

THOMAS: THE FIFTH GOSPEL?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Whereas for years those in quest for the historical Jesus have been content to pursue their investigations within the canonical Gospels, recent developments in source criticism along with certain twentieth-century papyrological discoveries have widened the field. Little could the discoverers of the Oxyrhynchus fragments have realized back in 1898 that their Greek fragments containing sayings of Jesus, along with the much fuller, Coptic trove discovered in the Nag Hammadi desert fifty years later, would one day become a staple of historical Jesus research. John Dominic Crossan, for example, sees *Thomas* as essential to the investigation of Jesus of Nazareth, for he writes that “the collection is very, very early.”¹ Burton Mack maintains a similar position, claiming that by the mid-1980s “it was well known, for instance, that the Gospel of Thomas was thoroughly nonapocalyptic in tenor and that it contained sayings from the very earliest period of the Jesus movements,” and for these reasons must also have been closely associated with the Q community.² Like Mack, Stephen Patterson also draws attention to the similarities between *Thomas* and Q, and maintains that between these two documents the tide has now turned against the apocalyptic Jesus of yore. For Patterson, a new day in Jesus studies has dawned:

... no new quest of the historical Jesus can proceed now without giving due attention to the Thomas tradition. As an independent reading of the Jesus tradition, it provides us with a crucial and indispensable tool for gaining critical distance on the Synoptic tradition, which has so long dominated the Jesus discussion.³

From those seeking to show what we can really know about Jesus to those seeking to show what we can really know about early Christianity, the list of scholars goes on.⁴

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¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 428.

² Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) 37–38.

³ Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Foundations and Facets Reference Series; Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1993) 241.

⁴ The Jesus Seminar places considerable weight on *Thomas*. “These [Thomasine] materials, which many scholars take to represent a tradition quite independent of the other gospels, provide what

Clearly, the game has changed. Whereas those in search of the historical Jesus have previously been accustomed to looking for their most-wanted man somewhere near the intersection of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, a new line of scholarship has appeared on the scene and, finding the Synoptic witness as giving us too little to go on, are turning to other haunts. If Jesus was to be seen anywhere, it is presumed, he would most likely not be caught dead (much less resurrected) in the neighborhood of the Synoptics. Instead, we would do best to look for Jesus in the earliest strata somewhere closer to the vicinity of Thomas and Q street.

But quite apart from the question of Q, one must ask whether the testimony of *Thomas* is actually as useful as much of NT scholarship has led us to believe. We have found *Thomas*, we have brought him downtown to the station, we have taken down his story, and now with this important new lead we are off to new beats and stakeouts. But have we really done the necessary background check? We have *Thomas's* story on Jesus, but do we really have the story on *Thomas*? Undoubtedly the author who stands behind the Oxyrhynchus fragments and the Coptic collection is witness to *something*. But how can we be so sure that *Thomas* is after all "very, very early"? How can we be certain that the *Gospel of Thomas* is witness to the historical Jesus? If the proposal that this collection be viewed as a "Fifth Gospel" largely rests on the sayings' usefulness as a witness to the historical Jesus, then another way of asking the question is this: may *Thomas* in fact be rightfully deemed the Fifth Gospel?

II. THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS AS A SYRIAC DOCUMENT

1. *The basic argument.* In the following essay, I wish to argue that *Thomas's* purported first-century roots and the correlated claim to its being on par with the canonical Gospels are both subject to serious question. As I have argued more fully elsewhere, the evidence seems to show that the Coptic gospel is not so much a witness to the historical Jesus, but instead a witness to early Syriac Christianity.⁵ Following a linguistic analysis of the Coptic collection, with particular attention to the use of catchwords, it appears that *Thomas* was not written—per the standard and prevailing assumption—in Greek, as an evolving sayings collection, dating back to the first or early second century. Instead, it seems that our sayings gospel was written in

scientists call a 'control group' for the analysis of sayings and parables that appear in the other gospels" (Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, *et al.*, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* [New York: Polebridge, 1993] 15). Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003) presents a revisionist history of early Christianity, one which takes into account the diversity represented by *Thomas*.

⁵ See *Thomas and Tatian: The Relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and the Diatessaron* (Academia Biblica 5; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; Leiden: Brill, 2002); also, "NHC II,2 and the Oxyrhynchus Fragments (P.Oxy 1, 654, 655): Overlooked Evidence for a Syriac Gospel of Thomas," *VC* 58 (2004) 138–51.

Syriac, as a piece, showing dependence on the first Syriac gospel record, Tatian’s *Diatessaron* (c. AD 173).

But before making this case, let us begin with a preliminary textual-critical observation, first made a number of years ago by August Strobel.⁶

Matt 8:20 = Luke 9:50 (NA 26)	<i>Gos. Thom.</i> 86	<i>Diatessaron</i> par. Matt 8:20 = Luke 9:50
Foxes have holes and the birds of the air	Foxes have their holes and _____ birds _____	Foxes have their holes and _____ birds _____
_____	Have	have
nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay the head.	their nest, but the son of man has no place to lay his head and rest.	their nest, but the son of man has no place to lay his head and rest.

The correspondences between *Gos. Thom.* 86 and Strobel’s reconstruction of the parallel in the *Diatessaron*, the latter being firmly based on both eastern and western witnesses, are remarkable. Both Thomas and Tatian include the possessive adjective (“their holes”), where the Synoptic tradition has none. Again against the Synoptics, both omit the phrase “of the air.” Both *Thomas* and the *Diatessaron* include the verb “to have” before the object “nests.” Again, against Matthew and Luke, both have plural “nests” rather than the canonical Gospels’ singular (note also the shared presence of the possessive adjective). Thomas and Tatian agree that the Son of Man has “no place to lay his head and rest.” Meanwhile, the first and third Gospels read: “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Allow me two remarks. First, the degree of detailed correspondence between *Thomas* and the *Diatessaron* against the Synoptic tradition at this point forbids a facile explaining away of the text-critical data as the product of chance. Second, while it is interesting enough that Thomas and Tatian share so many similarities in this saying, what is even more extraordinary is that the two traditions are in fact *identical*. In other words, were we to retrovert *Gos. Thom.* 86 into Syriac (the original language of the *Diatessaron*), we would also essentially be reconstructing the very (Syriac) words of the *Diatessaron*.

While other scholars have also detected affinities with the Diatessaronic tradition, time forbids an examination of the various observations bearing on

⁶ August Strobel, “Textgeschichtliches zum Thomas-Logion 86 (Mt 8,20/Luk 9,58),” *VC* 17 (1963) 211–24.

various logia here.⁷ But it may be worthwhile to point out, if only in passing, the degree to which Thomas and Tatian correspond. In his study of the texts, Gilles Quispel finds over 160 textual variants shared by *Thomas* and the Diatessaronic tradition.⁸ These variants occur across the span of the *Gospel of Thomas* and, more importantly, as for those logia that show parallels, to the Synoptic Gospels (roughly half of the entire collection of 114 sayings) there are *only several that do not* bear traces of Diatessaronic influence. Those that do show distinctively Diatessaronic characteristics are as follows: *Gos. Thom.* 1, 3, 8, 9, 10, 12, 16, 20, 21, 25, 26, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 44, 45, 47, 48, 55, 58, 61, 63, 64, 65, 66, 68, 73, 76, 78, 79, 86, 89, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 100, 104, 109, and 113.⁹

What are we to make of these shared variants between Thomas and Tatian? Quispel himself first proposed that the evidence points in favor of a common oral Aramaic source. Although Quispel modifies this so as to suggest the added influence of texts (possibly the *Gospel of the Nazoreans*, *Gospel of the Egyptians*, and hermetic gnomologies), this “oral source” thesis survives in its basic outline in current approaches to *Thomas*, for example, that of Helmut Koester.¹⁰ But Quispel bases this claim on the *a priori* assumption that *Thomas* could not have directly used the *Diatessaron*, nor—conversely—could Tatian have directly used *Thomas*. In other words, Quispel’s hypothesis, though possible, amounts to little more than an assertion.

While Quispel’s insight into the textual parallels between the *Diatessaron* and *Thomas* are highly significant, any interpretation which sees an oral version of proto-*Thomas* as somehow standing behind the *Diatessaron* remains problematic. It would be considered awkward, at any rate, were the same reasoning applied to the Synoptic problem. For students of the Synoptic problem it is precisely those passages where the Gospels very closely parallel each other that preclude the possibility of oral relationship and indicate (at least in the relevant pericopae) *written* dependence. Would one not be more justified in inferring, on the basis of close text-critical similarities between the *Diatessaron* and the Coptic collection, that the relationship between Thomas and Tatian is one of literary dependence?

To this must be added a further observation, namely, that in the earliest decades of Thomas research, a number of scholars have detected signs of the collection having been first composed in Syriac or at least of having passed

⁷ See, e.g., Aelred Baker, “Gospel of Thomas and the Diatessaron,” *JTS* 16 (1965) 449–54; Jacques-E. Ménard, *L’Évangile selon Thomas* (NHS 5; Leiden: Brill, 1975); Tjitze Baarda, “Thomas and Tatian,” in J. Helderman and S. J. Noorda, eds., *Early Transmission of Words of Jesus: Thomas, Tatian and the Text of the New Testament* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij, 1983) 37–49.

⁸ Gilles Quispel, *Tatian and the Gospel of Thomas: Studies in the History of the Western Diatessaron* (Leiden: Brill, 1975). Quispel has an extensive bibliography on this subject.

⁹ *Ibid.* 174–90.

¹⁰ Gilles Quispel, “The Gospel of Thomas Revisited,” in Bernard Barc, ed., *Colloque international sur les textes de Nag Hammadi (Québec, 22–25 août 1978)* (Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi 1; Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1981) 218–66. On Koester, see, e.g., Helmut Koester, “Q and its Relatives,” in J. Goehring, ed., *Gospel Origins and Christian Beginnings: In Honor of James M. Robinson* (ForFasc; Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1990) 49–63.

through a Syriac-speaking stage of transmission. Here we may note above all the work of Antoine Guillaumont.¹¹ But this scholarship has for some inexplicable reason remained ignored in current Thomasine scholarship.

In my own work I have made a similar suggestion regarding the Syriac-speaking provenance of Thomas.¹² For example, in *Gos. Thom.* 61, Salome asks Jesus:¹³ “Who are you, man, that *as from one* you have come up on my couch and have eaten from my table?” (*Gos. Thom.* 61). The words describing how Jesus comes up on the couch are virtually meaningless in the Coptic. Against what seem to be unsuccessful efforts to reconstruct the Greek *Vorlage* (on the assumption there was one),¹⁴ a better approach would be to suggest that the Syriac phrase *min-ḥdā*, which literally means “from one” but also “suddenly,” stood behind the Coptic *hōs ebol hen-oua*. Thus, in the original logion, Salome’s surprise leads her to exclaim: “Who are you, man, that you have *suddenly* come onto my couch?” In this case, the Syriac, although formally correctly translated into Coptic on a word-by-word-equivalence basis, was essentially mistranslated. There are other instances of this sort whereby oddities in the Nag Hammadi text or in the Oxyrhynchus Fragments (*P.Oxy.* 1, 654, 655) can be explained by tracing the text’s steps back to a Syriac original.¹⁵

Of course, the successful retroversion of isolated logia into Syriac proves little about the origins of the entire collection known to us today as the *Gospel of Thomas*. Whatever the genesis of assorted discrete sayings, evidence for the linguistic character of individual logia does not necessarily enable us to speak to the background of the whole composition. Nevertheless, when there is an accumulation of logia that can be located within a Syriac-speaking setting, the question naturally arises as to whether the Syriac-character of the sayings is not merely the exception, but the rule. The issue could only be settled decisively on the meeting of at least one of two conditions. Either a preponderance of logia in *Thomas* would have to show indications of Syriac-speaking background or there would have to be evidence that a Syriac hand was involved in the composition of the collection as a whole.

I believe that the latter is demonstrable. That the Coptic collection can be seen *in toto* as a translation of a Syriac text can in fact be borne out by an examination of catchwords. It is universally acknowledged that the *Gospel of Thomas* exhibits some kind of catchword arrangement. Consider, for example the opening of the gospel:

These are the secret *sayings* which Jesus the living one spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down.

And he said, “Whoever finds the interpretation of these *sayings* will not taste death.” (*Gos. Thom.* Prologue and 1)

¹¹ “Sémitismes dans les logia de Jésus retrouvés à Nag-Hamâdi,” *JA* 246 (1958) 113–23.

¹² Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian* and “Overlooked Evidence.”

¹³ This example is taken from Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian* 45–46.

¹⁴ See Bentley Layton, ed., *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7 together with XIII, 2**. *Brit. Lib. Or. 4926 (1)*, and *P.Oxy.* 1, 654, 655 (NHS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989) 74.

¹⁵ See Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian* 43–46.

The repetition of the word “sayings” in the first two sayings is by design; many similar such links are discernible in the collection. But for some reason, despite the lack of firm assurance regarding *Thomas’s* original language of composition (the Greek of the Oxyrhynchus fragments has won the day more or less by default), catchwords have never been employed as a means of getting at the question: “In what language were the 114 sayings, now known as the *Gospel of Thomas*, strung together?” Presumably, if catchwords are constituted not just by the repetition of sense, but the repetition of sound (we are constantly being reminded of the oral/aural quality of ancient texts), then it is worthwhile to reconstruct homophonous relationships between sayings, if any, given the various scenarios for the original language of composition.

Since the scholarly discussion has presented us with the possibilities of Coptic, Greek, and Syriac, I have set out in my own work to compare the occurrence of catchwords (semantic and phonological correspondences between two or more words across two adjoining logia) accordingly. I have worked with the extant Coptic text, a reconstructed Greek text (with some help from Oxyrhynchus and the several Greek retroversions already published), and a reconstructed Syriac text. Of course, the non-existence of a Syriac *Gospel of Thomas*, either as an actual artifact from the sandy dust of Egypt or as a scholarly reconstruction gathering dust on the shelves of university libraries around the world, grants this endeavor a speculative aspect. But history is by nature speculative; the goal is to avoid being unduly speculative. To that end I have set in place certain controls and adhered to the following stipulations:

1. When *Thomas* parallels the Synoptic material, the wording of the Old Syriac (OS) is to be followed.¹⁶
2. However, in cases where the Diatessaronic witness presents wording different from the OS, the *Diatessaron* is to be preferred.
3. When *Thomas* parallels neither the Synoptic nor the Diatessaronic tradition, the Syriac lexeme is chosen on the basis of sense and frequency of usage.

It must be recalled that the reconstruction of the Greek and Syriac gospels need not be accurate in terms of word order or in most cases syntax or morphology. The question in each case is, “What is the best Greek or Syriac equivalent for the corresponding Coptic word at hand?” Of course, as far as Syriac goes, on a theoretical level there are usually several options for producing lexical equivalencies, but then again, Syriac word usage—as those familiar with the language can attest—is fairly predictable. More often than not, the options quickly narrow themselves down to one, clear best option.

¹⁶ The OS is our earliest extant Syriac gospel record and is commonly thought to have been influenced by the popular *Diatessaron*, just as, by analogy, modern English versions have been influenced by the AV.

Here are the results. In Coptic *Thomas*, I find that out of 114 sayings, there are 269 words that may be linked to at least one other word either in the immediately preceding or in the immediately following logion—or both. In a reconstructed Greek version of the same, we find something similar: 263. But we find that if we examine a Syriac version of *Thomas*, we find that the number of catchwords almost doubles: 502.¹⁷

This, it seems to me, is an important consideration. But it is not just the raw number of catchwords that is striking. Let us look at the data in terms of distribution. How broadly spread out are these catchwords, given the various linguistic options? One way to measure this is by determining the number of sayings which are (1) connected either to the immediately preceding or immediately following logion; (2) connected to both the preceding and following logion; and (3) completely isolated, that is, lacking a catchword connection altogether.

	<i>Percentage of Logia Connected on Both Sides</i>	<i>Percentage of Logia Connected on One Side</i>	<i>Percentage of Isolated Logia</i>
Coptic <i>Thomas</i>	49%	40%	11%
“Greek <i>Thomas</i> ”	50%	38%	12%
“Syriac <i>Thomas</i> ”	89%	11%	0%

The number of sayings containing catchwords in the *Gospel of Thomas* is impressive, whatever the translation. In the reconstructed Greek and extant Coptic versions of the collection, almost half the sayings are tied to their context in two directions, forwards and backwards. The statistics for the Greek and Coptic are again roughly similar for the percentage of sayings that show a catchword connection with either the preceding or the subsequent logion, but not both. But interestingly, the numbers for the Syriac reconstruction are quite different. In the Syriac, I find that 11% of the sayings are connected on one side only and 89% of the logia are connected to both the preceding and subsequent logia. Given these numbers, it would be fair to say that the Syriac shows roughly double the degree of interconnectedness than the Coptic and Greek versions. Even more significant is the percentage of isolated logia for the Syriac: 0%. This means that in retroverting the *Gospel of Thomas* into Syriac, there are no isolated and dangling logia. In Syriac and in Syriac only, we see the collection as a seamless garment, completely sewn together with the threads of repeating senses and sounds. Neither Coptic nor Greek *Thomas* displays this thoroughgoing unity.

At this point, it may perhaps be tempting to say that the “Syriac theory,” as I have called it, is just lucky. “The high frequency and broad distribution

¹⁷ Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian* 57–155.

of catchwords in a Syriac *Thomas* is matter of coincidence,” or “The procedure remains fundamentally speculative.” Or perhaps, one might suspect, this is a case of an overzealous scholar fudging his analysis to produce the desired results. Any of these objections are natural enough.

Certainly, the charge of “coincidence” or tendentious “fudging” of the results would have some weight, were it not for the fact that my analysis yields not just a raw accumulation and broad distribution of catchwords in Syriac, but catchword patterns. By “catchword patterns” I mean the repetition of word pairings which, short of the Syriac theory, are statistically inexplicable.

It is noteworthy, for instance, that *Gos. Thom.* 10 contains the word “fire,” while the following logion contains the word “light”: in Syriac, the two words “fire” and “light,” *nurā* and *nuhrā*, would have been almost indistinguishable to the ear. The collocation of these two homophones might be written off as mere coincidence, except that precisely the same word pairing occurs again in *Gos. Thom.* 82.1 and 83.1 (*bis*), 2. And again we have a third occurrence of “fire” in *Gos. Thom.* 16.2, this time linked to 17 not with “light” per se, but—through a more indirect word play—“eyes,” a standard metaphor for “light” (Matt 6:22–23). Words for “fire” occur four times in the collection (*Gos. Thom.* 10; 13.8; 16.2; 82.1); “light” is found in seven sayings (11.3; 24.3 [4x]; 33.3; 50.1 [2x]; 61.5; 77.1; 83.1 [2x], 2). The statistical probability that these pairings are incidental is 6.8%.¹⁸

Again, the word “wealth” (Coptic *em̄m̄ ntr̄ em̄mao* = Syriac *‘etar*) occurs twice in the sayings collection (29.3, 85.1); both times in conjunction with the like-sounding word “place” (Coptic *ma* = Syriac *’atar*) (30.1, 2; 86.2). Coptic words meaning “place” (*ma*, *topos*) occurs in twelve logia (4.1; 18.2; 22.6 [4x]; 24.1; 30.1, 2; 33.2; 50.1; 60.6; 64.12; 67; 68.2; 86.2). Given these facts, there is a 3.8% chance that its repeated connection with *em̄m̄ ntr̄ em̄mao* is fortuitous.

There are other instances of the same. The word “women” (= Syriac: *nešše*) is found in only three logia in the collection (*Gos. Thom.* 15, 46.1, 114.1). Each of these logia, interestingly, also falls next to a saying which, when on the basis of the OS is translated back into Syriac, contains the word *naš*, that is, “someone” (*Gos. Thom.* 14.5, 47.1, 113.4). Whether *naš* can be presumed beyond these three sayings is questionable. Given the limited use of both terms, their recurring collocation would strongly suggest that *nešše* (“women”) and *naš* (“someone”) are intended to be phonologically linked. It is, of course, possible that these collocations of “women” and “someone” have occurred randomly—anything is possible. But the probability that these sayings containing these words simply fell next to each is .0085%.

I have treated more instances of the same elsewhere but do not wish to belabor the point.¹⁹ It is enough to say that on the basis of specific repeating verbal links in the collection, which produce very clear linkages only in

¹⁸ I am grateful to Stephen Carlson for initially providing this and the following statistics; they are confirmed by Andris Abakuks.

¹⁹ Perrin, “Overlooked Evidence” 143–45.

Syriac, the burden of proof squarely rests on those wishing to deny Syriac composition, much as the burden of proof would remain on one who, finding a manuscript of a scene from *Hamlet*, surmises that the arrangement of the letters on the pages were the product not of design but of a room full of monkeys banging away on a keyboard.

2. *Further arguments for a Syriac Gospel of Thomas.* But if this is not evidence enough, allow me to share six further reasons why a Syriac *Gospel of Thomas* makes most sense.

a. *Order of sayings.* It has often been said that the strongest argument against *Thomas's* dependence on a written source lies in the apparent willy-nilly sequence of sayings.²⁰ There is, to be sure, in Coptic *Thomas* little rhyme or reason, save some thematic congruencies and catchword connections which surface in that language. The odd order of the Thomasine collection has indeed proven to be an abiding mystery. However, if the editor's goal in compiling these sayings was first and foremost to get them to fit into an overriding rhetorical scheme, and this scheme can only be properly appreciated in a Syriac rendering of the collection, our puzzlement fades. The Syriac theory of *Thomas* explains the order of sayings *in toto*; no other hypothesis, which I am aware of at any rate, has done this.

b. *Oxyrhynchus fragments.* The differences between the Greek Oxyrhynchus fragments and the parallels in the later discovered Nag Hammadi texts have aroused the curiosity of scholars. Clearly, the Coptic is not simply a translation of the corresponding extant Greek text. Elsewhere I have explained how differences between our Coptic and Greek texts may best be explained not so much by a Gnostic *Tendenz* or something of the sort, but by the notion that both texts represent recensions dependent on the same Syriac original.²¹

Allow me a few examples here. Let us compare certain diverges between the Greek and Coptic:

"Where there are three, they are atheists (*atheoi*)." (*P. Oxy.* 1.23–24)

"Where there are three gods, they are gods (*hennoute*)." (*Gos. Thom.* 31)

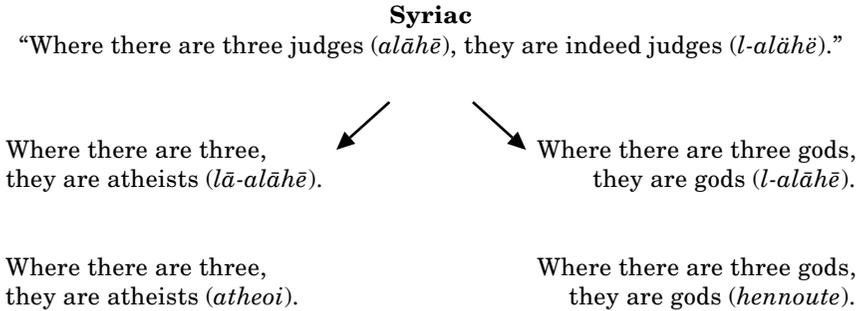
Guillaumont sheds light on the unusual assertion by suggesting that what is in view here is the Jewish practice whereby a *quorum* of three elders is required to settle judicial or interpretive disputes.²² In this case, those

²⁰ See e.g. Francis T. O'Fallon and Ron Cameron, "The Gospel of Thomas: A Forschungsbericht and Analysis," in Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini, eds., *ANRW* II.25.6 (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1989) 4215: "one who argues for the dependence of the Gos. Thom. on the Synoptic Gospels must . . . say why the Gos. Thom. presents its sayings in an order so totally different from that of any of the Synoptics, especially when there is no discernible compositional sequence in the Gos. Thom. demanding such a rearrangement."

²¹ Perrin, "Overlooked Evidence."

²² Guillaumont, "Logia de Jésus" 114–16.

envisaged are functioning not as gods, but as judges. This certainly fits a Syriac context, for in Syriac the word *alāhē* can be interpreted to mean either “gods” or “judges.” But this does not solve all our problems: the Greek and Coptic texts still seem to say almost opposite things. But let us take Guillaumont’s solution a step further and spell out what the Syriac might look like: “Where there are three judges (*alāhē*), they are indeed judges (*l-alāhē*).”²³ On this rendering it is easy to see how faulty hearing of the Syriac may have generated a separate line of transmission:



Greek Recension

Coptic Recension

As we see from *Ps.-Clem.* 3.3.73, to be *lā-alāhē* is to be “godless” or *atheoi*. Here is one instance in which differences between the extant Greek and Coptic may be explained by positing a common Syriac source.

Another instance of the same may be found by comparing the following:

“And my soul *is concerned* (*ponei*) for the sons of men . . .” (*P. Oxy.* 1.17–18)

“And my soul *was in pain* (*ti thas*) for the sons of men.” (*Gos. Thom.* 28.3)

While “to be concerned” and “to be in pain” both reflect a kind of inward mental anguish, the semantic overlap stops there. The meanings conveyed by the Greek and Coptic verbs are simply different. How might we explain this? Again, the Syriac theory comes to our aid. If the original writer used the Syriac Qal form *‘nā* to describe the state of Jesus’ soul, the Greek captures the sense appropriately. But if the very similar sounding Aphel stem of the same verb was employed, that is, *ā‘nā*, then the Coptic has it right. The point is this: the original text seems to have contained either *‘nā* or *ā‘nā* and, again, on account of faulty hearing, one line of transmission has failed to preserve the precise sense of the original. I give five further examples of the same phenomena elsewhere (including examples which suggest Syriac as opposed to Aramaic provenance), so there is no need to reproduce those results here more fully.²⁴

²³ The inclusion of the *lamedh* in the predicate is appropriate, given the determinative sense. Hebrew has an analogous construction.

²⁴ Perrin, “Overlooked Evidence” 144–51.

c. *Redaction.* A third strength of the Syriac theory is that it explains certain redactional changes the editor seems to have made on his material. If the compiler of the Thomasine collection considered it a high priority to establish catchword connections between the sayings, it may be imagined that when catchword linkages did not present themselves, he or she might be tempted to create them. I suggest this is precisely what we do find, but again, only in Syriac.

Compare, for example, the following:

“When you go into each land *and walk about the districts*, if they receive you, eat what is set before you.” (*Gos. Thom.* 14.4)

“When you enter into a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you.” (Luke 10:8)

Among the differences between *Gos. Thom.* 14.4 and Luke 10:8, the most striking is the inclusion of the phrase “and walk about the districts” in the former. Does this phrase reflect a more primitive Jesus tradition? Or does Luke’s omission of the phrase come closer to what Jesus actually said? I suggest we approach this question not through a form-critical analysis of the individual saying extracted from its context but through a comparison between *Gos. Thom.* 14.4 and material in the previous logion:

“When Thomas *returned (panni)* to his friends they asked him. . . .” (*Gos. Thom.* 13.7)

“When you go into each land and walk about the *districts (penayim)*, if they receive you, eat what is set before you.” (*Gos. Thom.* 14.4)

If *Gos. Thom.* 13.7 originally contained the verb *panni*, which if written in Syriac it probably did, a strategic way of repeating this relatively rare combination of syllables in the next logion would simply be to add the word “districts” (*penayim*). While there may have been several reasons for the editor to have added “and walk about the districts,” the phrase probably owes its existence to the editor’s desire to secure a catchword connection.

Gospel Thom. 17 contains a saying that is paralleled in a number of places, from Paul to the pseudepigrapha. For the sake of comparison, I have laid out 1 Cor 2:9, *Gos. Thom.* 17, and 1 *Clem.* 34.8 below:

1 Cor 2:9	<i>Gos. Thom.</i> 17	1 <i>Clem.</i> 34.8
what no eye has seen nor ear has heard	I shall give you what no eye has seen what no ear has heard <i>what no hand has touched</i>	Eye has not seen and ear has not heard
or entered into the heart of man.	and what has never entered into the human heart.	and it has not entered into the heart of man.

Minor differences notwithstanding, *Thomas's* peculiarity here (as can see by a thorough consultation of the saying's other occurrences in the ancient literature) consists in its unique inclusion of "what no hand has touched."²⁵ What theological difference such a phrase might make is hard to tell. The stylistic motivation is more apparent, but only when we view the collection through Syriac lenses:

<i>Gos. Thom.</i> 16.1–2	<i>Gos. Thom.</i> 17	<i>Gos. Thom.</i> 18.2–3
Jesus said, "Perhaps men think that it is peace which I have come to cast upon the world. They do not <u>know</u> that it is division I have come to cast upon the earth . . ."	Jesus said, "I shall give you what no eye has seen and what no ear has heard <i>and what no <u>hand</u> has touched</i> and what has never entered into the human heart."	Jesus said, ". . . blessed is he who will make his stand in the beginning, for he will <u>know</u> the end and will not taste death."

While it is difficult to ascertain what precise inflection of the verb "to know" would have occurred in a Syriac version of *Gos. Thom.* 16 and 18, it is almost certain that the root word in question would have been *ida*^ϥ. "How might I," the clever Syriac editor wonders, "forge a verbal bridge, whereby in a stroke I might connect the middle saying (*Gos. Thom.* 17) with the sayings on either side (*Gos. Thom.* 16 and 18)?" The answer, so it seems, is with the word "hand": in the emphatic state its form (*ida*^ϥ) is identical with the verb "to know." This otherwise inexplicable addition of "what no hand has touched" can be accounted for simply on the premise (1) that the collection was written in Syriac and (2) that editor was deeply interested in creating verbal connections where possible.

d. *Coherence with Syriac rhetorical style.* While this way of conceiving *Thomas*, that is, as a collection of sayings knit together first and foremost by phonological and semantic connections, may seem odd to the modern mind, it would have been nothing new to the ancient Syriac reader. Early Syriac literature is replete with this kind of trope. Ephraim, Narsai, Jacob of Serug, and the *Odes of Solomon* all show a love for linking strophes paronomastically.²⁶ Even several of the play on words that we find in the *Odes* (among the earliest extant Syriac texts) are discernible in *Thomas*.²⁷

e. *Coherence with Syriac theology.* Placing *Thomas* in a second-century Syriac setting also makes most sense of the theological tendencies that

²⁵ For parallels (none of which contain the phrase), see Klaus Berger, "Zur Diskussion über der Herkunft von 1. Cor II.9," *NTS* 24 (1977–78) 270–83.

²⁶ See Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian* 157–69.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 160–64.

characterize the collection. The asceticism, the low Christology, the quasi-dualism: all these are also characteristic of early Syriac Christianity. There are other features, for example, *Thomas's* use of *monachos* ("solitary"), that are more or less unique to the Syriac church at this point of time.²⁸ More work needs to be dedicated to exploring this issue further.

f. *Provenance*. There is a final reason as to why Syriac theory makes most sense: the *Gospel of Thomas*—and this point is accepted almost universally—was in all likelihood composed in Edessa. While Edessa was a bilingual city, it was predominantly Syriac-speaking and Syriac-writing. The vast majority of texts recovered from Edessa from the first centuries of the common era are written in Syriac; very little comes to us from that city at that time in Greek. And herein, we may say, lies one of the grand contradictions of *Thomas* scholarship. How could it be that in one breath scholars affirm Edessan provenance and yet dogmatically maintain that the collection was written in Greek? Multiple stages of composition or not (more on this in a moment), Edessan provenance is *prima facie* grounds for inferring that *Thomas* first saw the light of day in Syriac (not Greek, not Coptic) script.

III. THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS: UNITY, SOURCES, AND DATING

Of course, all these considerations do not *prove* that *Thomas* was written in Syriac, for history never *proves* anything. But what history can do is give a coherent model for explaining the available data. I believe that a Syriac *Gospel of Thomas* carries far more explanatory power than any other model can offer.

If this be accepted, another inference almost ineluctably follows, namely, that the *Gospel of Thomas* was not a slowly snowballing oral collection, drawing from different oral strata. Instead, it was a carefully worked piece of literature, brought together at one place and at one time by an industrious Syriac-speaking editor. Given the complex chain of connections that come to surface on the Syriac theory, *Thomas's* unity can hardly be doubted.

If this be so, the question then arises as to the nature of this author's sources, especially in regards to that material paralleled in the Synoptics. Were they oral or were they written? I have already spoken against the general possibility of oral relationship given the very tight parallels between *Thomas* and the first Syriac gospel record, the *Diatessaron*. Do we have any other evidence that this Syriac writer used the first Syriac gospel record directly?

Yes. We have the evidence of sequence. Whereas it is regularly pointed out that the sayings in *Thomas* do not reflect the sequence of the canonical Gospels and this, in turn, becomes a linchpin for arguing for the collection's independence, it must be said that at points the *Gospel of Thomas* does indeed follow the order of both the Synoptics and the *Diatessaron*. It follows

²⁸ See Alfred Adam, "Grundbegriffe des Mönchtums in sprachlicher Sicht," *ZKG* 65 (1953–54) 209–39.

the former at eight places: *Gos. Thom.* 8–9, 32–33, 42/43–44, 47, 65–66, 68–69, 92–93, and 93–94; it follows Tatian at each of these places (not surprisingly the *Diatessaron*, being a Gospel harmony, often follows the Synoptic order) and *Gos. Thom.* 44–45, thereby making nine points at which Thomas and Tatian share the same sequence.²⁹ Of course, given the nature of the project, it is not surprising that the author of *Thomas* should show little interest in following the order of his sources. He is more concerned with thematic groupings and above all linking sayings together by catchwords. Nonetheless, at these nine points, Thomas, our purported informant on the historical Jesus, betrays his source: none other than Tatian's *Diatessaron*.³⁰ This gives us a *terminus a quo* of AD 173 for the *Gospel of Thomas*. It was probably written no later than the end of the second century.

IV. CONCLUSION

If Thomas was based on the *Diatessaron* and the two documents issue from the same strand of early Syriac Christianity, this has fascinating implications for our study of the second-century Church, implications which I hope other scholars will pursue. But in returning to the issue at hand, the quest for the historical Jesus and *Thomas's* status as the Fifth Gospel, I would suggest we must reassess the emerging view. We can no longer hold to our romantic vision of *Thomas* as a naïve, artless compiler of Jesus sayings. More importantly, we can no longer envisage the collection as an early and therefore reliable witness of the Jesus tradition. We have brought Thomas into the station. We have listened to his story. But now that we have run a background check, I suggest we can only say: "It's late. And it's time to send Thomas home."

²⁹ See Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian* 186–88.

³⁰ Following the presentation of this paper, it was asked whether the shared sequence between *Thomas* and the *Diatessaron* might not equally suggest that Tatian was in fact dependent on Thomas. This is highly improbable. Which is more likely, one might ask, that "Thomas," while having no access to the Synoptic tradition, coincidentally reproduced the biblical sequence in eight places only to have these eight instances of biblical sequencing (plus one more) influence Tatian's order, who all along had his own Greek Synoptic Gospels; or that Tatian's narrative sequence at these points influenced Thomas's composition? If the author of *Thomas* wrote in Syriac and used written Syriac Gospel tradition, he could not have used anything but the *Diatessaron*.