
Linguistic Peculiarities And Values Of The Gospel Of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas is one of the most famous apocryphal works to have been found for a variety of reasons. To begin with, it was mentioned by a number of early Christian writers such as Hippolytus who quotes it in his arguments with the Naassenes and also may have been utilised by the Manicheans which makes it an influential book. Secondly, unlike most other Christian writing, Thomas consists only of logia (sayings) associated with Jesus along with occasional elements of dialogue. Not only does this make Thomas distinctive, but it is curious that it shares this style of writing with the hypothetical Q document which Matthew and Luke are thought to have used. Some biblical scholars may therefore be interested in using it as a tool to reconstruct Q. Finally, although this is not an exhaustive list, the discovery of the complete Gospel of Thomas came as somewhat of a surprise to experts. Greek fragments of the text had been discovered years beforehand although it was thought they may have been from the Gospel of the Hebrews, and the oldest of these copies was paleographically dated to c. 200 (Klauck, 2003: pp. 107-108). Even among academics, it is a mysterious document as Steven Davis acknowledge when saying 'As a whole, the Gospel of Thomas does not make sense' because it doesn't not present a coherent worldview. Although there may be some common ideas between logia, he doesn't believe that there is an overall theology presented in the text. (Davis, 2005: p. 149). In this essay I will explore whether we can uncover any general ideologies within Thomas, looking at it both as a whole as well as examining individual passages. I will compare and contrast some of these logion with verses in canonical scripture in order to determine how unique Thomas' teachings are and judge whether it fits into broader categories such a gnostic Christianity or if it can be placed in a class of its own. My aim is to explore broad themes and debates surrounding it along with seeing how contemporary scholars have interpreted its ancient wisdom.

Before we begin discussing the content of the Gospel of Thomas, I will briefly outline what we know about its historical background. Understanding when a text was composed and in what setting can help to provide a greater understanding of the ideology which it espouses as some beliefs that were common to the time may be incorporated within the document. However, even as of recently, 'scholars are nowhere near a consensus on the question of when Thomas was composed' (Skinner, 2012: p. 27). There are many factors that need to be analysed when looking at this conundrum, and there is not enough strong evidence to make a conclusive statement on when it was written. The first wave of researchers studying Thomas almost unanimously dated it towards the mid-second century or later, and religious preference for the canonical gospels may have led many to prioritise them over this newly discovered book. There are now generally four views which may be supported by scholars: 1.) Thomas was written in the second century, 2.) Thomas was written at a similar time to the canonical gospels, 3.) Thomas was written prior to Mark and 4.) different sets of logia in Thomas can be dated to different times (Skinner, 2012: pp. 9-11). My desire here is not to completely detail all of these individual arguments but to demonstrate the uncertainty we currently have in providing a date for the text, and thus to disregard this as one of the ways by which we can contextualise its theology.

Liberal scholars believe Thomas was written within a 1st Century setting, believing it to be one

of our earliest sources outlining Jesus' teachings. If Thomas was composed at an early time then this may explain why it contains no miracles; in all of the earlier Synoptics Jesus teaches that he is living in an 'evil generation' and that they will not be given signs of his holiness (Mark 8:11-12, Matt 16:1-4, Luke 11:29-30) whereas in the later John a whole section is dedicated to his signs (John 1:19-12:50). Indeed, scholars who support an evolutionary model of Christology believe that some of the earliest Christians did not regard Jesus as being sent as son of God but as a human who became divine (Ehrman, 2014:218). Therefore, if Thomas could be dated to the mid-1st century then this could help us understand how its author/s might have viewed Christ. Gerd Theissen and Annette Mertz claim Thomas' literary genre is typical of early material with other sayings collections including Q and the original logia behind Mark 4, a chapter containing stories like the parable of the mustard seed. The reconstructed Q, like Thomas, does not include the events of Jesus' life but rather lists quotations and Mark 4 is similar in its use of short didactic stories (Theissen and Mertz, 1998: p. 38). Maurice Casey disagrees that this is a reliable way of dating Thomas, and he cites the Book of Proverbs and the Instruction of Amen-em-Opet as other sayings collections that were composed hundreds of years prior to the beginning of the first millennium. Thomas' style, he says, cannot tell us anything significant about when it was written (Casey, 2002: p. 33). Casey ignores the fact that these are both non-Christian sources and it's within the Christian context that Theissen and Mertz argue that sayings collections are more typical within the 1st century. I do, on the other hand, maintain that it's not inconceivable for a Christian sayings collection to have been written later, and we do not even have the sources which Theissen and Mertz use to support their point so this argument is hardly conclusive. We do, on the other hand, have a copy of the Dialogue of the Saviour which is estimated to have been finalised in the mid-to-late 2nd century (Rom Cameron, 1982: p.39). This suggests that sayings collections remained popular in later years to an extent, and the literary genre argument is rather unconvincing.

Nicholas Perrin, on the other hand, dates Thomas to the later end of the 2nd century as he believes that it's dependent on the Diatessaron, written in c. 173 by Tatian. If this were true, reading Thomas through a gnostic lens would be more valid as Gnosticism was a later development within Christian theologies (Skinner, 2012: p. 9). Although we only have Greek and Coptic copies, he argues that it's likely the book was originally written in Syriac because a greater number of catchwords appear in this translated version (a catchword is 'any word which can be semantically, etymologically, or phonologically associated with another word found in an adjacent logion', Perrin, 2006: p. 68). Catchwords were often used in antiquity as a way of organising a document, and so if more of these can be found when converted into Syrian then it would be seemingly more likely that it was written in Syriac. From here, Perrin argues that the Diatessaron would have been a convenient Syrian source that the author of Thomas could've utilised. Furthermore, the two share textual variants that are not seen within the canonical gospels making Thomas' dependence on the Diatessaron even more likely as these similarities unlikely occurred as a result of chance. Logia 28 is one of Perrin's clearest instances where Thomas seems to copy from Tatian, appearing more similar to this version of the of the verse rather than the synoptic version:

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P.J Williams makes a fairly convincing takedown of this argument however, and he comments on how the method that Perrin uses to count alleged catchwords in Syriac unfairly biases his theory. For example, Perrin finds that the words 'sons' and 'child' are phonologically linked in his Syrian reconstruction so regards them as catchwords but ignores the fact that they should

also be included as catchwords within the Greek version because they are still semantically linked. This type of error can be found throughout Perrin's work and so his tally of catchwords is unreliable. P.J Williams also takes aim at Thomas' supposedly uncanny resemblance to the Diatessaron, focusing on Perrin's strongest examples like logion 86. Although the wording that Thomas uses here diverges from the Greek Matthew and Luke in places, it resembles our Sahidic copies of Matthew and Luke which demonstrates that these differences are simply a result of Coptic linguistical preferences.

Rather than arguing that all of Thomas was mostly written at the same time, I would propose that a theory closer to April DeConick's compositional model is more useful for understanding Thomas' theology. She is able to explain why there appears to be such a variety of different, and sometimes contradictory, views within the document. Scholars such as Marvin Meyer have argued that Thomas contains sayings that appear to be more original than their New Testament parallels. He points out that Thomas includes parables that appear without any allegorical interpretations that are left to be deciphered by the reader. The parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3–9, Mark 4:2–9 and Luke 8:4–8 is followed by an interpretation which applies elements of the parable to the church. This is thought to be added by later authors who wanted to make a story about farming in Palestine applicable to their contemporary lives. On the other hand, Thomas' parable of the sower in logion 9 includes no explanation which could imply that it was written before its synoptic equivalents. If we accept that sayings that are presented with further explanations are suggestive of later writing however, then we must also conclude that Thomas also contains some later writing. DeConick provides a list of material which include allegorical interpretations such as 21c, which urges believers to keep watch against the world after telling Mariam that a householder should be cautious of thieves, and 64b, which explicitly states that merchants will not enter his father's domain following a long parable. (188-189 She examines the Gospel and concludes that, because some sayings appear to be earlier than others than others, several additions were made to it over time. Furthermore, she argues that the presence of conflicting content could be explained if it had been written by multiple authors who would introduce new material into the text which fit the need of their community. We see 'doublets' throughout – logia which hold teachings that directly conflict with one another. For example, logion 38 teaches that 'There will be days when you will look for me and will not find me' while logion 92 teaches 'Seek and you will find'. Logion 55 teaches 'Whoever does not hate his father and his mother cannot become a disciple to me' while logion 101 paraphrases this previous teaching and then immediately contradicts it by saying 'whoever does not love his father and his mother as I do cannot become a disciple to me'. According to DeConick, these doublets may be cases of later authors updating older sayings for newer audiences as theologies evolved (179-180). Finding one hermeneutical key by which we can comprehend Thomas, therefore, may not be possible, but we can attempt to suggest readings that are more probable than others. 'There is plenty of room between a coherent agenda and total randomness' which is a space that Thomas seems to occupy (Uro, 2003: p. 3) so, with our ignorance acknowledged, I shall now explore the debates surrounding its theology.

The earliest scholars researching Thomas usually came to the conclusion that it was a Gnostic text, although this may largely have been because it was discovered alongside other Gnostic texts and assumed to be written at a later date (Skinner, 2012: p. 59). One of the first scholars to study its teachings was Bertil Gärtner who said that 'Many of the individual logia naturally have their own history...but the overall theological picture of the Gospel of Thomas, as we now have it, speaks of a Gnostic world of ideas' (Gärtner: p.272).