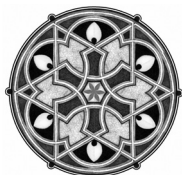


THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

In the Light of Early Jewish, Christian
and Islamic Esoteric Trajectories

*with a contextualized commentary and
a new translation of the Thomas Gospel*

Samuel Zinner



THE MATHESON TRUST
For the Study of Comparative Religion

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INTRODUCTION

The present work represents a portion of the results of over twenty years of research by the author on the *Gospel of Thomas*. This monograph concentrates on an historical reconstruction of the early Jewish, Christian, and Islamic esoteric trajectories that may help shed light on *Thomas*' conceptual background. We include Islamic sources in our study despite their later origin on account of their preservation of both Jewish and Jewish-Christian (i.e., Ebionite) traditions which often have not been preserved elsewhere. Additionally, much in Islam exists on a line of continuity with the previous revelations of Judaism and Christianity so that texts from all three Abrahamic religions often shed mutual light on the beliefs and practices of the others.

As we note in our text, we have consistently employed the terms "Jewish Christian" and "Ebionite" as synonyms. This by no means is intended to imply that there were not a variety of ancient Judaic-Christian sects. Yet all of the various Jewish-Christian congregations shared certain distinctive traits in common which united them in a general and functionally useful sense. The usual attempt to create a disjunction between the earliest Jewish Christians of Jerusalem under James the Just (the *Tsaddiq*) and the Ebionites (from the Hebrew term meaning the Poor Ones) is the apologetically and ideologically driven need to deny that Jesus and his earliest direct followers were fully faithful Torah observant Jews who simultaneously possessed a deeply esoteric 'gnostic' orientation. Our historical reconstruction indicates that the Ebionites were precisely what they portrayed themselves as, namely, descendants of the Jerusalem church led by James the *Tsaddiq*, and that even the self-designation of the Ebionites is to be

traced back to the earliest days of the Jerusalem Jamesian (or Jacobean) community.

The *Thomas* gospel as a whole is not understandable apart from the history and thought of the general heritage of Ebi-onite Jewish Christianity. A separate and much lengthier volume is in preparation in which we present a textual-philological analysis of *Thomas*. However, more than philology or linguistic arguments alone, it is a comparative *textual* approach that would best help to narrow the search for the geographic and temporal provenance of this deeply profound and provocative ancient text. In our textual-philological volume in preparation we present previously overlooked parallels between *Thomas* and Jewish sources ranging from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *Book of Enoch*, and Rabbinic literature. A surprising number of the *Thomas* logia are also clearly paralleled in Mandaean (the Qur'anic Sabaeans) literature to a previously overlooked degree, which we document in a separate volume from this historical-esoteric exegetical work. Such Jewish and Mandaean parallels have not been generally noticed previously principally because of bias among various scholars who are predisposed to prematurely label *Thomas*' more esoteric logia as Hellenistic or as Hermetic in an Alexandrian sense. As a result, even a certain number of Hebrew Biblical parallels to *Thomas* have gone unnoticed, for few have thought to look in such *Jewish* places for *Thomas*' background.

The final chapter of the present study's Part III presents what we call a contextualized commentary on the *Thomas* gospel. Rather than including all the historical and exegetical materials useful for the interpretation of each of the individual logia in the contextualized commentary chapter, we have instead distributed the diverse evidence throughout the various chapters in Parts I and II. We reserve the contextual commentary chapter solely for an analysis of the separate logia by means of intra-textual comparison; that is, in this particular chapter we interpret each logion by comparing it with other logia of the same gospel. We have done this because our research indicated to us that in order to understand *Thomas* properly, various reorientations or revisions were called for re-

garding some of the generally prevailing interpretative paradigms relating to ancient esoteric trajectories. Such reorientation is necessitated in part by the regrettable anti-Jewish bias of some Christian scholars who find it difficult to accept that the earliest form of Christianity may have been thoroughly Judaic rather than Gentile-oriented in a Pauline sense. Additionally, valuable Jewish and Jewish-Christian traditions on esoteric matters preserved in early Islamic sources have been ignored by Christian scholars as irrelevant to their historical or theological endeavors. Some Islamic scholars have similarly been reluctant to study Jewish esoteric sources which might shed light on various of the more arcane aspects of the Islamic revelation, as if somehow Islam were not a confirmation and continuation of the earlier revelations. Alternatively, some non-Muslim scholars find it difficult to see how Islamic sources could help shed light on ancient Jewish and Christian theology and metaphysics, as if Islam had not emerged from the same Abrahamic monotheistic matrix from which Judaism and the Church arose. Given this conflicted situation, it should go without saying that our citation of a particular scholar's work does not necessarily imply agreement with all their published views. According to a well-known Ebionite metaphorical logion of Jesus on the necessity of correct interpretation of spiritual teachings, one should be a good money changer, able to distinguish between authentic and counterfeit coins.

Our translation of the *Thomas* gospel incorporated at the close of this volume contains only brief footnotes and is designed for the general, non-specialized reader. Our goal here is to remain faithful to the Coptic and Greek texts as preserved in the various manuscripts. In the separate textual-philological study we will present an emendational reconstructed translation with an often different logia sequence and a pericope-based, rather than a logion-based, numbering scheme. Both of the two volumes will be complementary works, but each will represent independent studies, since both this volume's historical reconstruction of ancient esoteric trajectories and the additional volume's textual-philological results designed

for a more specialized audience with a knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic, Mandaic, Syriac, Greek, and Coptic, represent different domains of our findings on the *Gospel of Thomas*.

As we argue in this volume, the central esoteric concern of *Thomas* is self-knowledge, but not a knowledge of the earthly self or of the lower ego, but a knowledge of the divine Self which is mediated through the discovery first of one's primordial androgynous Edenic self and then of one's celestial self or image of light that pre-exists in the supernal kingdom, which anticipates in several respects the later-attested Kabbalistic feminine hypostatic *Malkhut* and *Shekhinah*. Self-knowledge is the only knowledge which is truly necessary, for to adapt the Islamic profession of faith to our present theme, there is no self but the Self; or alternatively, to abbreviate the words of the Jewish Shema, the Lord is *One*.

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ADDENDA

Page 27, in the first full paragraph, line 3, after "the Divine as such," the following footnote inadvertently dropped out: "The characterization of *ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merkabah* as lesser and greater mysteries stems from Philo; our selection in this chapter of Philonic passages has been guided in part by M. Friedländer, *Der vorchristliche jüdische Gnosticismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1898), a work which in many respects is still quite relevant and rewarding for the question of the Jewish origins of various components of Gnosticism."

Page 149, line 14, after "Roman citizenship," the following footnote inadvertently dropped out: "This and related matters are treated in a polemical tone in Hyam Maccoby, *The Myth-Maker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (NY: Harper Collins, 1987)."

PART I



A Reconstruction of Ancient
Jewish, Christian, and Islamic
Esoteric Trajectories

1. The Matrix of Orality and Textuality

THE VIEWS of modern scholars are often determined by a culture myopically dominated by written texts; this contrasts with ancient cultures in which both textuality and orality freely interpenetrated. Modern scholarly obsession with written texts may lead to reductionistic paradigms which predispose interpreters to view compositional and redactional activities as exclusively “written” phenomena. When we free ourselves from such artificial schemata, and recognize the possibility of reciprocal oral and textual dynamics, we can begin to envision the possibility, for example, that some of the Matthean, Markan, or Lukan redactional phrases, such as Matthew’s term “scribes and Pharisees,” may in fact represent phrases already current in public preaching of the nascent churches from very early days. Such phrases could have traveled from community to community by word of mouth via theological discussions and homilies. *Matthew* could have employed his particular redactional phrases orally for decades before writing them down. Thus, when we see a Matthean redactional phrase in the *Gospel of Thomas* (or vice versa as the case may be), this would by no means necessitate a *literary* dependence either way.

In order to determine chronological textual priority, each instance of a presence of common redactional phrases in two documents would have to be examined. Yet one would have to remain open to the possibility that in some cases the very concepts of textual or chronological priority may not even be valid categories, given the nature of the fluidity and interpenetration of both ancient orality and textuality. There is therefore, *pace* Koester, no reason why, for example, 2 *Clement’s* logia (sayings of Jesus) *must* be based directly or indirectly on

a written *Matthew* gospel.¹ After all, the people who authored the canonical and non-canonical gospels were undoubtedly prominent people in the churches wielding wide influence via not only their scribal activity, but via their oral preaching as well.

The above model may enable us to understand why *Thomas* 13, *pace* Bauckham,² does not necessarily indicate knowledge of chapter 16 of the written canonical *Matthew*. Here we cite both relevant texts to help illustrate our point:

Thomas 13. Jesus said to his disciples: “Make a comparison and tell me what I am like.” Simon Peter said to him: “You are like a righteous angel.” Matthew said to him: “You are like a wise sage.” Thomas said to him: “Master, my mouth will not allow me at all to say what you are like.” Jesus said: “I am not your master; because you drank you were intoxicated from the bubbling spring I have measured out.” And he took him aside and spoke to him three things (words). But when Thomas approached his companions, they asked him: “What did Jesus say to you?” Thomas said to them: “If I were to tell you even one of the things he told me, you would gather stones and cast them at me, and fire would come from the stones and burn you.”

Matthew 16:13) Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14) And they said, “Some say John the Baptizer, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” 15) He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16) Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.” 17) And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are

1. Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels. Their History and Development* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1990), 18.

2. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses. The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, U.K., 2006), 236-37.

you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father who is in heaven.”

Neither *Matthew* 16 nor *Thomas* 13 was created out of thin air, for given early Christian conditions these two texts would likely have been based on so-called floating traditions circulating in both oral and textual modes. The situation in *Thomas* 13, insofar as it contrasts the figures of Matthew and Peter, is paralleled by Paul’s open opposition to James and Peter in *Galatians* 2. Indeed, Paul condemns James and Peter outright, whereas *Thomas* 13 merely represents Thomas as having been more insightful upon one occasion than Peter and Matthew. The *Thomas* gospel is in tension with the church of Peter, but this does not necessarily pertain to the Petrine church as described in the canonical *Gospel of Matthew*, for the traditions enshrined in the *Matthew* gospel may have appeared later and independently of *Thomas*. *Matthew* furthermore represents Syrian ecclesiastical traditions of the Antiochene Petrine branch, whereas *Thomas* represents the traditions of the Eddesan branch. Accordingly, *Thomas* 13 may not be commenting upon the canonical written text of *Matthew* 16, but rather upon *oral* traditions concerning Peter which had been current in Antioch and which were later recorded in writing in the canonical *Matthew*. This would account for the simultaneously marked similarity and dis-similarity between *Matthew* 16 and *Thomas* 13.

Pace Bauckham, Peter’s description of Jesus as a “righteous angel” in *Thomas* 13 does not accord with *Mark*’s Christology, and so may not be used to infer a Thomasine allusion to canonical *Mark*. Rather, it perfectly accords with what we know of Ebionite Jewish-Christian angelic Christology, which we discuss below in this monograph. Perhaps it has been overlooked in previous studies on logion 13 that we have a precise parallel to the term “righteous angel” in “the angel of righteousness”³ mentioned in the Jewish-Christian text *Shep-*

3. The Biblical Aramaic word for the class of angels known as ‘watcher’,

herd of *Hermas* (Mandate VI,2). Thus Bauckham's suggestion that *Thomas* 13's "a righteous angel" may have been derived from *Mark* 1:2's description of John the Baptist as the "messenger" (*angelos*), but "mistakenly" applied by *Thomas* to the person of Jesus, seems to be a grasping at straws.⁴

Another example of presuppositions determined by a culture of predominant textuality would be the unwarranted contention that the *Apocryphon of James* must be late because it shows the author was acquainted with Paul's thought, based on parallels in the *Apocryphon of James* with certain phrases found in Paul. This would unnecessarily assume that the author of the *Apocryphon* could have had access to Paul's thought only in an exclusively *written* format. Such an approach fails to take into account that the historical James and Paul knew each other personally, or that even the canonical *Letter of James* exhibits a knowledge of some of Paul's theological terminology. In any case, the *Epistle of the Apostles* compared with the *Apocryphon of James* indicates to us that when an ancient author wished to allude to a previously written gospel, it is usually quite clear that he or she has done so. The *Apocryphon of James* exhibits no clear evidence of knowledge of the written canonical gospels or of the Pauline literary corpus. As Kirchner observes, the evidence suggests that the *Apocryphon of James* is a Syro-Palestinian document which may be "as early as the second half of the 1st century,"⁵ therefore between 50-100 CE. By contrast, it is universally recognized that the *Epistle of the Apostles* is an early 2nd-century CE

עִיר, is quite proximate orally to the Biblical word for 'teacher', רִא, which leads one to wonder if Peter's 'righteous angel' (cf. *Hermas*' 'angel of righteousness') might be connected somehow with the term 'teacher of righteousness' known from the Book of Joel.

4. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses. The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 237.

5. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha*. Vol. 1: *Gospels and Related Writings*. Revised Edition (Louisville/London: Jerome Clarke & Co., Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 287.

document which alludes to and extensively quotes from previously written gospels, canonical and otherwise.

The early Christian preachers, including the so-called pseudepigraphic authors (many of whom may have sincerely believed that they were speaking authentically under inspiration in the voice and name of the ancient prophets and apostles), constituted both supportive as well as competitive networks of preachers and scribes who influenced entire communities and regions which were engaged in all degrees and varieties of theological and metaphysical exchanges and debates. Scholars who insist that the *Apocryphon of James* must be late because of the presence of “Johannine” parallels again simply assume a *written* source for these Johannine parallels. The same problematic assumption may apply to Quispel’s claim that *Thomas* shows knowledge of the *Gospel of John*.⁶ Why does Quispel assume that *Thomas*’ knowledge of Johannine theology was necessarily mediated to him in a *written* format, especially when the parallels are rather vague, equally as vague as the parallels shared between *John*, the letters of Ignatius, and the *Odes of Solomon*?

Furthermore, some of the earliest pagan converts to Christianity could have been grossly ignorant of Judaism and Palestinian topography, and the latter ignorance could just as well apply to any Jew not resident in Palestine. Thus such features in a text like the *Protevangelium Jacobi* do not necessitate, by themselves, a “late” provenance, and do not always exclude the presence of genuine Jewish traditions.⁷ Halperin

6. G. Quispel, “The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom by Stevan L. Davies. Review,” *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 38, no. 1 (March, 1984), 92-93.

7. Such considerations are not taken into account in Charles L. Quarles, *Midrash Criticism. Introduction and Appraisal* (Lanham/NY/Oxford: University Press of America, 1998), 126-27. Perhaps here Quarles writes out of some sort of anti-Catholic animus directed against Marian traditions when he stresses that the *Protevangelium Jacobi* is “pagan” without “a Judaistic background.” By contrast, Jonathan Cohen, without denying historical inaccuracies in the *Protevangelium Jacobi*, nevertheless insists that “one may not simply conclude that all the sources of the PEJ are non-Jewish,” and notes several instances of its correct knowledge of Jewish customs and tra-

observes how the ordinary members of an ancient Greek-speaking Jewish community could have been “entirely or almost entirely ignorant of Hebrew.”⁸ Ignorance of contemporary conditions of other cultures and regions has always existed. Ancient writers would have been avid collectors of traditions, both written and oral, but not everyone could read or write in the ancient world, and this includes the average member of the various primitive churches. The early Christian authors would have been a specialized, prominent group wielding not only local authority, but also wide influence through the direct dissemination of their ideas and distinctive phrases through both writing and preaching, and the transmitted written and oral phraseologies would have mutually influenced each other from the very beginning of the process.

The considerations of orality and textuality reach as well into the domain of questions of original compositional languages. As an illustration, scholars still debate the question of the “original” language of the *Odes of Solomon*, whether it was Syriac or Greek. But this question is overly dualistic in its construction and as a consequence might be misleading. Convincing and sound arguments can be put forward alternately to support either theory of Greek or Syriac priority. In light of this, the most natural solution would be that the *Odes* were composed simultaneously in Syriac and Greek by a single bilingual Syrian Christian who freely employed wordplays in both versions. Like so many bilingual speakers, he probably also intentionally produced what to scholars would appear as “inaccurate” translational equivalents in both versions. In this scenario the Greek version will have priority, yet it will also be informed by the author’s other language, Syriac, that is, his Syriac thought patterns will have influenced

ditions found in *Midrash Samuel* 2, *Abodah Zarah* 26a, *Exodus Rabbah* xxix.9, *Pesikta Rabbati* 26, and many more like references. See Jonathan Cohen, *The Origins and Evolution of the Moses Nativity Story* (Leiden/NY/Köln: E. J. Brill, 1993), 171-72.

8. David J. Halperin, “Origen, Ezekiel’s Merkabah, and the Ascension of Moses,” *Church History*, vol. 50, no. 3 (Sep., 1981), 269.

his Greek usage. Conversely, with regard to the Syriac version, it will have just as much priority as the Greek, and the Syriac version will be equally as informed (and in some cases possibly misinformed) and influenced by the author's Greek thought patterns.

With regard to the gospels, both canonical and non-canonical, Jesus' words and ideas will have been constantly reformulated to meet the needs of various communities and cultures. Luke changes Matthew's Jewish terminologies, for example, to better communicate Jesus' teachings to a Gentile audience. At a later period, Jesus' teaching on the "new birth" (see *John* 3) was assimilated to the doctrine of transmigration when Syrian Christianity (of partial Nestorian-Ebionite complexion) first spread to China.⁹ Thus in all four canonical gospels, as well as in *Thomas*, one would expect a mixture of early and late, as well as Jewish and Hellenistic, formulations and reformulations, which would reflect interpenetrating influences emanating from both textual and oral sources. To argue, therefore, too generally concerning "priority" or "dependence" of *Thomas* (or of any other gospel, canonical or otherwise) would constitute a posture that fails to recognize the situation of mutual interpenetration of regions, mentalities, orality, and textuality which prevailed from the beginning of the nascent churches. Even so-called "secondary" textual and theological elements could have arisen quite early, even from the very beginning of church history, for it would have been necessary from the first day of its preaching to interpret Jesus' message and its significance for a variety of cultural and linguistic audiences. Preaching slogans and catechesis would have existed from the very beginning. All five gospels under consideration here could in principle represent a mixture of both early and late, as well as Jewish and

9. See Martin Palmer in association with Eva Wong, Tjalling Halbertsma, Zhao Xiao Min, Li Rong Rong, and James Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras. Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (NY: Ballantine Wellspring, 2001).

Hellenistic components. In *Thomas*, at the Syriac level, we see the influence of a pre-Diatessaronic gospel harmony similar to Justin's. This harmony probably developed before the publication of *John's* gospel, since Justin knew a gospel harmony, but apparently he did not know *John's* gospel, although he did know traditions paralleled in *John*; the same paradigm applies to Ignatius of Antioch in relation to *Thomas*.¹⁰

Therefore, no matter when we date the first versions of the canonical gospels, we must still make room for mutual influences, oral and written, behind and between these texts. Moreover, the present version of *Luke* may be later than our present version of *John*,¹¹ and although *Mark* is generally older than *Matthew* and *Luke*, nevertheless in its present form *Mark* contains various features which arguably might be temporally posterior to *Matthew* and *Luke*. We must keep in mind the rule established by classicists that the first 100 years or so of a text's existence is the period when it will undergo the most redactional changes.¹² Thus the versions of the canonical gospels used in the pre-Diatessaronic harmony could be expected to diverge in several respects from our present canonical gospels. And *Thomas* could have influenced some stages of the synoptic gospels, and vice versa.¹³ Ancient scribes, especially religious scribes, did not operate in a vacuum; in this respect, some modern scholars' ivory tower seclusion within academia might prove to be more extreme than a medieval monk's scriptorium.

10. It is possible that Justin knew *John's* gospel, but ignored it, just as Justin certainly must have known of Paul, but completely ignored his writings and theology.

11. Cf. Andrew Gregory, "The Third Gospel? The Relationship of John and Luke Reconsidered," in John Lierman (ed.), *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 109-22.

12. See Eldon Jay Epp, "The Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text' in New Testament Textual Criticism," *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 92, no. 3 (July, 1999), 256.

13. See Gregory J. Riley, "Influence of Thomas Christianity on Luke 12:14 and 5:39," *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 88, no. 2 (April, 1995), 229-235.

All three synoptic gospels as well as *Thomas* seem to have influenced one another, to have interacted with each other, each constituting what DeConick has labeled an expanding or “rolling corpus,” borrowing a term from McKane.¹⁴ All four canonical gospels as well as *Thomas* are to be dated similarly over a growing period of time, and all exhibit both early and late elements, resulting from substantial changes to the various compositional layers of their texts. They represent interweaving, expanding, breathing, living documents; redaction criticism will be unable to untangle these intertwining knots without destroying literary beauty and integrity, for such literary links are interwoven with each other like veins in a living body. According to Luomanen, at least a part of the *Thomas* sayings might be “directly based on a Jewish-Christian gospel harmony,” or *Thomas* and the “Jewish-Christian fragments” might share a “common harmonizing predecessor.”¹⁵ It is on account of ancient reciprocal literary complexity that Luomanen is compelled to stress that his assertion covers only some of the *Thomas* logia, rather than the document as a whole.

Epp has described modern textual critics such as Westcott-Hort, Metzger, and Kurt and Barbara Aland as reductionist as well as anti-traditional in their methodologies. For example, Epp quotes Hort’s law: “Where there is variation, there must be error in at least all variants but one.”¹⁶ The search for a reputed single “original text” is in fact the result of a reductionistic historicist approach, and it is anti-traditional inasmuch as it rejects a diversity of textual traditions which were held as valid and authoritative in the ancient churches. A few examples would be, as Epp points out, the “dual ver-

14. April D. DeConick, “The Original Gospel of Thomas,” *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 56 (2002), 180.

15. Petri Luomanen, “Eusebius’ View of the ‘Gospel of the Hebrews,’” in Jostein Ådna (ed.), *The Formation of the Early Church* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 278.

16. Eldon Jay Epp, “The Multivalence of the Term ‘Original Text’ in New Testament Textual Criticism,” 250.

sions” of *Luke’s* gospel and *Book of Acts*, namely, the B and D versions which are marked by “extensive textual variation.” Additionally, “tradition provides various endings” to the *Gospel of Mark* in order “to adjust for the perceived abruptness” of *Mark* 16:8.¹⁷ Additional examples are Jesus’ saying on marriage/divorce and the *Pater Noster*, both of which varied regionally throughout the churches, reflecting diverse valid local traditions. The *Pater Noster*, for example, “has six main forms in the manuscript tradition,” and the saying on marriage and divorce shows so much variation in the manuscripts that “the recovery of a single original saying of Jesus [on marriage and divorce] is impossible.”¹⁸ With regard to the *pericope adulterae* (*John* 7:53-8:11), scribes felt free to delete it from *John* or to displace it elsewhere, for example, into *Luke’s* gospel.¹⁹ Epp asks which forms or versions of *Luke-Acts*, the *Pater Noster*, the Markan endings, etc. were/are canonical?²⁰ His point is that all the various forms reflect valid, binding, local traditions. Modern text critics are anti-traditional in their desire to reduce such living diversity to a single authoritative frozen “original” form, for as Epp observes, they reject what was “once authoritative scripture” in both the ancient and medieval periods, and even beyond.²¹ The text critics are also anti-traditional in that they as a rule either ignore or reject important Patristic evidence. As Epp notes, sources as early as Justin Martyr quote *Matthew* 19:17 in the following form: “And he [Jesus] said to him, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good? One is good, my father in heaven.’”²² The phrase “my father in heaven” was deleted from the surviving manuscript tradition out of theological embarrassment; yet despite the multiple attestations of this form in the Fathers, the modern

17. *Ibid.*, 269.

18. *Ibid.*, 265.

19. *Ibid.*, 269.

20. See *ibid.*, 275.

21. See *ibid.*, 274.

22. *Ibid.*, 261.

text critics completely ignore it simply because it is not attested in *later* New Testament manuscripts.

A core presupposition of the modern text critics is that Christianity is primarily a religion of the written text rather than of the spoken word. The same applies to much of scholarship on Islam, for according to a common misunderstanding the Qur'an is essentially a written text, whereas in fact the Qur'an was first received as a spoken, oral transmission. To return to our main topic, Epp notes that there are "some 300,000 variant readings in the New Testament manuscript tradition."²³ Modern text critics see these as "corruptions," when in fact they largely represent the diversity of valid local ancient traditions.

Although he does not mention it, Epp's approach incidentally restores credibility to the Council of Trent's endorsement of the Latin Vulgate, because one can now understand that "canonical" and "authoritative" does not equate to "original reading" or "original text," whether that be "original Greek" or the "original" version/s of the Latin Vulgate. Yet even with the Latin translation of the scriptures we face a plethora of ancient pre-Vulgate divergent readings, representing regionally and individually held binding, authoritative texts. The same critique can be applied to DeConick's concept of an "original" *Gospel of Thomas*, which while admittedly useful on an historical plane is of lesser value for the service of theology and metaphysics if a chronological "later" is interpreted as necessarily implying a "theologically" less original or authoritative version or "development."

All in all the undeniable New Testament manuscript evidence clearly sustains Parker's assertion that for the early churches, "it was more important to hand on the spirit of Jesus' teaching than to remember the letter... [T]he material about Jesus was preserved in an interpretive rather than an exact fashion."²⁴ The variations between the four canonical

23. *Ibid.*, 277.

24. Quoted in *ibid.*, 265.

gospels themselves are proof that the spirit and not wording is essential; and to a significant degree this gospel characteristic reflects the literary fluidity of Jewish targumic praxis, not to mention the freedom with which the Septuagint Greek translators handled the Hebrew Biblical texts, and then in turn the freedom with which the Masoretes handled the even earlier Hebrew texts of their period. The sacred text long remained fluid, and different theological schools, both Jewish and Christian, produced a rich treasury of scriptural variant readings, yet all the traditional schools of interpretation were held to be authoritative among their respective adherents.

In much of the Rabbinic writings all forms of traditions relating to specific questions are collected, often without a stated bias in favor of any one school or scriptural textual variant over another. Similarly in Islamic *tafsir* and *hadith* collections all variants and opinions are generally recorded and preserved. The same applies to the gospels. In light of all these cases of co-existing diversity we may ask which scriptural readings and traditions are “original”? Our answer is that all of the traditional forms are “original,” for although historical reality was by no means ignored in the antique world, “historicity” in the modern sense was never the primary category of concern for either ancient Judaism or nascent Christianity. The underlying eternal and esoteric significance of events was more important than the bare historical phenomenon in itself.²⁵

Jewish tradition speaks of variant readings in the Torah which are traced back to this or that Rabbi; one such technique is known as *tiqra*: “do not read thus, but read thus.” *Sanhedrin* 110b gives us a typical example of *tiqra*: “Isaiah 26:2, ‘Open the gates, that the righteous nation which keeps truth may enter in’; read not ‘which keeps truth’ (*shomer emunim*),

25. As Schuon has observed, myth can communicate truth more effectively than mere historical reportage. See Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*. Translated from the French by G. E. H. Palmer. (Pates Manor, Bedford, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1990), 18-22.

but ‘which says Amen’ (*she-omer amen*)”. What is implied here is not that a Rabbi’s copy of the Torah actually read differently from the standard version, but that the Rabbi interpreted the text in such or such a way, based on considerations of gematria, allegory, etc. The same applies to the well-known phenomenon of variant readings in the Qur’an; contrary to the claims of many academic western Orientalists these were primitive interpretations of an already fixed text, not primitive textual variants. Which of the traditional variants were considered original? All of them, because nascent Islam was not concerned with an “original” *historical* reading, neither at the Qur’anic level, as the various versions attest, nor at the level of the *ahadith*, which exhibit the same types of oral and exegetical fluidity as do Jesus’ sayings in the gospels. Even according to a non-traditional scholar such as Wansbrough, the “‘companion’ codices” as well as the “‘regional’ codices” (*masahif al-amsar*) “are largely fictive. Of genuinely textual variants exhibiting material deviation from the canonical text of revelation, such as are available for Hebrew and Christian scripture, there are none.”²⁶ However, the fact that the early Islamic authorities presented these traditions as such proves that their concept of textuality was fluid and that all traditional schools of exegesis were equally respected as such.

The traditional seven approved readings of the Qur’an demonstrate that at least in some sectors of early Islam oral diversity predominated over monolithic textuality even with regard to Islam’s sacred text. This reflects the metaphysical tenet that there is not an identity but a continuity between the written and recited Qur’an and its celestial archetype. It is of the celestial archetype, not of its written or even recited analogue, that it is said the words of God are inexhaustible, as in Qur’an *sura* 31:27: “And if all the trees on the earth were pens, and if the seas were *ink and the seas were* expanded sevenfold, *the ink would be depleted before* the words of God would

26. John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies. Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 203, 45.

be finished; surely God is mighty, wise.” This undifferentiated infinity is also hinted at in the fact that many of the earliest Qur’ans were written without diacritical markings, which encouraged diversity of variant readings, interpretations, and recitations. That the variants are limited to seven is a valid traditional safeguard, but this does not imply that the possible meanings of the text are not infinite. According to a *hadith*, there are 70,000 veils of the Qur’an, just as “the Torah has 70 faces.”²⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabi teaches that each time one reads a Qur’anic *aya* (verse) one should understand it differently; there is no one meaning to the sacred text. This agrees essentially with the Buddhist doctrine of non-essence, which is more or less paralleled in Islamic mysticism, as for example when Seyyid Haydar Amuli writes in his *Asrar al-Shari’ah (Mysteries of the Shariah)*, in the section on divine Unity (*tawhid*):

The statements of all the Gnostics, moreover, mirror the same truth: “Nothing exists but God, his names, his attributes and his actions. Thus everything is him, by means of him, from him, and to him.” Just as the waves vanish back into the sea and the drops of rain dissolve into the ocean in spite of our mental perception of them as distinct existent entities because, in actuality, the waves and drops of rain have no separate existence at all, so the real existence is solely that the sea and the waves are in a condition of mutual destruction and vanishing.... Therefore the one who witnesses the Real, and who sees the creation and its manifestations for what they in truth are, realizes that the creation and all phenomena are actually non-existent.... In truth, nothing exists but the Real.... God alludes to this when he says, “When you see the mountains you think they are solid, yet they shall vanish as the cloud vanishes” (Qur’an *sura* 27:88).

The Babylonian Talmud does not normally choose between competing traditions, pronouncing that one is “right”

27. Cited in Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (NY: Meridian, 1974), 172.

and the other “wrong”; there is some of the latter procedure in the Jerusalem Talmud, but there as well we find an overall respectful preservation of all sides of religious questions. The Babylonian Talmud is typified by a tolerance, acceptance, and respect for a diversity of truth articulations. By contrast, the Jerusalem Talmud conforms more to the pattern of Scholasticism, to an Aquinas, for example, who assembles all opinions and then pronounces in favor of one. Boyarin argues that the Babylonian Talmud has adopted a Christian apophatic approach, and this is a possibility, but we do not share Boyarin’s negative attitude towards apophasis in general.²⁸ Rather than always being necessarily shallow or non-intellectual, apophasis on the contrary can by means of extremely subtle and profoundly dialectical contemplation reconcile diverse faith interpretations and traditions which at first sight may appear dogmatically irreconcilable. Apophasis can demonstrate that at an interior level some contradictories may coincide, at least to a certain degree. Thus apophatic thought may serve to nurture and support a co-existence of diverse faith interpretations and traditions.

At least theologically considered, there is ultimately no need to choose between valid textual variations of scripture, for as Gregory the Great writes in his *Moralis in Iob*, 20.I.I, *Scriptura sacra cum legentibus crescit*, that is, “Sacred scripture increases with those reading it.” Cognate to the concept of a valid variety of variant readings of sacred scripture and a legitimate co-existence of competing theological and metaphysical propositions, is the question of divergence with regard to the establishment of a sacred canon of authoritative books. And here we find the same diversity as with scriptural variant readings. The different churches have different canons, such as the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant,

28. See Daniel Boyarin, “Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia,” in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 347.

and Ethiopian Churches. The latter canon in fact includes the *Book of Enoch* in its Old Testament, and by adopting such works as the *Shepherd of Hermas*, its New Testament canon is quite different from the canons of all other churches.

3. *The Gospel of Thomas*

A New Translation Based on the Coptic and Greek Texts

Here are the secret teachings of the living Jesus; and he wrote them, even Judah the Twin, and he¹ said:

1. “Whoever finds the interpretation of these teachings will not taste of death.”

2. Jesus said: “One who seeks, let them not cease seeking until they find; and when they find, they will be troubled; and when they have been troubled, they will be amazed; and when they have been amazed, they will reign; and when they have reigned, they will rest.”

3. Jesus said: “If those who push you around² say to you, ‘Behold, the kingdom is in the sky,’ the birds of the sky would enter her before you. And if they say to you that she is under the earth in the watery abyss, then the fish of the sea would enter her before you. But the kingdom of God is both inside you and manifest to the outer eye. One who knows oneself will find the kingdom, and when you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will see that you are children of the living father. But if you do not know who you are, you will dwell in poverty and you will be that poverty.”

4. Jesus said: “The man old in days will not hesitate to ask an infant seven days old concerning the place of life, and he

1. Thomas, not Jesus.

2. Coptic *sok*, *contra* Guillaumont not from Aramaic ܩܘܩܩܐ, but from Biblical *sug* (סוּג); compare the Arabic سق (*saga*).

will live. For the many who are first will become last; and the many will become one.”

5. Jesus said: “Know what is in front of you, and what is hidden from you will be revealed to you. There is nothing which is hidden which will not be made manifest.”

6. His disciples asked him and said to him: “How should we fast? And how should we pray? And how should we give alms? And how should we observe dietary laws?” Jesus said: “Do not lie, and do not do anything against your conscience, for Heaven sees all things. For there is nothing that has been hidden that will not be made manifest.”

7. Jesus said: “The lion that a man will eat is blessed, for the lion will become a man. But the man that the lion will eat is cursed, for the lion will become a man.”

8. He said: “The man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea; he drew it up full of little fish from the sea. Among them the wise fisherman found a good large fish. He cast the little ones back to the sea; he chose the large fish without trouble. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

9. Jesus said: “Behold, the sower went out, he filled his hands and cast forth. Some, indeed, fell upon the road; the birds came, they gathered them. Others fell upon the rock, and did not send roots down into the earth, and did not send forth ears reaching to the sky. And others fell upon thorns; they choked the seed, and worms ate them. And others fell upon good earth, and it produced good fruit (reaching) up to the sky. It brought sixty per measure, and one hundred twenty per measure.

10. Jesus said: “I have cast a fire upon the world, and behold, I watch over it until it burns.”

11. Jesus said: “This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will also pass away. And those who have died are not alive, and those who are alive will not die. In the days when you ate what was dead, you made it live. When you come to be in the light, what will you do? On the day you were one, you became two, but when you become two, what will you do?”

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