thomas, but the causal 'because' suggests that Thomas's learning dispensed with the need for Jesus to continue to function in this capacity. Thomas understands how to properly learn from Jesus, but he did not reach this point by interpreting him through any other religious configurations - only by drinking directly from the spring of Jesus' own words. It is Thomas - not Matthew or Simon Peter - who graduates to this superior level, and not only that, but if they were able to know what Thomas knew, they would evidently be insulted and become enraged.

It is significant that this logion breaks with the pattern of Jesus instructing his disciples of their interpretive missteps by providing cryptic responses to redirect their gazes. Instead, Jesus dignifies Matthew and Simon Peter with no response at all, further heightening their ignorance and solidifying their exclusion from the inner circle of true disciples. This chilly response stands in stark contrast to his reply to Salome in her similar question concerning Jesus' identity in logion 61:

Jesus said, "Two will recline on a couch; one will die, one will live.
 Salome said, "Who are you mister? You have climbed onto my couch and eaten from my table as if you are from someone."
 Jesus said to her, "I am the one who comes from what is whole. I was granted from the things of my Father."
 "I am your disciple."
 "For this reason I say, if one is whole, one will be filled with light, but if one is divided, one will be filled with darkness."

Jesus begins the dialogue by distinguishing between two different types of people, the ones who will live and the ones who will die. When Salome poses her question, she is evidently unfamiliar with Jesus and so is not rebuked for her initial failure to recognize

him. Her intuitive perception of his true identity, however, quickly renders her a positive example, as he need only speak one sentence for her to understand his power, declare herself a follower, and become one of the ones who will not taste death by perceiving his true nature. The contrast lies in the fact that Matthew and Simon Peter had already received Jesus' instruction and should have known better. For this reason, their error is even graver than that of the other disciples who simply misunderstand. According to Logion 39, "Jesus said, 'The Pharisees and the scribes have received the keys of knowledge, but they have hidden them. Neither have they entered, nor did they let enter those who wished to enter.'" In the parallel in Matthew 23:13, the scribes and Pharisees are sharply castigated, but in the Gospel of Thomas, they receive no such woe. Unlike Matthew's portrayal, they are not presented as specific historical characters whom Jesus takes on as rivals. Rather, Plisch identifies the true object of criticism as "the imperial monopolization of knowledge, the typical conduct of political and religious elites."⁴⁸ By neutralizing the polemic as it appears in Matthew, Thomas is able to blur the distinction between the error of the scribes and Pharisees and the same error as it is committed by Matthew and Simon Peter. This error, however, lies not only in the failure to understand, but in that this faulty understanding, when perpetuated by figures of religious authority, obscures everyone else's access to the truth. In literary terms, the synoptic evangelists have received the same sayings, the same keys to knowledge, but they have hidden them by defusing them within a historically delimited narrative exterior to Jesus' own teachings, one which controls and curtails the interpretive activity necessary for an individual to maintain an active relationship with Jesus in the manner that the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas teaches it.

⁴⁸ Plisch, p. 111.

As we have seen previously in logion 21, the Gospel of Thomas construes this willful infelicity as a kind of theft which threatens to remove what is gained through direct access to Jesus' own words as they are purportedly preserved unadulterated in the Gospel of Thomas, and in logion 43, the author articulates this position explicitly and situates his gospel as superior to the others for this very reason: "His disciples said to him, 'Who are you to say this to us?' 'Do you not realize from what I say to you who I am? But you have become like the Jews: they love the tree, but they hate its fruit. Or they love the fruit, but they hate the tree.'" This dialogue echoes the criticism voiced in logion 52 when the disciples attempt to compress Jesus' living voice to fit within the fixed, temporally distanced outcome of prophecy. Logion 43 similarly denounces such attempts to reach an understanding of the person of Jesus through the lenses of traditional configurations rather than allowing his words to speak for themselves. The impudent questions are reprimanded for bifurcating the preacher and his sermon, the saying and the source, and it also reinforces the position assumed throughout the Gospel of Thomas that proper understanding of Jesus comes only from proper engagement with his words.

However, this logion stands apart because of the uncharacteristic hostility of the disciples' question as well as the passage's unusual failure to identify Jesus as the responder. As Valantasis notes, it is left tantalizingly ambiguous as to whether the reply comes from Jesus or from the author himself. The combination of these factors invites a double - or two simultaneous - readings of the logion, the first outlined above and the second evocative of a controversy concerning the integrity of the text of the Gospel of Thomas itself. If, in fact, it is the authority of this particular text and its author which the disciples impudently call into question, then this rare in-breaking of the authorial voice

unequivocally declares that the presentation of nothing but the undiluted and unadulterated words of Jesus himself should be more than enough proof of the text's integrity.⁴⁹ Therefore, the unity of the saying and the source applies to the author just as it applies to Jesus, and it is precisely because the author endeavors to present Jesus' sayings without secondary interpretation and without placing them within the conceptual limitations of a secondary mythological or narrative framework that he bases his claim for the preeminent authority of his text. Of course, it is possible that the omission of the phrase "Jesus said" owes to a simple scribal error, but whether or not these are to be understood as the author's or Jesus' words, the effect is essentially the same and consistent with the ambiguity between text and living voice that is present throughout the Gospel of Thomas: that when one is hearing - or reading - Jesus' words, they are encountering Jesus' voice, and the Gospel of Thomas is a text which aims to teach and reinforce this epistemological lesson through its compositional choice to present only the fruit that is attached directly to the tree.

The genius of this logion's ambiguity is that Jesus' own voice subtly but forcefully provides a rationale both for why this text, its author, and its hermeneutic are preferred and why the others fall short. In many ways, this logion stands at the climax of the Gospel of Thomas's hermeneutical critique. It is the moment when the author names the stakes with which he sees his text to be playing, and those stakes are none other than the ability to recognize Jesus at all. The disciples' question represents the gravest possible consequence of their interpretive misconceptions. Their insistence upon first finding a name or label before they will justify listening to the speaker not only renders them incapable of hearing the living voice in their presence and knowing who is speaking with

⁴⁹ Valantasis, p. 119.

it, but their lack of perceptivity also renders them prejudicially hostile to the speaker's message as well as to the text which conveys it. Furthermore, because of its overtly polemical tone, this logion establishes that the text of the Gospel of Thomas does not simply represent an independently developed alternative take on pre-synoptic sources. Logion 43, like logion 39 as discussed above, correlates the flawed disciples with the Jews, the dominant religious authority from which the Christian tradition took its roots before pursuing its own self-definition. By contextualizing its polemic within a debate concerning dominant authority while displacing the Jews as the particularized object of this polemic, the Gospel of Thomas acknowledges its fundamental kinship with the majority Church while articulating its critical position. The Jews famously failed to recognize Jesus, and in the view of the Gospel of Thomas, the Church commits the same error and perpetuates it through its proprietary texts.

IV. Conclusions

Although there is evidence that the Gospel of Thomas incorporates some primitive, pre-synoptic materials, this evidence is not universally applicable. Whether or not there is consensus concerning what constitutes a 'significant degree' of interaction, there are too many instances of redaction and verbal harmonization to be ignored completely, and the isolation of certain early or late sayings cannot explain *why* some elements of the Gospel of Thomas persist in primitive and unredacted form while others betray a strong editorial hand. Given the sum of the evidence, it is more plausible to conclude that the text was shaped by an author who intentionally incorporated synoptic materials in accord with the type of reading he meant to evince, but this is not to say that

form and source critical observations concerning its genre and constituent elements do not contribute a great deal to the analysis of how and in what manner this author shaped the synoptic materials at his disposal. By assessing how the author engages his synoptic sources, it becomes clear that there is a method to the Gospel of Thomas's madness. Its apparent disorganization, appearance of primitivity and lack of narrative, and excision of secondary interpretation serve a well-articulated hermeneutical purpose. They converge to establish a relationship between Jesus, his sayings, and his followers which is fostered and maintained by their own interpretive grappling with his teachings, and it would run counter to the hermeneutical relationship which the Gospel of Thomas encourages to present this information in a more developed literary form.

But with these presentational choices and the persuasive purpose they serve, the author of the Gospel of Thomas is also an editor of the synoptic tradition, strongly and explicitly critiquing not only the way in which the synoptic evangelists present similar information, but also the authority and traditions which develop around these texts. The Gospel of Thomas represents a radically conservative voice, demanding a return to Jesus' original proclamation and denouncing any external authority that threatens to remove interpretive ownership from the reader. This critique is a fundamentally hermeneutical one. It re-centers the location of meaning and redefines the method by which this meaning is presented and sought. In the process, it questions the credibility of traditional interpretive authorities and the secondary religious and theological concerns which govern the interpretations they enforce.

On the one hand, the identification of sayings derived from primitive, pre-synoptic sources claims a space for the text as a genuine participant in the synoptic

tradition whose relationship to later synoptic sources cannot be dismissed as simply derivative. On the other hand, the identification of instances of synoptic redaction claims a space for the Gospel of Thomas as a meaningful, deliberate divergence from that tradition, one which voices a new literary alternative for these sources as they have been handed down by the synoptics. When we acknowledge that the Gospel of Thomas is evaluating and critiquing the normative New Testament gospels, we are able to see how it privileges the primitive form of the sources it retains, how it understands what a gospel ought to be and how it ought to function in the lives of its readers.

CHAPTER 3: The Gospel of Thomas and Its Gnostic Legacy: Orthodoxy, Heresy, and the Hermeneutical Space Between

In the previous chapters, I have argued that the Gospel of Thomas represents a critical revision of the synoptic tradition and its literature, tailoring its use of synoptic sources according to a discrete ideological agenda. The nature of its critique stands at the crux of the transition within early Christianity from a primarily oral to a primarily scriptural tradition, one in which the Christian message is normalized through the authority of its texts and the faithfulness with which these texts convey that message. The Gospel of Thomas questions the way in which the narrative gospels fulfill this scriptural purpose, suggesting that they have failed to capture the immediacy and energy of Jesus' oral proclamation and that their emphasis upon time-bound events and the concerns of institutionalized religion fails to bridge the temporal gap between the original presence of Jesus and the needs of later communities to reencounter this presence in their own post-Easter worlds.

The question remains, however, as to what ideology the Gospel of Thomas's agenda belongs and how to navigate between its substantial affinities with the synoptic tradition, on the one hand, and its critical position toward the literary developments of this tradition on the other. William Arnal offers the explanation that the Gospel of Thomas is a stratified document containing two distinct layers: an original synoptic stratum and a later gnostic redaction which manipulated this core to reflect the concerns of the gnostic community in which the text ultimately landed. In his view, it is this

gnostic redaction which is responsible for the final meaning of the text,⁵⁰ and it was not uncommon for gnostic authors to embrace the normative Christian scriptures and incorporate them into expositions of their own beliefs. Such connections between the Gospel of Thomas and Gnosticism have been made since its earliest extant attestation. In his *Refutation of All Heresies* (ca. 200 C.E.), for example, Hippolytus credits the Naassene gnostic sect with the Gospel of Thomas's composition,⁵¹ and a century and a half later, Cyril of Jerusalem would attest that it was favored by Manichaean gnostics as well.⁵² Given that a mid-fourth century manuscript was discovered at Nag Hammadi bound in a codex among other more explicitly gnostic documents, it is beyond question that the Gospel of Thomas was widely embraced among gnostic communities for a number of centuries.

If, in the end, the Gospel of Thomas is simply a gnostic appropriation of the synoptic tradition, then the significance of its unique stance toward the function of the written gospel and its ultimate rejection from the New Testament canon cannot be brought to bear in any meaningful way upon the conversation concerning what the Christian scriptures should contain and how this information should be presented. If, on the other hand, it can be demonstrated that the Gospel of Thomas does not fit so neatly into the gnostic box, then the fact that it was dismissed from the fold of the New Testament on grounds of Gnosticism becomes all the more significant. We must ask, then, if its subsequent utilization by gnostic groups has imposed an ideological disposition upon the text which is not native to it.

⁵⁰ "The Rhetoric of Marginality: Apocalypticism, Gnosticism, and Sayings Gospels," *The Harvard Theological Review*, 88 (1995), pp. 474-8.

⁵¹ 5.2.20

⁵² *Catechesis* 4.36

In the following chapter, I will explore the Gospel of Thomas's putative relationship with Gnosticism, arguing that, although certain of its sayings may be amenable to a gnostic sensibility, the text as a whole is resistant to the basic tenets of gnostic belief.⁵³ Thus, the association it comes to share with Gnosticism despite its straightforward and conservative use of synoptic sources, as well as its subsequent condemnation by the early Church as a result of this curious association, demand an explanation which penetrates beyond the facile justification that anything falling into the Church's constructed category of the 'gnostic heresy' was rejected. I propose that this explanation may be found in the Gospel of Thomas's own hermeneutic and the metaphysics of oral presence it seeks to preserve and that these factors render it incapable of stabilizing the tradition and preserving its lineage from the original event of Jesus.

I. The Gospel of Thomas and Gnostic Doctrine

In *The Theology of the Gospel According to Thomas*, Bertil Gartner asserts that, if there is one thing that can be said with certainty about the Gospel of Thomas, it is that "the gospel outwardly belongs in a Gnostic milieu,"⁵⁴ but in order to assess its possible affiliation with Gnosticism with more precision, a brief summary of gnostic belief is in order. Generally, gnosticism may be identified by the following characteristics: (1) a cosmology according to which the heavenly sphere is populated by a host of aeons, or divine emanations from the Godhead, (2) the construction of a mythological drama

⁵³ As I will address at greater length in the pages to follow, the terms 'gnostic' and 'Gnosticism' have been shown to be problematic, inattentive to the differences of belief among various gnostic groups and to the pre- and extra-Christian philosophical backdrop which underlies Christian gnostic movements as they come to solidify in the second century. I use the terms here and throughout this essay only for ease of reference and only to refer to those groups which share certain basic doctrinal characteristics.

⁵⁴ Trans. Eric J. Sharpe, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1961), pp. 91, 73.

according to which the aeon named Sophia, or Wisdom, falls from her place in this heavenly sphere, in her grief spawning an ignorant demiurge who in turn becomes the true creator of the material world, (3) the resultant belief that the material world is inherently corrupt and spiritually void but that certain elect contain sparks of Sophia's divinity, and (4) the conception of a divine redeemer figure who descends into this world in order to deliver the knowledge (γνῶσις) of this state of affairs. In Christian Gnosticism, the redeemer figure is construed as Christ, but only the elect are able to receive his esoteric wisdom and, in so doing, may release themselves from the fetters of the physical world and find salvation.⁵⁵

Gartner concludes after a survey of the Gospel of Thomas's content that "it seems first and foremost to be concerned with reproducing certain definite theological themes," and the themes which he identifies align closely with the description above. He recognizes the Gospel of Thomas's primary concerns as man's sorry situation in the corrupt world and in the body, the recognition and liberation of the light trapped within this body, and the characterization of the savior as the bearer of the esoteric knowledge concerning this light. In sum, "the basic view of Jesus is that he is none other than the true revealer of gnosis."⁵⁶

Indeed, it is not difficult to see how the Gospel of Thomas might lend itself to such interpretations. It does, after all, claim to relate "the *secret* words which the living Jesus spoke," and as discussed in the previous chapter, it is deeply critical of mundane concerns and the authority which governs them, dividing humankind into those who achieve spiritual immortality by aligning themselves with the light and those who remain

⁵⁵ This typological model is adapted from the one provided by Christoph Marksches in *Gnosis: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden, (New York: T&T Clark, 2003), pp. 16-17.

⁵⁶ Gartner, pp. 71-72.

dead in darkness. Nevertheless, we must contend with the fact that the text entirely lacks the characteristic gnostic cosmological myth, makes no mention of any ignorant demiurge, and does not employ an overtly gnostic vocabulary. As Irenaeus cautions however, these facts are not alone sufficient to rule out a gnostic subtext. In his sweeping treatise “on the detection and overthrow of gnosis falsely so-called,” the second-century bishop of Lyons explains that it was common practice for gnostics to cloak their teachings in conventional Christian language in order to claim legitimacy for their aberrant beliefs, and it was precisely for this reason that they posed a palpable threat to the mainstream Christian faith. To that effect, he begins his treatise with a warning:

Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should be at once detected. But it is craftily decked out in attractive dress so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced (ridiculous as the expression may seem) more true than the truth itself...What inexperienced person can with ease detect the presence of brass when it has been mixed up with silver?

He continues, “Their language resembles ours, but their sentiments are very different.”⁵⁷

It is as if to say, “Brace yourselves. These gnostics may sound like us, but don’t be fooled. Whatever story they are telling, it certainly is not ours,” and we find an example of this type of gnostic literature in the text designated ‘Gospel of Truth.’ It contains some thirty to sixty parallels and paraphrases of the New Testament, and it employs the simple New Testament terminology of “father” and “son.”⁵⁸ On the first pass, its prologue reads as a fairly conventional appropriation of the prologue to John’s gospel: “The proclamation of the Truth is a joy for those who have received grace from the Father of Truth, that they might learn to know him through the power of the Word that emanated

⁵⁷ *A.H.* 1.Preface.2

⁵⁸ Bentley Layton, “Introduction to the Gospel of Truth,” *The Gnostic Scriptures*, ed. Bentley Layton (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1987), p. 251.

from the fullness that is the Father's thought and intellect." The christological title 'Word,' its relationship to the 'fullness' of the Father, and its soteriological function in reestablishing the relationship between God and humankind appears to the lay reader a rather unsurprising assertion of conventional Christian belief. The gnostic initiate, however, would recognize the word 'fullness' (πλήρωμα) as a technical gnostic term referring not simply to God's perfect wholeness as one might initially assume, but to the heavenly sphere populated by aeons, or divine emanations from the Godhead, which is a central element of the gnostic cosmology. As Hans Jonas explains, "the tale is offered and withheld at the same time, its essentials are recounted for those who already know [gnostic theology] but tantalizingly veiled for those who do not."⁵⁹

In response, Irenaeus offers a detailed exposé of gnostic doctrine, similar to the one listed above, in order to demystify their secret knowledge and offer his reader the equipment by which to identify their heresy. Two millennia later, Bart Ehrman will invoke the same caution when reading the Gospel of Thomas. He contends that "there are [Gnostic perspectives evident in the text itself] and that these can help us explain some of the more difficult sayings of the Gospel." He does acknowledge that the Gospel of Thomas does not employ gnostic terminology or go on to develop gnostic themes, safeguarding his claim with the following assertion: "I do not think the Gospel of Thomas attempts to describe such a Gnostic view for its readers or to explicate its mythological undergirding. I think that it *presupposes* some such viewpoint and that if readers read the text with these presuppositions in mind, they can make sense of almost all the difficult

⁵⁹ *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 313.

sayings of the book.”⁶⁰ He proceeds to offer interpretations of select logia which he considers unintelligible without a gnostic belief structure from which to draw, using logion 28 as an example. It reads:

Jesus said, ‘I took my stand in the midst of the world, and in flesh I appeared to them. I found them all drunk, and I did not find any of them thirsty. My soul ached for the children of humanity, because they are blind in their hears and do not see, for they came into the world empty, and they also seek to depart from the world empty. But meanwhile they are drunk. When they shake off their wine, then they will change their ways.’

In Ehrman’s reading, this logion is the lamentation of a savior who, in typical gnostic fashion, affirms that the material world blinds humankind to the pure spiritual knowledge which this Christ figure has come to impart. He claims, “Salvation will not, therefore, be salvation that comes *to* this world; it will be salvation *from* this world. The world itself, this material existence, is not something that was created good (contrary to the doctrines of the proto-orthodox). It is a cosmic catastrophe, and salvation means escaping it.”⁶¹ To be sure, it is certainly possible to interpret the passage in this way, and in his commentary on the logion, Valantasis categorizes it as the most traditionally gnostic in the Gospel of Thomas due to its compatibility with gnostic redeemer mythology and its emphasis upon the need for intervention from the disorientating effects of the material world.⁶² In order to test Ehrman’s hypothesis that a gnostic lens is required to make sense of it, however, we must ask if a gnostic reading is the only one which renders this logion intelligible, and, if not, if the gnosticized interpretation is the one best suited to it. A closer look, however, reveals that the extent of this logion’s affinity with gnostic belief is far from

⁶⁰ *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 60.

⁶¹ Ehrman, p. 59.

⁶² Ehrman, p. 103

indisputable. To begin, it constitutes a clear affirmation of the physical reality and ontological significance of the incarnation, a statement which a categorically gnostic redeemer figure would be loath to make. On the contrary, this verse speaks of the human condition as the expressly chosen means by which the divinity of Christ would become available for human encounter,⁶³ and, thus, the status of the material world and of the flesh is not itself devalued. Rather, the logion's language of judgment is reserved for its critique of man's own inability to recognize the divine significance of what is in front of him. To be sure, this saying suggests that man's perceptive failure is the result of engagement with improper sources of satiation, and it undeniably establishes a dichotomy between worldly fulfillments and the spiritual fulfillment one finds in Christ. However, this distinction is not incompatible with other New Testament sources. In Romans, for example, Paul says, "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" (8:5-6). A similar statement is made in John when Jesus speaks to the woman at the well: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (4:13-14). John's words are also echoed in logion 13 when Thomas correctly identifies Jesus: "Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended."

Thus, logion 28 suggests that the problem with the material world lies not in the simple fact that it exists, but in the fact that, when people rely upon it rather than Jesus as the starting point for their search for spiritual knowledge, the ability to accurately

⁶³ Valantasis notes that "to take one's stand" is not a passive verb, but rather one denoting agency (p. 102).

perceive both this spiritual knowledge and proper knowledge of the world becomes restricted. To be sure, the relationship between the spirit and the world is problematized throughout the Gospel of Thomas, but as evidenced by logion 24, the relationship is nevertheless maintained: “His disciples said, ‘Show us the place where you are, for we must seek it.’ He said to them, ‘Anyone with two ears had better listen! There is light within a person of light, and it shines on the whole world. If it does not shine, it is dark.’” This language of internal light does have a gnostic flavor, but if this reply were made by a gnostic savior, the world would be utterly irredeemable and there would be a sharp division drawn between the person of light and the darkness of the world. Instead, there is a continuity. The world *is* meaningful, but only when it is perceived through the spiritual lens which the Gospel of Thomas’s Jesus teaches his disciples to cultivate.

Logion 91 further develops this distinction between the two types of knowing, between conventional reasoning which works from the outside in and spiritual reasoning which works from the inside out: “They said to him, ‘Tell us who you are so that we may believe in you.’ He said to them, ‘You examine the face of the sky and the earth; but the one who is before you, you have not recognized, and you do not know how to assess this opportunity.’” The disciples’ original question concerns revelation and belief, but Jesus’ response redirects this question to one of epistemology and belief. In Coptic, the word used for ‘examine’ is borrowed from the Greek *πειράω*, meaning to test, attempt, or come to know from experience.⁶⁴ Jesus thus suggests that, because he is in their presence and communicating with them, they should have already encountered this revelation, but because they still need to ask who he is, their attempts to make sense of the significance

⁶⁴ Walter Bauer *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, ed. Frederick William Danker, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

of his physical presence in the physical world are evidently defective.⁶⁵ This is not the fault of the world, however, but of the disciples' inability to engage it with the proper spiritual subjectivity.

Thus, the tension created between spiritual knowledge and the physical world does not appear to be wrought with a gnostic motivation, but rather to support and explore the hermeneutic which the Gospel of Thomas articulates. In a manner of speaking, the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas does communicate gnosis, but we need not conclude that it is a gnostic gnosis. According to Irenaeus, “[The gnostics] tell us that this knowledge has not been openly divulged, because not all are capable of receiving it, but has been mystically revealed by the Savior by means of parables for those qualified for understanding it.”⁶⁶ Yet while the knowledge conveyed through the Gospel of Thomas is esoteric to a degree, its meaning is no more hidden than it is in the parables of the New Testament, and unlike the gnostic hermeneutic which Irenaeus describes, the reader need not supply secret extra-textual revelation to find the truth of its sayings. In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus is less a revealer than a teacher, and his wisdom is available to “anyone with two ears” to listen, if only they restructure their search for the meanings of his words according to the hermeneutical lessons he provides. Furthermore, although the Gospel of Thomas does establish a hierarchy among the disciples, this hierarchy is unlike the gnostic conception of election which divides those born with divine sparks and those born without. The Gospel of Thomas does not predicate salvation upon an individual's inherent spiritual talents, but, rather, the seeker receives instruction at every turn concerning how to understand his relationship both to Jesus' teachings and to the world

⁶⁵ This analysis is indebted to Richard Valantasis's commentary, pp. 171-172.

⁶⁶ *A.H.* 1.3.1.

outside. Therefore, we cannot conclude that the Gospel of Thomas is camouflaging its secret gnostic agenda with an overt allegiance to the New Testament scriptures as the Gospel of Truth does. If gnostic ideas are present, then they are carefully measured and incorporated only insofar as they are useful to support the hermeneutic lesson which constitutes the Gospel of Thomas's ideological thrust.

Ironically, such scholarly approaches employ a similar hermeneutical activity to that of the gnostics themselves who, as Irenaeus explains and as we have seen with the example of the Gospel of Truth, import extra-textual information into the text to find the interpretation they expect. It is for this reason that Irenaeus offers his detailed account of gnostic doctrine, to demonstrate that such beliefs are not, in fact, supported by the scriptures to which the gnostics claim to profess allegiance. In order to wring gnostic ideas from scripture, one must "twist the scriptures from a natural to a non-natural sense"⁶⁷ and willfully disregard the text's manifest design. Irenaeus contends that if the scriptural authors had intended to evoke these gnostic ideas, they would have made their intentions explicit.⁶⁸ It follows that gnostic beliefs are irreconcilable to the scriptures, and the only way to evince a gnostic meaning is by allegorizing them to the point of abstraction, dislocating every word from its plain sense such that the resultant interpretation cannot be traced back to the text's intended message. Any exegesis which seems to support such beliefs necessarily violates the integrity of the text and must be the product of a heretical motivation to "falsify the oracles of God"⁶⁹ for their own purposes.

He proceeds to offer examples of their allegorical methods:

⁶⁷ *A.H.*, 1.9.4

⁶⁸ *A.H.*, 1.9.1

⁶⁹ *A.H.*, 1.Preface.1.

And, they say, the reason that the savior - for they do not wish to call him the lord - did nothing publicly for thirty years was in order to manifest the mystery of these aeons. Indeed, also in the parable of the workers sent to the vineyard, they say these thirty aeons are disclosed very openly. For some get sent at the first hour; others at the third; others at the sixth; others at the ninth; still others at the eleventh. If these are added together they make the sum of thirty.⁷⁰

We find a similar numerological reading in Hippolytus's brief mention of the Gospel of Thomas, in which he quotes "a Gospel entitled *According to Thomas* which states expressly: 'The one who seeks me will find me in the children from seven years of age and onwards. For there, hiding in the fourteenth aeon, I am revealed.'" ⁷¹ This passage, however, is nowhere to be found in either of the extant manuscripts. The closest analogous logion is the fourth, which reads, "Jesus said, 'The person old in his days will not hesitate to ask a child seven days old about the place of life, and he will live. For many who are first will be last, and they will become a single one.'" This logion echoes several found throughout the New Testament. In Matthew 18:3, for example, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."⁷² The latter translation is consistent with both the Nag Hammadi manuscript, dating to the year 340 C.E., as well as the Oxyrhynchus fragments which date to the mid third century. Either Hippolytus had drawn from an altogether different version of the text, or he inadvertently recounts a gnostic interpretation of it. Because both of the extant manuscripts corroborate the same reading and post date Hippolytus's work by as many as two centuries, the latter explanation is more convincing. It seems that the Gospel of Thomas is not a gnostic text, but that its gnostic interpreters considered it

⁷⁰ *A.H.*, 1.1.3.

⁷¹ *Refutation of All Heresies*, 5.2.20.

⁷² See also, for example, Mark 10:13-15, its parallels in Matthew 19:13-14 and Luke 18:15-16, and Mark 9:37.

scripture which, like the New Testament gospels, they understood as laden with a hidden gnostic meaning only revealed through the hermeneutic key of their gnosis.

However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the Gospel of Thomas is explicitly critical of allegorical interpretation - even those interpretations provided in the New Testament gospels themselves - and the author seems to use a similar, if even more fundamentalist, reasoning for his text's resistance to allegory as Irenaeus does. He aims to convey in his text only the words which Jesus spoke with no secondary interpretive additions, understanding these words as inviolable and containing the only meaning that Jesus himself intended to convey. It seems that, against its will, the Gospel of Thomas had been appropriated by gnostic sects and their interpretations, and it evidently remained in gnostic circles for the duration of its circulation. That its skepticism toward the material world does evoke a conceptual association with Gnosticism cannot be denied, but to be compatible with certain gnostic ideas is not tantamount to being a gnostic text, and although Gartner's and Ehrman's interpretations may very well be consistent with the ways in which gnostic sects understood the Gospel of Thomas, such an approach proves circular in its scholarly application. It begins with a predetermined expectation of the theology that the Gospel of Thomas will yield and seeks post facto evidence to bring the text in line. Moreover, the viability of Gnosticism as a meaningful category has been widely called into question in recent scholarship for similar reasons. What we call 'gnostic' is more properly understood as a retrofitted concept, and the implication inherent in such a term - that it denotes a unified class of Christian heresy - fails to appreciate the complex identities of these ideological strands as they asserted themselves both within and beyond the fold of proto-orthodoxy. The term has become so broad as to

be nearly meaningless, applied to any text with hints of dualism or anti-worldliness. Karen King, among others, argues that attempts to reconstruct the historical and ideological character of Gnosticism have been mired in the conceptual frameworks instilled by early Church heresiologists who, like Irenaeus, endeavored to quarantine competing Christian movements in their efforts to define and defend the borders of nascent Christian orthodoxy. She claims, “So long as the category of Gnosticism continues to serve as the heretical other of orthodox Christianity, it will be inadequate for interpretation of the primary materials and for historical reconstruction.”⁷³ We are in error if we uncritically accept and apply these categories as they have been handed down to us, for, as we have seen, the imputation of a gnostic motivation to the author of the Gospel of Thomas stifles the recognition of the text’s intended message.

II. Scripture, Interpretation, and the Gospel of Thomas: An Alternative Proposal for the Gospel of Thomas’s Rejection

Yet while the conceptual framework provided by typological reconstructions of Gnosticism may not help us to understand the Gospel of Thomas in its own terms, it is necessary to remember that the creation of the categories of heterodoxy and orthodoxy was a dialectic process for the early Church. Prior to such heresiological interventions, there had been considerably more ideological latitude within early Christian culture and belief, and Gnosticism had come to hold a prominent enough place in the early Christian milieu to precipitate “a moment in crystallizing self-awareness” on the part of proto-

⁷³ *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 1-3. See also Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism:” An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

orthodoxy.⁷⁴ As Wilhelm Schneemelcher asserts, “The struggle against Gnosticism and the syncretistic dissolution of the Christian message which it entailed made it necessary to seek for uniform norms for life and doctrine and for the constitution of the Church and so secure the unity of the *ecclesia catholica* and the purity of its proclamation.”⁷⁵ Thus, Irenaeus’ polemic against the gnostics was not simply launched to show that gnostic beliefs were on their faces heretical, for at the historical moment in which he writes, such a claim would lack the rhetorical force necessary to buttress his conclusion. Rather, he wages his refutation as a demonstration and exploration of *why* these beliefs were heretical, in the process articulating an argument for why proto-orthodox belief was superior. He finds his answer in none other than the scriptures, the one thing held in common between himself and his adversaries: “So firm is the ground upon which these Gospels rest that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them and, starting from these, each one of them endeavors to establish his own peculiar doctrine.”⁷⁶ Irenaeus’ argument against the gnostics and their freewheeling hermeneutic leads him to assert, arguably for the first time, the fourfold gospel canon in his desire to define the true Christian faith and to find reliable criteria by which to recognize it.⁷⁷ As noted in chapter one of this essay, Irenaeus understands his task as the reeling in of the unmanaged oral transmission of tradition by naming those texts which he understands to preserve the true Christian message as it traces back to Jesus himself. Because the problem which he

⁷⁴ R. A. Markus, “Review of *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*” by Walter Bauer, *New Blackfriars*, 54 (1973).

⁷⁵ “Introduction,” *New Testament Apocrypha Volume 1*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 10.

⁷⁶ 3.11.7

⁷⁷ Irenaeus’ famous assertion is found in 3.11.8 of *Against Heresies*, and according to Hans von Campenhausen, for example, his declaration signals “the transition from the earlier period of belief in tradition to the new age of canonical standardization - a transition in the direction of later orthodoxy in which the canon of the Old and New Testament was firmly laid down.” (p. 182).

identifies with the gnostics is a hermeneutical one, the step toward canonization is a step toward instituting a hermeneutical control, and because these concerns are also at the forefront of the Gospel of Thomas in its self-reflection as scripture, Irenaeus' move toward stabilizing theological meaning through the written gospels renders the Gospel of Thomas's alternative stance regarding how the same oral tradition should be represented in text a fruitful lens through which to view the theological and scriptural implications of the Church's decision to include only narrative gospels in its canon. In this capacity, the Gospel of Thomas's mistaken gnostic identity is significant, inviting reflection upon its failure to fulfill the tradition's scriptural and hermeneutical needs and, by extension, upon the narrative gospels' relative success.

We have seen that the Gospel of Thomas represents a conscious attempt to compensate for the physical and temporal distance intervening between the historical moment of Jesus and the historical moments of his future followers, proposing that the encounter between these followers and Jesus' own words, as it is performed through the active interpretive engagement which the Gospel of Thomas prescribes, is all one needs in order to access the immediacy of his presence. We have also seen that, in its efforts to retain Jesus' living voice, it erases the spatio-temporal framework which roots this voice in the past. Thus, the text's design is, in fact, to cause the reader to lose his footing, removing what it identifies as the interpretive training wheels that threaten to deplete the reader's energy in grappling with the sayings presented. According to Valantasis, the Gospel of Thomas's is a "performative theology whose mode of discourse and whose method of theology revolves about effecting a change in thought and understanding in the

readers and hearers (both ancient and modern).”⁷⁸ In this manner, the text attempts to create an internalized, personal encounter between the speaker and the hearer, and if the Gospel of Thomas is read correctly according to the hermeneutical principles it lays out, then the locus of meaning is found within the reader’s own interpretive efforts. The only way to find coherence within the intentionally confusing and puzzling mass of sayings which constitute the Gospel of Thomas is by clearing a space within one’s own mind where these pieces can fit together. The result is that the reader is taught how to prepare himself for proper interpretation and offered examples of how interpretation might go wrong, but the fruits of his efforts rest in his own individual subjectivity. If a stable reading were to be reached, it is as though the text’s efficacy would cease.

For this reason, it is telling that Hippolytus inadvertently offers an example of gnostic exegesis as though it were a part of the Gospel of Thomas itself. While it does not bear the conventional characteristics of Gnosticism, it is hardly difficult to imagine why gnostics would have embraced it, and by unsettling the prevailing epistemological assumption that knowledge necessarily flows from the outside in, the Gospel of Thomas leaves itself vulnerable to dualistic readings, which it does not itself encourage, by putting nothing solid in their places. The figure of Jesus is left in a sort of interpretive free fall, and the meaning of his sayings has nothing on which to stabilize itself. We may consider this the result of an excess of optimism concerning the oral metaphysics of presence which it attempts to capture. In the words of Aristotle, “Just as all men have not the same writing so all men have not the same speech sounds, but mental experiences, of which these are the primary symbols, are the same for all, as also are those things which

⁷⁸ Valantasis, p. 7.

our experiences are the images.”⁷⁹ It follows that an event of communication, whether written or spoken, is successful insofar as the communicator and the receiver hold in common a world of reference which reflects their internalized experiences of it. Although Aristotle creates a disjuncture between speech and the writing used to describe it, Jesus’ embodiment and activity in the perceptible world generate the images of internalized experience held in common by his perceivers, stabilizing the use of the language used to describe him. Moreover, the oral encounter is a discrete event in which both parties are present in this world, accompanied by a host of attendant circumstances which converge to create the atmosphere of that event. According to Aune, “the evangelists wrote with historical intentions,” classifying the gospel genre as it takes shape in the New Testament as “a discrete prose narrative devoted exclusively to the portrayal of the whole life of an individual perceived as historical.”⁸⁰ To be “perceived as historical,” however, is not to impute a modern expectation of historical accuracy upon these texts. We see readily enough that Luke installs a traditional collection of Jesus’ sayings into a travel narrative, while Matthew organizes the same material into sermons.⁸¹ Despite such historical discrepancies, these gospels appear alongside one another in the eventual Christian canon, recalling Aristotle’s claim that the conferral of meaning depends first and foremost upon the shared embodied experience of being in the world. These are circumstances to which narrative texts attend, and despite the Gospel of Thomas’s constant insistence upon faithfulness to the character of the oral encounter, one does not speak in lists. The Gospel of Thomas does acknowledge that it is the historical event of Jesus’ speech which must be drawn into the present moment, but the particularity of the

⁷⁹ *On Interpretation*, 1.1.

⁸⁰ Aune, pp. 29, 64.

⁸¹ Aune, p. 19.

speaker and the perceptible effect of his presence are lost in its exclusive emphasis upon the spoken word. The gospels, as biographically oriented records of the gospel of Jesus, were not merely asked to be plausible, but to faithfully represent a system of meaning tenable to the prevailing metaphysical understanding. If a gospel is to successfully approach Jesus' presence, then both its content and the way this content takes shape in text must host an encounter for the reader which reflects the conditions of the original.

It is this set of circumstances which leads Derrida to revise the prevailing notion that writing is a "signifier of a signifier" which is "always technical and representative."⁸² He contends that the moment when a presence becomes available for perception is the moment when it differentiates itself from its background and draws its own parameters. It follows that any interpersonal interaction necessarily entails a step away from fullness and a step toward discreteness, for there would be no call for communication if the speaker, the hearer, and the referent held between them were indistinct. If the necessity of presence arises in the same space created by absence, then writing - as it functions to reduce an idea into a common perceptible form - is the same activity by which a human speaker manifests to his hearer. It follows that writing is not solely responsible for the breach in continuity from the signified to its signifier, for it gives rise to the conditions that make a metaphysics of presence possible: "The signified always already functions as a signifier. The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone effects all signifieds in general the moment they *enter the game*."⁸³

And yet, by claiming a space for 'writing' in the perceptible world as the necessary precondition for any semblance of a metaphysics of presence to occur, Derrida

⁸² Derrida, p. 11.

⁸³ Derrida, p. 7.

questions the possibility that true presence can ever be reached, critiquing the notion that “[t]here is therefore a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul. The perverse and artful is technique, exiled to the exteriority of the body.”⁸⁴ In his view, it is insufficient to define writing as an “interpreter of an originary speech itself shielded from interpretation.”⁸⁵ From its inception, presence defers the actualization of its meaning to the impression it makes upon its perceiver. It can never be captured in a single moment or in a single utterance, for it continually unfolds through subsequent interpretations. The realization of its full meaning is always suspended because there is always a future to look forward to. While the issue of interpretation is placed at the forefront of the Gospel of Thomas, it is just as much the condition of the narrative gospels. If the pure essence of an event can never be recaptured, or if, in the end there, is no such thing as the pure essence of an event, then the whole life of a text is the falling of dominoes, passing from interpretive subjectivity to interpretive subjectivity. The interpreter is always constructing a meaning consistent with his own subjective frame of reference according to which he construes the text and its purpose, even if this activity is not made explicit to the extent which it is in the Gospel of Thomas. According to Frank Kermode:

Acts of interpretation are required at every stage in the life of a narrative; its earliest form must itself be an interpretation of some precedent fable...There comes a point where interpretation by the invention of new narrative is halted; in the present instance that point was reached with the establishment of a canon of four gospels. Interpretation thereafter usually continues in commentary.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Derrida, p. 17.

⁸⁵ Derrida, p. 8.

⁸⁶ *The Genesis of Secrecy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. ix-x.

Hence, the intervention of the canon establishes a type of hermeneutical control by which it is ensured that subsequent dominoes proceed from the same point of origin. The exclusive inclusion of narrative gospels in the canon stabilizes that origin within a basic epistemological frame of perception, while the inclusion of four gospels with different ‘historical’ perspectives accounts for the fact that historicity is never so clean a concept. The least common denominator is that the narrative gospels not only create an impressionistic picture of Jesus’ world by which the reader can find an epistemological foothold, but that this epistemological foothold tethers the Church’s interpretation, the individual reader’s interpretation, and the event of Jesus which they interpret to a series of concrete referents. The creation of a canon of narrative gospels does not mean to halt interpretation, deciding upon a single, neatly packaged truth within those texts arbitrarily recognized by the Church as authoritative. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the generative power of interpretation and the need to create and cohere communities of belief out of a plurality of voices. Harry Gamble notes of such canonical criteria and texts:

They themselves came into broad use and gained authority so far as they were susceptible to appropriation in later situations and so proved their persistent value to the church. Indeed, their capacity for continuing reinterpretation was the necessary condition for the religious authority which accrued to them, in virtue of which they came to be seen as scripture and then were made a part of the canon. This authority did not simply reside in the documents but depended on what they were understood to mean by the communities which read them.⁸⁷

No two interpretations of the New Testament gospels may ever match perfectly, but if there is no clear sense of the objective event which gives rise to interpretation - no matter how differently that event may be understood - then all interpretation is reduced to

⁸⁷ *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 74.

utter subjectivity. The narrativity of the canonical gospels installs concrete hermeneutical parameters by which the possibility of a direct continuity between interpretation and its object may be preserved. If the Gospel of Thomas had won the day, however, there would be no way to allow for differing interpretations - that driving force of tradition - while ever being sure that the same thing was being discussed at all. There would be no standard by which to evaluate whether or not an interpretation legitimately responds to the same referent, and, therefore, the canon is not just a question of the content of the gospels, but of their interpretive yield. As evidenced by Hippolytus's appraisal, the Gospel of Thomas becomes a victim of its own democratized hermeneutic, and by toeing the line of gnostic ideas in support of its epistemological argument, it allowed the trajectory of its future interpretations to threaten the original presence which it meant to capture. Although we may understand the Gospel of Thomas as an earnest participant in what it understands as the aims of the New Testament gospel tradition, there is a reason why it could not fulfill the scriptural function which the tradition required it to fulfill, and although Hippolytus's own reasons for condemning the Gospel of Thomas are not nearly so nuanced, the circumstances contributing to the text as he apparently received it provide a conceptual framework in which the larger theological implications of the Gospel of Thomas's literary choices and hermeneutic may be appreciated and in turn brought to bear upon the implications of those of its canonical counterparts.

CONCLUSION

As R. Cameron observes, “The New Testament serves as the sole framework for scholarly imagination of Christian origins, even when scholars recognize that picture as tendentious, overly simplified, or legendary.”⁸⁸ If contemporary scholars are not themselves persuaded by the heresiological biases instilled into the Christian tradition since near its inception, it is undeniable that refutations like Irenaeus’ have come to bear a great deal of historical weight. In effect, they create a new point of origin for Christianity, after which the Christian tradition, as it would remain for the next two millennia, is insulated from those other traditions which fall beyond its pale. They frame the conversation in the categories of ‘us’ vs. ‘not us,’ heresy vs. orthodoxy, and as a result, scholarly approaches to apocryphal and orthodox texts have by and large become separate endeavors. The significance of the extra-canonical body of literature has primarily been sought in its potential to disclose new information about the larger cultural, philosophical, and religious world of antiquity, but not in its potential to complicate the reigning model.

While this may be the approach best suited to the vast majority of apocryphal literature, it falls short in its application to the Gospel of Thomas. DeConick’s alternative developmental model is an acknowledgement of the need to think about the production of orthodox Christian literature in new ways that can accommodate this text, as well as an acknowledgement of the Gospel of Thomas’s heady potential to revise our assumptions about gospel development. Arguments that the Gospel of Thomas is an early, literarily

⁸⁸ “Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of the Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 11, p. 239.

independent text similarly seek to claim a space for the Gospel of Thomas as a possible window into the very sources which find their homes in the New Testament gospels. Reconstructions of the developmental and literary backdrops of the Gospel of Thomas illuminate the sum of the parts which make up the whole as well as the forces driving its composition, but the implication inherent in these approaches is that the Gospel of Thomas is a mute collection of data which must be made to speak through scholarly effort. This is half true, but the nature of the text in its entirety cannot sufficiently be explained as a neutral deposit of such historical information. In the end, these attempts to define the Gospel of Thomas by seeking discrete developmental models ultimately highlight the Gospel of Thomas's refusal to fit neatly into any of these templates. We must conclude, then, that woven throughout the text's apparently unsystematic layering of sources and stages are a series of authorial choices which draw these elements together. The Gospel of Thomas is a participant in New Testament literary movement, but it is an especially self-conscious one, finding its articulation through its critiques and tensions with the larger atmosphere in which it understands itself as an active participant. Its insistent privileging of the living Jesus and his words speaks directly to the motivations of gospel production, and the deliberate manner in which it formats and presents synoptic and pre-synoptic material creates a carefully constructed statement about how these traditions must be accessed and preserved.

By reading the text within a literary rubric, the insights of form and source critical approaches can work hand in hand with an analysis of how the text creates its meaning and asks this meaning to be interpreted by its readers. Through the identification of what the author was working with and what criteria were governing the incorporation and

presentation of his sources, the Gospel of Thomas may assert its potential to revise, enrich, and complicate our understanding of the New Testament gospel tradition without requiring an absolute choice between its theological content and its formal and thematic complexities. It is through attention to these complexities that we can understand the Gospel of Thomas as a true alternative voice within the New Testament tradition and see more clearly the intricacies of its interactions with what would become the New Testament scriptures. By establishing how the Gospel of Thomas understands the correct way to convey the person and teachings of Jesus, we can see how it positions itself as scripture and how its stance concerning the purpose of the gospel text in the lives of its readers can, in turn, host a conversation about how the narrative gospels fulfill their own functions and what the dominant tradition understands these functions to be.

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