of finding the interpretation of the sayings. The community developed in this gospel is not one analogous to a parish, or a church, or any other organized group of people with a structure and a charter. Rather, this community is a loose confederation of people who have independently related to the sayings and found their interpretation, who have begun to perform the actions that inaugurate the new identity, and who have become capable of seeing other people who perform similar activities. The community, in short, is a by-product of the theological mode, a loose conglomeration of people of similar mentality and ways of living, but who do not necessarily live together as an intentional community. This introductory overview of the theology of the gospel will focus upon this performative aspect.

The person of Jesus

In the gospel, Jesus pronounces a number of sayings to his disciples. Actually, it is more complicated than that. In these sayings, the narrator presents Jesus as a character speaking to an audience, and at one point (Saying 111) the generally diminutive narrative voice breaks out of its hidden presence and asks “Does not Jesus say…?!” as a direct address to the implied audience of the gospel. The narrator indicates that these sayings come from Jesus (“Jesus said”), so that the narrator adopts the voice of Jesus as its own. Jesus is the character the narrator has created to transmit the sayings.

This narrativized Jesus pronounces sayings. He functions primarily as a voice, and the gospel provides little information about his identity, his intellectual or emotional life, or any significant biographical information about the major events of his life. One time in the sayings, Jesus describes his emotion at the empty world full of spiritually blind people (Saying 28: “My soul ached for the children of humanity”), but beyond that readers are not admitted into Jesus’ emotional structure. Moreover, Jesus’ mother and brothers are mentioned (Saying 99), although Jesus generally rejects the legitimacy and centrality of family bonds (Sayings 55 and 101) in favor of a redefined society (Saying 99) which is the group comprised of those who hear his sayings. The gospel affirms that Jesus appeared in the flesh to do his work in the world (Saying 28), and that he did not understand himself to be a philosopher, an angel, or a teacher (Saying 13). The most significant theological factor about the Gospel of Thomas is that it contains no information about the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The only mention of the crucifixion occurs in an indirect reference to his disciples carrying a cross as does Jesus (Saying 55). Beyond these few elements, Jesus’ life remains opaque.

The preceding examples provide a negative appraisal of the person of Jesus from the absence of biographical information. A more positive appraisal may be constructed from Jesus’ function as the chief speaker in the narrative. The gospel presents Jesus as “the living Jesus” (Prologue) who is “the living one in (the audience’s) presence” (Sayings 52 and 91, my parentheses). This gospel portrays Jesus as immediately accessible to the hearers of the sayings; his voice is that of a fully engaged speaker and guide who speaks the sayings to his followers (Saying 38). The readers of these sayings, then, connect not to the narrative of Jesus’ life (as in the canonical gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John), but to his living presence as a person speaking directly to them.

Jesus entered the world as a fleshly being precisely in order to assist people to change their way of living (Saying 28). Consequently, Jesus’ mission revolved around presenting hidden mysteries (Sayings 17 and 62), reorganizing the meaning of discipleship (Sayings 3, 31, 34, 61, 101), calling people who live in the world to a sober and full life (Saying 28), enabling people to drink from the bubbling well of his spiritual direction (Sayings 13 and 108; also see Sayings 45 and 114), encouraging people to manifest their interior and spiritual selves (Saying 70), and leading the worthy to rest (Sayings 50, 51, 60, 90). This mission may be best summarized in Jesus’ saying: “Look to the living one as long as you live, otherwise you might die and then try to see the living one, and you will be unable to see” (Saying 59). The immediacy of Jesus’ active speech underscores the urgency of the message to choose another mode of life.

Jesus is also constructed as a mystagogue (Saying 17), a revealer of sacred knowledge to seekers, who discloses the mysteries to those who are worthy (Saying 62). This mystagogic Jesus describes himself as the light, the “all” found in every place, the one who is the origin and destiny of all creation (Saying 77). As a bearer of secret wisdom (Prologue), Jesus is portrayed as a divine figure who not only permeates all life, but enables true vision to occur (Saying 37), and who guides people to the fulfilling of their deepest desires (Saying 51). Moreover, Jesus’ presence becomes merged with the seekers so that there can be no distinction between Jesus and those who follow him (Saying 108).
Performances

Exploring what Jesus tells his readers to do in these sayings provides the most productive way of understanding Jesus’ mission. Jesus instructs the readers in a new way of living, and his instructions advocate certain actions or performances that are appropriate to that new lifestyle. Jesus’ sayings function at the heart of the new life; this means that the interpretation of the sayings is the key to the reformation of life. Saying 1 encapsulates this central performance: “Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.” Jesus’ voice, and the content of his speaking, define the means of becoming a new person (Sayings 38 and 52) and guide seekers to various discoveries that transform life (Sayings 5, 80, 91, 110).

In addition to these more sublime instructions, Jesus also provides very practical guidance. His followers are advised: to reject pious acts such as fasting, praying, almsgiving, dietary restrictions (Sayings 6 and 104), and circumcision (Saying 53); to have no worry about food and clothing (Saying 36); to renounce power (Saying 81) and wealth (Saying 110); to lend money to people who will not repay it (Saying 95); to endure persecution, hatred, and hunger (Sayings 68 and 69); to practice privately the death-dealing relationship with the outside world (Saying 98); to love the other members of their community (Sayings 25, 26); to hate father and mother, sisters and brothers (Sayings 55 and 101); to manifest their interior and saving worth (Saying 70); to work on the reformation of their own life before helping others (Saying 26); to drink from Jesus’ mouth so as to be united with him (Saying 108); to strip off their clothing without shame and to stomp upon them (Saying 37); to fast from the world and to observe the sabbath as a sabbath (Saying 27). This list exemplifies the specific performances these sayings advocate for the construction of an alternative way of living. They show the breadth and variety of factors involved in Jesus’ message. The readers, both by performing these actions and especially by interpreting the puzzling sayings that Jesus speaks, become new people capable of living a new kind of life, and the contours of that new personality are carefully developed through Jesus’ advocacy of specific actions.

Subjectivity

This new person (the subject, or subjectivity) that Jesus promulgates in these sayings may be constructed more specifically. The distinction between the newly envisioned identity and the dominant opposing identity finds its expression most dramatically developed in two major areas: gender and singularity. This person has become in essence a third gender, a person no longer fitting in the cultural categories of male or female, but one who is now a fully integrated person with a body whose parts are replaced by newly understood parts in a sort of ascetical reconstruction of the meaning and significance of each member of the physical body (Saying 22). This third gender does not simply transcend the old male and female genders, but transforms both completely into a third gender identity that revolves about that integration. Jesus metaphorizes this integrated personality as that of a “single one,” a solitary, a person who lives alone and who combines the characteristics of old and young (Saying 4). This integral person lives in unity with other solitaries in a recreated or redefined family environment (Saying 16). This single person is elected to live as a solitary (Saying 23 and 49) and as a solitary is capable of miraculous powers over the physical world (Saying 106). The metaphorized “single one” makes concrete and defines the new third gender that replaces the former dual-gender paradigm.

The sayings further characterize this subjectivity. The person envisioned in these sayings is immortal: the seeker will not taste death (Sayings 1, 11, 18, 19, 111) and will reign forever (Saying 2) as a person of superlative gifts and power. The subject advanced by Jesus benefits from a form of pre-existent existence (Saying 19) that originates in light and returns to the light (Sayings 24 and 50) and that manifests an eternal and invisible image (Saying 84). This person lives in the world in a detached manner as a passerby (Saying 42) or even as an homeless itinerant (Saying 86) and yet clearly understands the distinction between the world posited in these sayings and the surrounding mundane world (Saying 47; see also Sayings 56, 110, 111). This subject works hard at finding the interpretation of the sayings, but finds the difficult work a source of life (Saying 58). Jesus’ sayings construct a sort of divinized person united to Jesus through his mouth (Saying 108) who is of higher status than Adam (Saying 85) and who is worthy to enter into the most intimate relationship with Jesus in the bridal chamber where all the other solitaries live (Saying 75). The ultimate goal for this person is to find the rest (Sayings 50, 51, 60, 90) that comes from having learned the secret and hidden realities of life (Sayings 5 and 6).

The opponent, or the opposite type of subjectivity, also receives attention. These opponents are considered drunk and empty people (Saying 28) who are strong, but who can be defeated by the seekers (Saying 35). They live in a world that the seekers must reject (Saying
because it is analogous to a carcass (Saying 56). These opponents ought to be interpreted not as a specific group of people, but simply as all others who do not engage in the search for meaning that these sayings promulgate.

In contrast to this opponent, these sayings work at constructing a new and alternative subjectivity. Through reading the sayings of the Gospel of Thomas deliberately and consecutively, the readers gradually come to understand not only the new identity to which the sayings call them, but also the theology, anthropology, and cosmology that support that new identity. Although the contours of this subjectivity may be generally (and cursorily) described, they cannot ultimately become clear without a careful and close reading of each saying in the context of all the sayings in the collection. A number of scholars have developed summaries of this gospel's theology (see Gärtner 1961; Kaestli 1979: 389–95; Davies 1983; Koester 1990a: 124–28; Patterson 1993: 121–57), but ultimately no summary will be able to capture the interactive and intellectually challenging process of hearing the sayings pronounced by Jesus and finding their interpretation. One can only understand the theology developed through these sayings by beginning the difficult task of searching and finding their interpretation. This attentive reading is, after all, the suggested strategy presented by the gospel itself.

THE DATE OF THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

Assigning a date to the Gospel of Thomas is very complex because it is difficult to know precisely to what a date is being assigned (see Rewolinski’s description page 4). Scholars have proposed a date as early as 60 CE and as late as 140 CE, depending upon whether the Gospel of Thomas is identified with the original core of sayings, or with the author’s published text, or with the Greek or Coptic texts, or with parallels in other literature. The physical evidence (the Greek fragments from 200 CE and the later Coptic codex) does not really help, because these versions provide more information about the actual production of the texts, rather than about the publication of the first Gospel of Thomas by its author. The fact that these two versions also differ from one another indicates that changes in the gospel occurred at some intervening time during both the production of the texts and their translation. Moreover, it is difficult to provide a date for a collection of sayings, because a collection, like any list, can be changed over time without any evidence of addition or subtraction being visible to later readers. A collection may thus contain material much older than the first collecting of that material, and it may include material that later scribes considered sufficiently important or consistent to add.

An eclectic series of factors, then, must be considered in order to assign an accurate date to the tractate we have received as the Gospel of Thomas. Those factors include the following: comparing the Gospel of Thomas to other early Christian literature; an analysis of the way in which the gospel communicates through sayings of a wise person; that is, an analysis of the mode of discourse in the gospel and its genre; an attempt chronologically to locate the gospel in the context of the production of early Christian literature; and finally, a comparison of the gospel to other synchronous literature of the period. In the end, I argue that the Gospel of Thomas was composed during the first decade of the second century (100–110 CE), and that this gospel (together with the synchronous Gospel of John and Letters of Ignatius) form part of a common theological discourse at the turn of the first century.

The first means of dating the Gospel of Thomas emerges from a comparison to primitive and formative Christian literature. Parallels with other New Testament literature (especially the Synoptic Sayings Source Q) and sections of authentic Pauline literature suggest that parts of the material collected in these sayings comes from the period of Christian origins and reflect some of the earliest written forms of the sayings of Jesus from around 60 CE (Koester 1990b). The parallel parables seem to indicate that the version preserved in the Gospel of Thomas comes from the earliest, and least edited, level of the sayings of Jesus (see Turner and Montefiore 1962: 40–78; Cameron 1986). Other comparisons with the Synoptic Sayings Source Q indicate that many sayings in Thomas come from a source equally as early as that source (Cameron 1986; Patterson 1993: 18–71; cf. Schrage 1964). The occasional Pauline parallel indicates that some of the material reflects primitive Christian concerns (Koester 1990b: 50–53). The dating of the Gospel of Thomas by means of the oldest core of sayings suggests an early date of 60–70 CE.

The later date (140 CE), one which I find more problematic, is suggested by comparing the content of the sayings with the theological content of later forms of gnosticism. Gnosticism is a theological and spiritual movement that advocates salvation through a particular knowledge ("gnosis") provided by a savior, in the content of theology, and through specific mythologies of creation and redemption. Gnostic theology is often characterized as dualistic with regard to the relationship of the physical to the spiritual (see Rudolph 1977; Filoramo
Introduction

1990). Historically, gnosticism as a Christian movement is documented in the second century CE (Wilson 1960: 14–44); however, as a religious tendency or phenomenon, gnosticism is suspected to exist in other religious and philosophical writings of the first century BCE and the first centuries CE (see Bianchi 1967: xxvi–xxix). Valentinian and Sethian Gnosticism give evidence for the fully developed systems of gnosticism, while some wisdom traditions of Second Temple Jewish writings, some Greco-Roman philosophy, and Paul’s early Christian communities provide evidence of the developing gnostic movement (see Bianchi 1967; Layton 1981). These early Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman gnostic movements have been seen as precursors to the fully developed Christian gnosticism of the second century CE. The scholars who want to identify the theology of Thomas as “gnostic,” begin with the assumption of its gnostic nature and then proceed to justify that characterization through establishing parallels with the theology and mythology of later and fully developed gnosticism (Grant and Freedman 1960; Schoedel 1960; Gärtner 1961; Cullman 1962). These scholars employ the categories of the known anti-gnostic literature and correlate them to the newly discovered Gospel of Thomas (see Gärtner 1961). Almost every one of these scholars acknowledges, however, that the Gospel of Thomas does not contain any of the known systems or theologies of gnostic writers (see Wilson 1960: 11), and yet they will insist that the document comes from the same period of historical theology. In the end, the terms “gnostic” and “gnosticism” have become increasingly difficult to use because there is such a wide discrepancy between the theological statements of the heresiologists who have defined the categories and the texts of supposed gnostic documents that the terms no longer aid interpretation. Recent surveys of scholarship provide important guidance to understanding this problem (see Fallon and Cameron 1988; Patterson 1992; Riley 1994). The application of a mid-second century CE date to the gospel fails to convince: there simply is no evidence for the fully developed gnostic systems in the Gospel of Thomas.

James Robinson (1971a) and John Kloppenborg (1987) developed a more productive comparative-literary strategy that has been followed by a majority of scholars working on the Gospel of Thomas today. This strategy identified the genre of the Gospel of Thomas and of the Synoptic Sayings Source Q as a collection of sayings of a wise person, and then it located both the Gospel and the Synoptic Sayings Source Q within the stream (or trajectory) of writings in that genre beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures, continuing with the intertestamental literature, and ending with early Christian literature. Kloppenborg has located the genre and the form of these collections in the wider context of the ancient Near East.

Some background information will help explain the import of these observations. The genre of the sayings of the wise and the larger tradition of wisdom arose among the court scholars, or professional scribes, of the ancient Near East (see Wills 1990: 22–38). These ancient scholars used short, pithy sayings as a means both to teach the skills of writing and to instruct the scribes in the mores of the court. When these wisdom collections were gathered together and published they became the nucleus of social and ethical formation for people living in any community. In the Hebrew Bible, the best examples of this genre of literature are Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (“the church’s book” because it was so popular among Christians; the teacher is Qoheleth). These biblical books (and many other Jewish and Christian ones as well) attest to the gradual organization by theme so that the wisdom of the ages would be more readily learned and applied. In the Hellenistic Jewish period (c. 250 BCE until 70 CE), this literature flourished, and the numerous early Christian translations into demotic languages (such as Syriac, Armenian, Coptic) indicate its popularity among Christians. Later in the Christian period, monks continued to produce literature in this genre, culminating in the Sayings of the Desert Masters (see Ward 1975). The specific genre of the sayings of the wise, as well as the wisdom tradition itself, has a very long history in Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman literature.

By locating the Gospel of Thomas within this stream of wisdom literature as a collection of the sayings of Jesus, the wise person, both Robinson and Kloppenborg have provided the parameters that determine the precise intellectual location of the gospel (see Patterson 1993: 94–110). The gospel’s location in this tradition does not produce a precise date, but it does provide the information with which to begin to compare this gospel to other wisdom literature and other collections of the sayings of the wise.

The first important point of comparison relates to the earliest of the witnesses to formative Christianity, the letters of Paul. The wisdom orientation of the gospel connects with a discourse about wisdom found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (see Robinson 1971b: 42–43; Koester 1980: 248–50; Patterson 1991). Again, Helmut Koester (1990a: 50–53) identified the similarities between the Gospel of Thomas and 1 Corinthians. Paul argues against the understanding of Christianity as initiation into a mystery, as his opponents seem to have understood
baptism (1 Corinthians 1–4). Koester argues that Paul countered the hidden mysteries of his Christian opponents with a proclamation of the crucifixion as the hidden mystery (1 Corinthians 2.1). More important for the Gospel of Thomas is the mere presence of this conversation in the 50s CE, because it mirrors the understanding of Jesus and his wisdom found in the Prologue of the Gospel of Thomas: “These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke…. The mode of discourse in Thomas’ Prologue replicates the “mystery” language of 1 Corinthians. That kind of wisdom discourse among followers of Jesus begins in the 50s CE (as Paul’s letter indicates) and continues well into the middle of the fourth century (as the Sayings of the Desert Masters attests). Now, however, there are two important elements (the wisdom tradition and Paul’s letters) that pull the date of the Gospel of Thomas more toward the last quarter of the first century (for a summary of the arguments see Fallon and Cameron 1988; Patterson 1993: 113–18).

A correlative way of dating the Gospel of Thomas is to attempt to place this tractate into the context of the production of literature in the formative period of Christianity prior to the third century. John Dominic Crossan (1991: 427–34) has stratified the Jesus material according to chronology. The First Stratum, 30–60 CE includes (among others) the authentic Pauline letters, various fragmentary Oxyrhynchus papyri (P. Oxy. 1224) not in the Gospel of Thomas, The Synoptic Sayings Source Q, a Miracles Collection attested to in Mark and John, an Apocalyptic Scenario, a Cross Gospel now found in the Gospel of Peter, and the earliest layer of the Gospel of Thomas. During this period the material in the Gospel of Thomas that is parallel to these other early sources was recorded. Crossan’s Second Stratum, 60–80 CE, includes (among others) the Gospel of Mark, a Dialogue Collection (now found in the Dialogue of the Savior (Nag Hammadi Library tractate III, 5), the Signs Source for the Gospel of John, and some material in the Gospel of Thomas. Crossan’s Third Stratum, 80–120 CE, includes (among others) the writing of the Gospel of Matthew (c. 90 CE), Luke (also c. 90 CE), and the first edition of the Gospel of John (c. 100, but no later than 125 CE for which we have the earliest extant papyrus attestation). Crossan’s Fourth Stratum, 120–150 CE, includes the redaction of John’s Gospel, the writing of Luke’s second volume commonly called Acts, the Pastoral Epistles and the Catholic Epistles (among others).

For purposes of comparison, I would like to adopt Crossan’s stratification and focus (after some comments on the earlier ones) on the Third Stratum, the period in which the first edition of John’s gospel was produced. The First Stratum contains important information about the early Jesus followers of a wide variety: those who collected sayings, others who were oriented toward the miracles, still others fascinated by the apocalypse, and others in the Pauline community who were living out a new form of universal Judaism. These communities in various ways related to a living Jesus, one speaking in the sayings, one immediately available in the miraculous manner of Moses’ deeds to save the people of God, one present in the meal, one manifest in the community that formed his Body and that transgressed boundaries of gender, race, and class. This stratum, in short, is characterized by a wide diversity of forms and understandings of Jesus, those identified with him, and manners of living out the diversity in community.

I agree with Burton Mack (1988: 318–24) that Mark was the one, in Crossan’s Second Stratum, to write the document that held all the diversity together. The narrative of the biography provided the skeleton upon which a wide variety and even disparate sorts of Jesus material could be placed. This narrative strategy put limits on the often conflicting and immediate understandings of Jesus from the earlier generation, and produced a more acceptable biography of a secret messiah in the prophetic tradition. In order to get all the disparate parts to fit together, Mark had to place narrative controls on the material he was presenting and organizing.

In the third period, Matthew, Luke, and John begin to offer criticism of Mark’s earlier project. Matthew and Luke in different ways argued that the material placed in the Markan narrative account was insufficient: it was too scant in relationship especially to the sayings of Jesus (which Mark for the most part avoided) and to some other particular material which they themselves knew (some of which appears in the Gospel of Thomas). They wanted to complete the Markan picture with the addition of a strong tradition of Jesus as sage from the extant collection of his sayings. In accepting the narrative structure of Mark, however, Matthew and Luke had to submit to his controlled presentation of Jesus. The emergent structure of the community, organized around the biography of Jesus and the appointed disciples, remained, but now supplemented with a few other traditions and with a great body of sayings of Jesus variously organized. Their revision of Mark moved the churches of their time and place back toward the origins of the Jesus movement in the relationship of a listener or seeker to a sage.

John, at a slightly later time, knew the earlier work of the synoptic gospels and was not interested in pursuing their theological agenda.