

## Introduction □

For those interested in Jesus of Nazareth and the origins of Christianity, the Gospel of Thomas is the most important manuscript discovery ever made. Apart from the canonical scriptures and a few scattered sayings, the Gospel of Thomas is our only historically valuable source for the teachings of Jesus. Although it has been available in European languages since the 1950s, it is still subject to intense scrutiny and debate by biblical scholars. The Gospel of Thomas is roughly the same age as the canonical New Testament gospels, but it contains sayings of Jesus that present very different views on religion and on the nature of humanity and salvation, and it thereby raises the question whether the New Testament's version of Jesus' teachings is entirely accurate and complete.

In late 1945, an Egyptian peasant named Mohammed Ali al-Samman Mohammad Khalifa rode his camel to the base of a cliff, hoping to find fertilizer to sell in the nearby village of Nag Hammadi. He found, instead, a large sealed pottery jar buried in the sand. He feared it might contain a genie that would haunt or attack him, and he hoped it might contain a treasure. Gathering his courage, he smashed open the jar and discovered only a collection of twelve old books. Suspecting that they might have value on the antiquities market, he kept the books and eventually sold them for a small sum. The books gradually came into the hands of scholars in Cairo, Europe, and America. Today those books are known as the Nag Hammadi library, a collection that is generally considered to be the most important archaeological discovery of the twentieth century for research into the New Testament and early Christianity. The Nag Hammadi library contains the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Secret Book of James, the Secret Book of

John, and many other fascinating texts ranging in date from the second through the middle of the fourth centuries A.D. The twelve books contain fifty-two texts altogether, forty of which were previously unknown to scholarship.

Of all the Nag Hammadi texts, by far the most significant is the Gospel of Thomas. Scholars knew of the existence of the Gospel of Thomas before the Nag Hammadi discovery because it was mentioned in the works of Hippolytus, a third-century church father. At the end of the nineteenth century, fragments of the Gospel of Thomas in the Greek language were found in the rich Egyptian archaeological site known as Oxyrhynchus, a discovery that excited great interest among New Testament scholars because the fragments contained sayings of Jesus that were familiar from the New Testament but appeared to have been transcribed from independent oral tradition and therefore were a new source for the teachings of Jesus.

When the full Gospel of Thomas came to light in the Nag Hammadi Library fifty years later, it was excitedly greeted as if it were an old friend. Scholars immediately saw that they now possessed the full version of what they had known before only in fragments. The version of the Gospel of Thomas found at Nag Hammadi, like all the texts in that collection, was written in Coptic, the language of ancient Egypt put into an alphabet derived from (but not entirely identical to) the Greek alphabet. The newly found text was not an original Coptic composition but a translation of a Greek original, the same Greek sayings list that had been found in fragments at Oxyrhynchus.

The Gospel of Thomas contains roughly 150 sayings attributed to Jesus, about half of which are also found in the canonical New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It does not contain sayings found also in the Gospel of John. For convenience, scholars have numbered the sayings in a standard sequence, almost always basing the numbers on the occurrence of the phrase "Jesus said." By that method the standard list contains 114 sayings, some of which are two or more

sayings combined into one. Thomas contains no sustained narrative at all, although it contains a few narrative elements, for example, “a woman in the crowd said to him” (79), “Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples...” (22).

The format of the Gospel of Thomas is little more than a disorganized list. The sayings at the very beginning (sayings 1–3) and end (113) may have been deliberately placed in those locations, but the rest of the sayings, despite the efforts of many scholars over the past half century to find order in them, appear to have been haphazardly put together. To some degree, the Gospel of Thomas begins to repeat sayings toward its end, and several times throughout the text, sayings of the same general sort—short sets of proverbs for example, or parables—appear adjacent to one another. Sometimes adjacent sayings share a word or a motif, but otherwise there’s no known order to the list. The Gospel of Thomas is about as primitive a form of text as there can be: a simple list with one thing following another in a manner that is much more reminiscent of oral tradition than of literary construction. It appears most likely that the sayings list we call the Gospel of Thomas was transcribed by a scribe on a particular occasion from the word-of-mouth recitations by some people who were trying to remember what they could of what Jesus reportedly had said.

For most people, the Gospel of Thomas’s greatest significance arises from the fact that so many of its sayings are similar to sayings in the canonical gospels. This raises the question whether Thomas is a source for the teachings of Jesus independent of the New Testament gospels, or whether it is dependent on those canonical gospels. If the Gospel of Thomas is independent, its sayings were derived from sources other than the New Testament gospels, most probably from oral rather than written sources. If it is dependent, then its sayings were taken from the New Testament. If it is independent, then the Gospel of Thomas gives us a new source for the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, our first new source for nearly two thousand years and one second in importance only to the

biblical books. On the other hand, if the Gospel of Thomas is dependent on the canonical scriptures, then—while it provides some interesting insight into a very early Christian cult—it offers no new information of significance about Jesus of Nazareth.

Those who argue that Thomas is dependent on the canonical gospels for its sayings point to the fact that, according to the most widely held theory of New Testament origins, the Gospel of Mark was revised by Matthew and Luke as they incorporated it into their own gospels. Accordingly, when a word or phrase appears in Matthew or Luke in a passage they have in common with Mark, but that particular word or phrase does not itself appear in Mark, it generally indicates that Matthew or Luke has changed Mark. Now, if the same word shows up in the equivalent saying in Thomas, some find it reasonable to presume that Thomas found the word in Matthew's or Luke's Gospel and therefore took the saying from that existing gospel. Since this happens on a few occasions, some conclude that Thomas must have used Matthew's and Luke's Gospels as a source.

On the other hand, many scholars argue that there are so few hints of dependence by Thomas on Matthew's or Luke's or Mark's Gospels that the hints that do exist can best be explained by the fact that Christian scribes copied and translated Thomas throughout the centuries before it was hidden at Nag Hammadi. The history of the New Testament manuscript tradition shows that the scribes who copied such manuscripts invariably made mistakes, made what they thought were improvements, copied what they remembered a saying to be rather than what a manuscript in front of them said it was, and so forth. In other words, as scribes copied Thomas they did so in light of their own knowledge of the canonical gospels, and the same would be true for whoever it was who translated the Gospel of Thomas from Greek into Coptic. It is only reasonable to presume that their knowledge of the canonical gospels occasionally led them to change Thomas's sayings as they copied them, and as time went on, sayings in copies of the Gospel of Thomas increasingly came to resemble their New Testament counterparts. Therefore, if on a few occasions

Thomas's sayings have words that accord with Matthew's or Luke's version of sayings rather than Mark's version, this does not by any means prove that the Gospel of Thomas is dependent on Matthew's or Luke's Gospels, only that scribes in the chain of copying and translating were familiar with the canonical gospels.

The Gospel of Thomas seems often to contain sayings of Jesus in a less revised state than they are in the canonical gospels. In the words of Professor Helmut Koester of the Harvard Divinity School: "If one considers the form and wording of the individual sayings in comparison with the form in which they are preserved in the New Testament, the Gospel of Thomas almost always appears to have preserved a more original form of the traditional saying or presents versions which are independently based on more original forms. In a few instances where this is not the case, the Coptic translation seems to have been influenced by the translator's knowledge of the New Testament gospels."

Many scholars have noted that Thomas is the most primitive possible form of written tradition, a simple barely organized list, and that to a great extent the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas that do overlap with versions in the canonical gospels show absolutely no sign of having been taken from those gospels. In addition, there is virtually no overlap in the order of the sayings, for virtually none of the sayings in Thomas occur in the same sequence as they do in Matthew or Mark or Luke. All these factors argue for Thomas's independence from the influence of the canonical gospels, as does the fact that the Gospel of Thomas does not contain any reference to the great Christian themes of crucifixion and resurrection, or any reference to Jesus' status as Messiah or Christ, or the stories of him as virgin-born and capable of miraculous actions. One of the most likely reasons for the absence of these concepts is that the Gospel of Thomas was compiled before those Christian themes were fully developed. Significantly, Thomas also lacks the imaginative cosmological speculations typical of later Christian Gnostic texts. It seems to have come into being before those kinds of writings were developed.

The Gospel of Thomas, it now appears, is very likely to be independent of the New Testament's canonical gospels and therefore to be a new source for the teachings of Jesus. Since it is in such a primitive form—the unstructured list—and since it shows no signs of the great themes of Christianity that developed in the early church, and since the forms of the sayings in Thomas are often less developed than they are in the canonical gospels, it stands to reason that Thomas is quite an early text. It may perhaps have been written before 62 A.D., for there is a hint of a date in that period in the Gospel of Thomas itself: saying 12 commends Jesus' brother James to be the leader of the Christian movement after Jesus himself is no longer on earth. James died in the year 62 A.D. It follows that a saying recommending his leadership would probably not have been incorporated into Thomas after that year. Be that as it may, one cannot say for certain when Thomas was written, for, apart from the hint supplied by saying 12, there are no chronological indicators in the text.

There are no clear geographical indicators in the Gospel of Thomas, for it contains no narratives that give us place names. However, we may have one clue in the title of the text itself. In the early days of the Christian movement, different regions claimed different apostles as the founders of their own churches. Mark was said to have founded the church in Egypt, John the church in Greece, Peter the church in Rome, and Thomas the church in Syria. The Acts of Thomas, a late-third-century Syrian pious novel, and the Book of Thomas, which is a fictional fourth-century Syrian dialogue between Thomas and Jesus, testify to a particular Syrian interest in Thomas the apostle. As does the much earlier Gospel of Thomas, those texts refer to "Judas Thomas." Some argue that because of the significance of the apostle Thomas to later Syrian Christianity, the Gospel of Thomas probably comes from Syria. Syria is the northern neighbor of Galilee and had an established Christian community at least by the early 30s A.D. at which time Paul was making his way to Damascus to confront the Christian church there.

Most New Testament scholars find a theory known as the “two-source hypothesis” to be the most convincing way to account for the fact that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are word-for-word identical in the Greek of many passages. The “two-source hypothesis” holds that Matthew and Luke used two texts as principal sources for their own gospels. One of those texts is the narrative we call the Gospel of Mark. The other text is a now lost collection of the sayings of Jesus that German scholarship came to call “the source” or, in German, *Quelle*, or, now quite commonly, just Q. This Q can be reconstructed from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, for, in the simplest formulation, Q is simply a list of the material that we find in Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels that we do not find in Mark’s Gospel. Today the two-source hypothesis is so commonly accepted that books are now published discussing Q as though it were a real existing text.

The “two-source hypothesis” was attacked in earlier decades because, for one thing, there was no evidence that Christian communities composed lists of sayings; no list like the hypothetical Q had ever been discovered. But now the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas has confirmed the hypothesis that lists of sayings definitely existed during the earliest times of Christianity.

Today, many scholars of Christian origins will place the reconstructed Q list side by side with the newly discovered Thomas list as the earliest gospels that we have. Q and the Gospel of Thomas are not the same thing. Q, as reconstructed by scholarship, appears to have been somewhat more coherently organized than the Gospel of Thomas and to have begun to take on the form of a narrative of Jesus’ life.

Thomas and Q are significantly different in terms of the points of view their contents advocate. The Q list, through its selection of sayings, presents Jesus as a man who taught that the Kingdom of God would come in the very near future. Only a few will be allowed into the Kingdom when it comes, but everyone will see it arrive “like a lightning flash.” To be allowed into the Kingdom, one must begin to behave appropriately; one

must “do unto others as you would have God do unto you.” As you forgive others God will forgive you; as you judge others God will judge you. This combination of future orientation and judgment based on moral behavior has characterized much of Christianity to this day. Like Thomas, however, Q shows no significant interest in the motif of crucifixion and resurrection or salvation through grace and faith.

The sayings in the Gospel of Thomas present a startling contrast to this point of view. Thomas also speaks of the Kingdom of the Father, but here we find that the Kingdom already exists on the earth and has existed since the very beginning of time. When Jesus is asked about the coming of the Kingdom in Thomas, he invariably replies that the Kingdom is here now; it is right in front of your face, even though people usually do not see it. The Gospel of Thomas implies that the Kingdom has always been present, ever since the first days of creation. But its presence is now hidden from almost everyone. One might summarize the Gospel of Thomas as saying: “Find the Kingdom that is right here.” Some have compared this perspective to such Eastern philosophies as Zen Buddhism. Few religious texts in the West insist that perfection exists on this earth now, if you can find it. Rather, the Western religions generally place perfection in the heavens and in the future. Thomas’s Gospel presents a very different view.

The idea that the Kingdom is already here, but usually undiscovered, leads logically to the idea that a person’s greatest accomplishment would be to find the Kingdom. The motif “seek and ye shall find” occurs throughout the Gospel of Thomas. If people are inherently able to find the Kingdom, they nevertheless will need guidance as to how to do it. That is the purpose of the Gospel of Thomas: to give directions toward finding the Kingdom. Those directions, however, are presented in a deliberately obscure fashion. The directions come as riddles, as sayings of Jesus that need to be deciphered in order to be understood. The Gospel of Thomas sets itself up as a model for spiritual endeavor. Just as people should approach its sayings as having deeper hidden meaning that is not



immediately apparent, so also should they perceive the world as having deeper hidden meaning.

Thomas conveys a very positive view of human nature. People are capable of discovering hidden truth, both in the world and within themselves. Indeed, as the Kingdom is already in the world, so it is already inside of people. Accordingly, if you know yourself properly, you know the Kingdom of God. While Thomas has some sayings that point to a moral dimension for human life, its overall approach is structured in terms of self-knowledge and discovery.

Significantly, there is no place in the Gospel of Thomas for the great themes of sin and salvation as they are found in the canonical New Testament. The human problem is not defined as separation from God as a result of one's moral failings or the mythical failings of Adam, nor is the solution presented in terms of faith in the death of Christ for sins, or in reference to the resurrection of Christ. Those themes are absent.

Thomas gives us a whole new kind of first-century Christianity. It has been called a Gnostic Christianity; *gnosis* is the Greek word for knowledge, and the term *gnostic* has *gnosis* at its root. A wide variety of Gnostic Christianities emerged during the second century with increasingly complicated and, to us, bizarre views of the creation and history of the cosmos. Most of the Nag Hammadi collection of texts can be categorized as Christian Gnostic. The Gospel of Thomas, however, is not properly called Gnostic because it completely lacks interest in the history of the cosmos that the later Gnostic texts find so fascinating. Still, Thomas does advocate a point of view that Gnostic Christians also held: that knowledge of the divine and knowledge of oneself are inseparable.

Those who find the Gospel of Thomas interesting often wonder why it is not in the Bible alongside the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Unfortunately, there is no good answer to that question because we do not know how the canonical gospels came to be selected in the first place. Around the year 180 A.D., Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon in what is now France, argued that there should be only the four gospels of the New

Testament in the church's official collection. He assumed that his orthodox readers were already well aware that there are four and only four. But how the decision for four and not three and not five came to pass, we do not know. One cannot assume that Thomas was deliberately excluded from the canon of scripture because we have no idea whether those who decided on the canonical four had ever even heard of the Gospel of Thomas. Thomas may have circulated extensively in the Eastern churches, from Syria to Egypt, and yet have remained almost unknown to churches in the West.

The Gospel of Thomas appears at first to be only a sporadic collection of disconnected sayings. But examination of those sayings one by one can lead to a more comprehensive vision of what the compilers of the text intended to communicate. The Gospel must be read carefully, saying by saying, and one must allow the meaning of the whole to build gradually. If one does this successfully, and if one comes to find the right interpretation of the sayings in Thomas, then, the text promises, one "will not taste death."