Chapter 1

Introduction

The dry desert conditions in Egypt are ideal for the preservation of papyrus and other ancient writing materials. Two discoveries of papyri at two different sites in the Egyptian desert (Oxyrhynchus and Nag Hammadi) bear particular relevance to the Gospel of Thomas. Nearly 100 years ago Grenfell and Hunt discovered at Oxyrhynchus and published some fragmentary Greek papyri containing several sayings attributed to Jesus (Grenfell and Hunt 1897 and 1904). Although most of these sayings curiously did not have counterparts in the sayings already known in the canonical New Testament, these early Greek fragments were initially acknowledged simply as sayings unattested in the canonical tradition and unparalleled in other early Christian literature. They captured the imagination of scholar and layperson alike; their origin was unknown, but their significance was generally recognized.

Then, over 50 years ago, thirteen codices (ancient books constructed from papyrus sheets) were discovered at Nag Hammadi (Robinson 1979). These codices were written in Coptic, a dialect of Egyptian. Among the Coptic codices found in this collection (commonly called the “Nag Hammadi Library”) were a number of different tractates of great interest to scholars studying the literature of early Christianity because the codices contained a number of tractates entitled “gospels” (such as the “Gospel of Peter,” the “Gospel of Truth,” and the “Gospel of the Egyptians”) as well as a tractate (the second tractate of Codex II) entitled at the end “The Gospel According to Thomas.” Scholars eventually linked the earlier unattested Greek fragments discovered at Oxyrhynchus and the Coptic tractate entitled “The Gospel According to Thomas” discovered at Nag Hammadi. The earlier Greek sayings of Jesus were nearly the same as some of the Coptic sayings from the Gospel of Thomas. From that time forward, the Gospel of Thomas
became a permanent fixture in the search for understanding the origins and development of primitive Christianity. The desert of Egypt had preserved some Greek fragments and a complete Coptic version of a lost Gospel of Thomas.

Although these discoveries of Greek and Coptic sayings of Jesus attributed to the Gospel of Thomas were dramatic and exciting, the existence of such a gospel had long been known. Ancient Christian testimonia witnessed to knowledge of a gospel by this title and to ancient knowledge of some of the sayings that now are known to be part of the Gospel of Thomas (Attridge 1989: 103–12). Modern knowledge was dependent upon these later testimonia until these dramatic discoveries made in Egypt's desert. The discovery of new gospel material, especially that of the Gospel of Thomas, inaugurated an international quest in the general public and among scholars to understand anew the origins and development of Christianity.

The discovery of the complete Coptic version of the Gospel of Thomas caused a great stir for three primary reasons. First, New Testament scholars had theorized for many years that behind Matthew's and Luke's revision of the Gospel of Mark stood a collection of sayings, known simply as the Synoptic Sayings Source Q (Kloppenborg 1987: 1–40 provides a good history of the issue). This theory, known as the “two-source hypothesis,” explains the literary relationship among the three synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) and it maintains that the earliest narrative gospel was Mark's. Matthew and Luke used the majority of Mark's gospel as the basis for their own gospels, and then added one other major source (called the Synoptic Sayings Source Q) in addition to some of their own traditions about Jesus, to supplement Mark's narrative frame. The Synoptic Sayings Source Q that Matthew and Luke used was considered a collection of sayings of Jesus without any narrative frame. The content of this Synoptic Sayings Source Q could only be established by comparing the sayings common to Matthew and Luke and by then reconstructing the common text; the genre of collections of “sayings of Jesus” remained theoretical. With the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas in Coptic, scholars finally had an actual document in the same genre as had been theorized, an existent gospel composed only of sayings of Jesus in a collection of sayings. Although the Gospel of Thomas is not believed to be the source that Matthew and Luke used, the fact that many of the sayings from it directly paralleled sayings known from the common Synoptic Sayings Source Q added strength to the argument that such a source could have existed. The two-source hypothesis was in this way strengthened and renewed by the discovery.

Second, prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library, gnosticism could be studied primarily by reading the writings of those orthodox church writers (known as heresiologists) who described and copied parts of larger “heretical” works in their own anti-heresy literature in order to criticize supposed heretical beliefs. With the discovery of the presumed “gnostic” library at Nag Hammadi, church historians, historians of theology, and historians of religion finally had real and ancient gnostic documents that were not preserved by being embedded in heresiological treatises but that were both carefully copied and even more carefully preserved at a time when heterodoxy was being persecuted. These “heretical” writings would provide scholars with an original voice against which to evaluate the heresiologists' assessment of gnosticism.

Finally, people (both among the academic and general public) who were interested in alternative Christianities, gnosticism, and syncretistic religions, as well as people who were either tired of or bored with the traditional view of Jesus were captivated by the voice present in these sayings. Many thought that they could hear immediately the words of Jesus without the intermediation of the institutional church and its orthodox theologians.

It has been over 50 years since the discovery and interest in the Gospel of Thomas has not waned. Of all of the Nag Hammadi documents, this gospel has received the most interest and been the subject of the most writing. It has been at the heart of a general debate about the historical Jesus, the status of the canonical view of Jesus and his sayings, and religious journalistic speculation. It has also been heatedly debated by European and American scholars.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

The Gospel of Thomas is a tractate preserved in two ways: a fragmentary set of Greek papyri; and a complete Coptic text written in a "particularly fine script" (Turner and Montefiore 1962: 11). The physical evidence (that is, the actual papyrus and codices) dates from about the year 200 CE for the Greek and the middle of the fourth century CE for the Coptic. The scholarly consensus holds that these two sources provide evidence for an earlier gospel written originally in Greek in Syria (Koester 1989: 38), most probably emergent from the

So what is this gospel that has been discovered in two different places, two languages, two versions, and from two different times? The answer to that question is not easy. The Greek fragments found at Oxyrhynchus and the Coptic version found at Nag Hammadi have both similarities and differences. The Coptic sayings comparable to the Greek do not seem to be a direct translation of the same Greek text, and the Greek seems to witness to another version of the gospel than the one on which the Coptic translation is based. So there is not really a singular gospel, but two divergent textual traditions. This situation makes a precise and well-delineated description of the Gospel of Thomas problematic, because the Gospel of Thomas may refer to a number of different elements in its textual history.

To answer the question about the exact referent, Edward Rekowski (1996) has outlined clearly the various layers of the possible texts that may make up the gospel. These layers at once make the problem more complex and more simple: complex, in that the layers show the stages of the tractate's development; simple, because it allows me to locate a specific layer or phase of development for this commentary.

There are seven layers at least. First, there are the original sayings of Jesus that probably circulated orally and were repeated by various followers of Jesus in their own ministrations. These sayings constitute the original field of possible sayings from which those in this particular gospel could have been selected. Second, there is the author of this particular collection of the sayings of Jesus who collected and then wrote the sayings down and published them. Not all the sayings of Jesus were recorded, rather the author or collector selected from those available. The second layer offers an opportunity both for an intentional selection of sayings from among the oral texts and for the adjustment of these sayings to suit the author's purpose and perspective. Third, the author's collection of sayings was probably used by various people and communities who would have read them, perhaps used them liturgically, and produced other copies of the gospel. In this process those people and communities probably adapted the sayings to their life-situations. This was a common practice in ancient Christian literature, especially in gospel literature, and it can safely be assumed to have occurred here and at any other stage in the transmission of the gospel. Fourth, these community adaptations of their text of the gospel would effect another text: the communities that produced the texts of the gospel would reproduce the text currently in use in their communities and pass them on to others who would not know in what way the texts had been adjusted. Therefore, the subsequent text would reflect the particular community's changes and show how they made their own adjustments to fit their own life-situation. Fifth, there is the last Greek scribe who influenced the text of the gospel in transcribing it (as in the fragments discovered at Oxyrhynchus); changes often occurred each time a scribe produced another copy. A number of scribes (in Syria as well as Egypt) transcribed their text of the gospel; the Oxyrhynchus fragments provide the physical evidence of at least parts of the gospel for which we have witnesses. Sixth, there is the Coptic translation of the text. In all likelihood, more than one person translated the gospel into Coptic. Translations involve an interpretative process because the translator renders into another language (here Coptic) what he or she understands the original text (here Greek) to mean. The process of translation itself, then, provides another version in Coptic of the Greek text that came into the hands of the Coptic translator. And seventh, there is the last Coptic scribe who produced the text that was hidden in a jar in the fourth century only to be discovered at Nag Hammadi nearly fifteen centuries later.

Each one of these layers could safely be called the Gospel of Thomas, but clearly each one refers to a different production, version, or edition of the gospel that the author wrote. The gospel could refer to the original core of sayings, the author's originally published collection, the Greek editions used by any number of communities, the Greek edition to which the Oxyrhynchus fragments witness, one of the Coptic translations, or the final Coptic version that was discovered. For the purposes of this commentary, the Gospel of Thomas refers to the authorial level only as it can be discerned through the physical evidence of the Greek and the Coptic texts that have survived: in other words, this commentary looks to the text that the author originally created, but only to those versions that exist in one fragmentary Greek version and one (presumably) complete Coptic version.

The tractate that we call the Gospel of Thomas actually has two possible descriptions within the tractate itself (see Robinson 1971a; Meyer 1990). The Prologue calls it "The Secret Sayings that the Living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded." This designation would indicate that the tractate consists of a collection of secret sayings spoken by Jesus and recorded by Didymos Judas Thomas. The title found at the end of the tractate (as is customary in these documents) reads "The Gospel According to Thomas." Here the tractate becomes
an example of the literary genre "gospel," and receives a title parallel to the canonical gospels in structure, namely a gospel "according to" an identified disciple authority in parallel to Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. This second designation creates problems, because the content of this gospel differs from those other texts in the genre in that there is comparatively little narrative material in the Gospel of Thomas (see Wilson 1960: 4; but also Koester 1990a: 80–84). Despite what it might be called, the tractate consists of a collection of sayings of Jesus.

The sayings are not in any particular order (Koester 1989: 41–42): they are not organized by themes or topics; they are not organized with any discernible theological direction; they do not exhibit any particular logical or cohesive overall structure that holds them together (see Wilson 1960: 4–10; Patterson 1993: 94–102). The sayings are bound together by a diminutive narrative structure consisting mostly of the phrase "Jesus said." Some evidence exists that the sayings were originally preserved in oral communication (Häensch 1961–62; Cameron 1986: 34), because there are words that link certain sayings in sequence (a list is provided in Patterson 1993: 100–2), even though that sequence does not display any theological or literary connection beyond the linking words themselves.

Not all the sayings are unique to this collection. There are three classes of sayings in the Gospel of Thomas: those that have a parallel saying in the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke); sayings of Jesus attested elsewhere in early Christian literature, but that have no parallel in the canonical tradition of gospels; and hitherto unattested and unknown sayings of Jesus (MacRae 1960). Some of these sayings have parallels to other literature of the period, both religious and philosophical (Baker 1964 and 1965–66; Quispel 1981). Some sayings have distinct parallels to material in Paul's Corinthian correspondence (Häensch 1961; Davies 1983: 138–47; Koester 1990b: 51–52; Patterson 1991). Most all of the sayings are attributed to Jesus, although other people (disciples, for example) also speak and ask questions of Jesus.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

The Gospel of Thomas, as a collection of sayings of Jesus, does not purport to be a systematic or even an organized theological tractate. A collection of sayings by nature cannot fulfill expectations of a systematic presentation of discursive theology, so that any description of its theology must emerge from the oblique references in the sayings. The theology of a collection of sayings must be constructed, that is, from such indirect and opaque elements as inferences, innuendo, connotations of words, analysis of metaphors, and other elements both non-theological and non-discursive. In constructing from these elements, the theology remains fragmentary: not every theological question that an ancient or a modern reader might ask will be addressed in a satisfactory or consistent manner. It must be made clear, however, that the Gospel of Thomas does indeed present a recognizable and articulated theology, but both the mode and the content of that theology differs from other theological discourses. The theology of the Gospel of Thomas, moreover, presents even greater challenges because some of its content (the sayings parallel to canonical sayings) is familiar from the canonical tradition. This familiarity with other scriptural traditions tends to emphasize the normative status of the canonical tradition and to underscore the deviations and differences from that tradition in this gospel. Even with these difficulties it is possible to construct some elements of a theology characteristic of the Gospel of Thomas.

I would characterize this theology as a performative theology whose mode of discourse and whose method of theology revolves about effecting a change in thought and understanding in the readers and hearers (both ancient and modern). The sayings challenge, puzzle, sometimes even provide conflicting information about a given subject, and in so confronting the readers and hearers force them to create in their own minds the place where all the elements fit together. The theology comes from the audience's own effort in reflecting and interpreting the sayings, and, therefore, it is a practical and constructed theology even for them. In communicating through a collection of sayings, moreover, the topics move rapidly from one to another with little meaningful connection between them. The sayings cajole the audience into thinking, experiencing, processing information, and responding to important issues of life and living without providing more than a brief time to consider the question fully. The audience's forced movement through and interpretation of rapidly changing topics and issues bases the theological reflection in cumulative experience emergent from their responses to the stimuli of the sayings. That is why it is performative theology: the theology emerges from the readers' and hearers' responses to the sayings and their sequence and their variety.

The community that forms around the collection of sayings is one created by the association of the readers and by their mutual experience