Rather, he “understood his task to be the fresh interpretation of the Jesus traditions current in his own church in the light of the passion narrative” (Koester 1992: 28). Koester interprets John’s project as benign, as a reinterpretation. I would argue that John rejected the Markan strategy even as revised by Matthew and Luke as a betrayal of the original mode of living among the early Jesus people and the earliest understanding of Jesus as the living voice in the community. John’s efforts, then, functioned as a radical and early renewal movement intended to return to the original ways of the first Christians by pushing the strategy of his immediate predecessors more strenuously. John envisioned the origins of Christianity as a time of open community, without authorized leadership, when Jesus spoke to the community openly and enigmatically at the same time (for a description of that early community see Schüssler-Fiorenza 1983: 160–241; Grossan 1991: 227–426). John’s effort in writing his gospel was to return to that formative and original understanding of the Jesus movement. Like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of John has been identified with the gnosticizing tendency of this community in formative Christianity (see MacRae 1960).

The writings of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, are synchronous with the Johannine project. Ignatius composed his letters between 100–118 CE (Schoedel 1985: 4–7) while traveling as a martyr from Antioch to Rome. Along the way, Ignatius wrote letters to the churches of Smyrna, Ephesus, Magnesia, Philadelphia, Tralles, and Rome and to an individual, Bishop Polycarp. These letters contain incomparable information about Ignatius’ theology, understanding of the church and ministry, sacraments, and his relationship with Jesus as a martyr (see Schoedel 1985: 1–31). Ignatius’ project revolved about a complex and rich understanding of the way in which Christ was present in the community. By invoking the charismatic and organizational traditions of Paul (Koester 1982: II, 281–87), Ignatius promoted the hierarchical organization of the church on the model of the imitation of Christ and his first followers. This imitation of Christ was actually two-fold: the community in structure was to imitate the structure of Christ surrounded by his apostles and followers, and the imitation of the passion and death of Christ modeled the life of those condemned to death as martyrs. Just about the time that John attempted to renew his community by a return to the original and earliest modality of understanding of Jesus’ relationship to his followers, Ignatius attempted to guide the church into further hierarchical reformation by the promulgation of the church offices of bishop, presbyter, and deacon as a means of replicating the presence of Christ in the community—a presence made manifest in the proper celebration of the eucharist and also in martyrdom as sacramental participations in the life and immortality of Christ. This pattern of revelation based upon an immediate access to Jesus either through martyrdom or through the structures of the church, and the centrality of the passion and crucifixion of Christ, mirror the activity of John’s gospel.

In the early second century, then, between about 100 and 110 CE, there is evidence for understanding a watershed period of Christian living focused upon an intense interest in articulating the way Jesus is present and related to the community of his followers. On the one hand, Ignatius continues the development of a hierarchically organized church that refuges the dominant position of the major disciples around Jesus promulgated in the synoptic gospels; on the other hand, John attempts to circumvent this hierarchical and sacramental system in the composition of the gospel that includes extensive dialogues of Jesus with his followers and that denies the sacramental system. The ideal type for John is the beloved disciple; the ideal type for Ignatius is the monarchial bishop.

I argue that at this particular juncture there is a third option promulgated by the publication of the collection of sayings of Jesus as the Gospel of Thomas. Although there are no direct literary parallels between the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of John, their common thematic elements (such as light, life, truth) have long been noted (Brown 1962–63; Quispel 1969; Davies 1983: 106–16). Helmut Koester (1990a: 113–24, especially 119) has convincingly argued that these two gospels share a common tradition which they interpret in very different ways, while Gregory Riley (1993) is persuasive that the communities represented by Thomas and John were communities in a competitive relationship. Two elements emerge as important here: first, the Gospel of Thomas has material that comes from the earliest traditions of the sayings of Jesus; second, the Gospel shares theology and perspective with the Johannine community (although that common material is often very different, and even polemical). The Gospel of Thomas, then, connects to early Christian literature in two ways: some of its contents parallel the material in the Synoptic Sayings Source Q from primitive Christianity; some of the way in which that material is developed parallels the work of the Johannine community.

I maintain that the author wrote the Gospel of Thomas at this point (100–110 CE), at the same time as John’s gospel and Ignatius’ letters, as part of the debate about the renewal of the church and about the way
that Jesus relates to the community of his followers. All three of these texts situate the believer in intense relationship with Jesus, each revolving about a different center. John’s gospel connects the early sayings with the passion narrative, but with a discursive Jesus who speaks as a living, discursive voice in the midst of the community. Ignatius articulates a vibrant and mystical understanding of the church, the eucharist, and martyrdom as means of connecting internally and socially with the immortal life Jesus provides. The Gospel of Thomas connects the hearer and seeker to the very voice of the living Jesus speaking in the midst of an interpreting community. The living Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas and of the Gospel of John have similar positions in relationship to their respective communities as revealers of sacred wisdom. This revisioning of the relationship of Jesus to community in the first decade of the second century CE has often been identified with a gnosticizing tendency within formative Christianity, so that at various times in the history of scholarship John, Thomas, and Ignatius have been scrutinized as gnostic writers. This tendency, however, does not primarily relate to a gnostic theological construction, but to a renewal movement emergent at this time to reconsider and reformulate the relationship of Jesus to the churches as a foundation for Christian living.

On the basis of this analysis, then, I place the composition of the complete Greek version of the Gospel of Thomas somewhere in the years 100–110 CE influenced by the same dynamics that produced both the Gospel of John and the Letters of Ignatius. Wilson (1960: 146–47) has already noted this constellation of Johannine theology and Ignatian chronology as a likely milieu for the production of the Gospel of Thomas (see also Davies 1983: 18, 100–2). It is certain that some of the material of the Gospel of Thomas comes from the First Stratum (30–60 CE) and there is always the possibility that one of the copyists of the Coptic version included sayings other than those contained in his archetype. With both these provisions, I would date the Gospel of Thomas to 100–110 CE.

In the context of John and Ignatius, the Gospel of Thomas probably appeared to be somewhat “old fashioned” in its approach. I say this because, on the one hand, the gospel presents very early material and a good number of sayings that are found in the Synoptic Sayings Source Q; on the other hand, the Gospel of Thomas works with those sayings in a way more similar to John’s gospel, but without the development of extended dialogues or discourses. Another way of articulating this is to recognize that contemporaries of the author of the Gospel of Thomas were working with the tradition in different ways: like Thomas, John’s gospel looked to the sayings, but developed them into discourses; like Thomas, Ignatius reformulated the earlier image of the church as a closely knit community around Jesus as a model of contemporary ecclesiastical structure around the bishop. Both these contemporaries move in different directions with the traditions, while the Gospel of Thomas continues the tradition already used by Matthew and Luke a few decades earlier to revise Mark. The Gospel of Thomas simply presents an older tradition of relating directly to Jesus through a collection of his sayings. Its “old fashioned” appearance, then, is based upon first its use of a genre of writing that had already been subsumed into the Markan outline by Matthew and Luke and second its refusal to advance the sayings genre by the development of discourses as John had. Certainly by the middle of the second century CE, the genre of wisdom literature as collection of sayings among Christians appeared anachronistic (Davies 1983: 13). The Gospel of Thomas would sound even more out of date as the ecclesiastical orientation of the Fourth Stratum took shape. Even John’s gospel would fare poorly when the dominant ecclesiastical structures of Acts, the Johannine redactor (that is, the ecclesiastical writer who added material to an earlier version of the gospel), and the Pastoral and Catholic Epistles were to emerge. In the end, both John and Thomas were superseded by the Ignatian model of church in which there was little room for the intimate, interpreting communities of these sayings-oriented gospels.

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS AND ASCETICISM

I argue, then, that in the first decade of the second century CE three different and conflicting interpretations of the Christian’s individual life were promulgated and competing. Three different and alternative Christian identities emerged at the same time as a last attempt at renewal before the hierarchical structures of the church became dominant. The Gospel of Thomas promotes an engaged and immediate experience of the living Jesus gained through the interpretation of the sayings (Saying 1). The Gospel of John promotes a similar Christian person but modified by reference to the passion and death of Jesus: these revelations connect with the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Koester 1992: 28). Ignatius promotes a Christian person in imitation of the life (in the church) of Jesus and participation in his death. Thomas’ kind of person alone hearkens to the days of immediate presence of Jesus without any need to engage in imitation either of Jesus or of the
disciples; John and Ignatius work with the passion and attempt to reduplicate the experiential basis of that immediacy (John through the discourses; Ignatius through the participation in the death of Jesus through martyrdom), but Thomas is satisfied simply to present the interpretation of the sayings as the only necessary experience (Mack 1993: 181).

Another way of talking about this way of promulgating a new identity within a religious movement is to analyze it as asceticism. The word “asceticism” itself derives from the preparations that athletes performed in order to be capable of rigorous athletic competition. By extension, I understand asceticism to include all the actions, called performances, that are required to build a new identity, called a subjectivity (Valantasis 1995a). When John, or Thomas, or Ignatius begin to describe a new kind of person and to promote a different identity within the larger confines of Christianity, they also must speak of the means of activating or creating that new identity so that members of this smaller community may learn how to make that identity real.

At the heart of asceticism is the desire to create a new person as a minority person within a larger religious culture. In order to create a new person, there must be a withdrawal from the dominant modes of articulating subjectivity in order to create free space for something else to emerge. A redefinition of social relationships must also emerge from the new understanding of the new subjectivity, as well as a concurrent change in the symbolic universe to justify and support the new subjectivity. These are all accomplished through a rigorous set of intentional performances (Valantasis 1995a).

All three of these turn-of-the-century writings reflect ascetical interest in relationship to three different models, they attempt to construct an identity alternative to the dominant and prevailing one. John’s subject receives the revelations of Jesus in the discourses, but awaits a correlative transfiguration or glorification through the death and resurrection of Jesus (Koester 1992: 2). Ignatius finds the new person at once obedient to the bishop as to Christ, and promotes a charismatic understanding of leadership as immediately expressive of Jesus’ presence to which the believer must submit. The Gospel of Thomas promotes an interpreting and questioning subject who connects with a living Jesus by engaging with his words and sayings through which interpretation the believer finds the eternal life which all three (John, Ignatius, and Thomas) propose. Each of these texts exhibit in their own way the ascetical agenda appropriate to the kind of spiritual or religious formation that they propound.

Reading these texts, and especially the Gospel of Thomas, as ascetical texts offers an important lens through which to categorize and analyze both the content and the mode of communication within them. The main focus of the Gospel of Thomas revolves about instruction to a reader who in all likelihood functions as a member of a group of readers formed from among other readers. The sayings in the gospel provide a means of instruction to the reader by encouraging the reader to interpret them (Saying 1). These sayings construct and reconstruct the understanding of the identity of the readers/interpreters, they suggest alternative ways of living in society, and they develop an understanding of the world and the wider environment that supports the new way of living. This process constitutes an ascetical system within the text. Reading the text as an ascetical text helps modern readers to understand the import and significance of the way of living promulgated in the gospel; that is, it constitutes a convenient strategy for reading the gospel in order to discover on its own terms what kind of person and what kind of identity the text posits and constructs. As a reading strategy it also assists in understanding how social relationships change for this new identity, and how theological and philosophical systems have been developed to support it.

The ascetical nature of the Gospel of Thomas has long been recognized (Grobel 1961–62; Turner and Montefiore 1962; Quispel 1965; Fried 1967; Koester 1990a: 128; Patterson 1993: 166–68). Early literature, however, identified this asceticism with the negative aspects, with “enkratia” or the arts of self-control (Quispel 1965; Fried 1967; Richardson 1973; Kaestli 1979); they identified the acts of self-denial as being in themselves ascetical. These negatives included, as one scholar put it, the renunciation of wealth, family, and sexuality (Kaestli 1979: 393). The ascetical orientation of the gospel, moreover, was read as a counterpoint to the gnostic orientation of the sayings, so that the Gospel of Thomas was read as either being “enkratia” or gnostic (see Fried 1967; Richardson 1973). This choice, in fact, misleads because a text may be both ascetical and gnostic (Richardson 1973: 68). My perspective on asceticism looks not only at the negative performances (rejecting wealth or sexuality), but primarily toward the positive articulation of the new subjectivity that the gospel presents (“becoming a single one,” for example). This positive perspective promotes a constructive reading of the text, so that all performances (whether negative or positive) are interpreted in the context of the larger project of creating an alternative identity within a larger and more dominant religious environment.
It may just as well be that, with the emergence of the hierarchical structure of the church as normative, asceticism, with its intense orientation toward the development and articulation of an individual subjectivity, became marginalized and problematized so that not only gnostics, but also professional ascetics emerged as counterpoints to hierarchical structure. This may be seen to be the case beginning with the ‘widows’ in 1 Timothy 5.3–16, and continuing through Athanasius’ battle with the ascetic followers of Arius and Hieracas (Elm 1994). What became problematic was not gnosticism, but unmediated and non-hierarchical practices (Brakke 1995) whether educational (as with Hieracas and Athanasius) or spiritual (as with the orthodox monks and Valentinian gnostic Christianity). The Gospel of Thomas certainly falls within the category of ascetic text, and its history in Coptic even identifies its production with a Pachomian ascetic community. Its ascetical orientation may have proven problematic to Christian leaders of the mid-second century and later, but its content shows little, if any, evidence of later gnostic mythology and theology.

The ascetical reading of the Gospel of Thomas provides a more neutral position from which to articulate its theological tendencies and to develop an understanding of the tractate in its own language: the articulation of the specific performances (primarily revolving about interpretation of the sayings), the particular subjectivity (often called “the single one”), the redefinition of familial relationships, the construction of a community awareness through mutual engagement with the sayings, and the positing of a smaller (perhaps esoteric) society within a larger and less aware cosmos. These elements reflect the ascetical and formative dimension of the Gospel of Thomas and they do not necessarily arise in the traditional categories of theological and scholarly research, but rather emerge from a close reading of the text on its own terms in order to move toward the definition of suitable categories for study from within the text itself.

**MY PERSPECTIVE ON THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS**

This ascetical reading strategy sets the stage for what I have attempted to achieve here. This commentary aims to appreciate the Gospel of Thomas as an example of one variety of an authentic Christianity which seems to have emerged at a critical crossroad of formative Christianity—the same crossroads that produced the Gospel of John and the Letters of Ignatius. I do not intend to make it fit into any of the later categories of orthodoxy or heresy, but to treat it as exemplary of one understanding and articulation of Christian living that was sufficiently important that it was preserved in antiquity and is studied in modern times. Through a close literary reading of the entire text, I aim to develop the theological perspective of the various sayings without bias (again) to later categories of orthodoxy or heresy. This strategy distinguishes the readings that follow from most of the precedent commentaries (Grant and Friedman; Ménard; Kasser; Fieger, for example).

Moreover, I am not interested in constructing the trajectory of Jesus’ sayings, nor in writing a history of Jesus, but in constructing the perspectives and theology of the Gospel of Thomas. My focus rests not on the Jesus in these sayings, but in the theological and literary tendencies of the sayings themselves. There are two implications of this: first, that I read the entire corpus and not simply those that have parallels in the Synoptic Sayings Source Q and Paul; and, second, that I focus directly and primarily on the material as it is preserved in the tractate that has survived. That means that I am only interested in this gospel, and not how this gospel relates to other gospel materials or to other writings of early Christianity. There have been many scholars who have noted parallels both canonical, intertestamental, historical, bibilical, philosophical, and gnostic; and their works may easily be consulted through any one of the major current surveys of scholarship (see Fallon and Cameron 1988; Patterson 1992; Riley 1994). My aim in writing this commentary is simply to present a consistent, literary analysis of each saying in the order in which they appear in the tractate.

I have not set out to provide a complete survey of pertinent scholarship. Nor have I attempted to engage the entire history of scholarship in argumentation for my perspective on the text. The interested reader may easily access the history of scholarship as well as capable summaries of recent research in review articles which have already been acknowledged. I have incorporated only the scholars whom I have found helpful in opening the text of the Gospel of Thomas to careful reading and study. These scholars, though not always ones with whom I agree, will be acknowledged as the commentary proceeds.

Some studies, however, deserve particular mention here. I have not attempted to reduplicate the recent and thorough work of Stephen Patterson (1993) in his *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* which explains the relationship of the gospel to the Synoptic Sayings Source Q; his work carefully argues the independence of Thomas and thoroughly explicates the interaction with those synoptic sources. Three works in particular commend themselves for the comparative study of the parables of Jesus.
in Gospel of Thomas and the synoptic gospels: John Dominic Crossan's *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (1973), Charles Hedrick's *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (1994), and (in a more literary theoretical vein) Dan O. Via's *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (1967). These scholars fully explore the relationship of Thomas parables to the synoptic as well as explicating the meaning of the parables in general and in relationship to Jesus.

I have taken the lens provided by the author of this gospel seriously. If a community exists behind these sayings (Lincoln 1977; Riley 1995), it consists of those who have taken the interpretation of these sayings as their primary duty. Since it is an interpretative process that creates the community, that community need not articulate a homogeneous and singular theology. The sayings genre leaves ample room for diversity, disagreement, alternative and resistive interpretations, and even subversive readings by people within the various groups of readers who may not agree with one another. Moreover, these sayings could be used in a variety of organized communities: fourth-century monks could have found in them rich ascetical teaching; gnostic Christians would have found profound esoteric meaning; orthodox Christians might have thrilled to hear the parables without allegorical interpretation. Many people in many different kinds of communities could, and did, read these sayings and interpret them, but they cannot be assumed to share one common theology, perspective, or even interpretation of the sayings.

In my consistent reading, I have focused on the collection of sayings as a complete text. I have not looked toward the development of the material over the course of the period from roughly 60 CE until the dating of the Coptic manuscript, but I have looked at the material as a complete collection from the first decade of the second century CE. I presume that they would have been read as a collection, not as isolated sayings. The sayings, therefore, may be understood to refer internally to one another: a reader may assume that a statement made earlier may be alluded to later in the collection. The text, that is, takes precedence over the individual saying. My intention here is to construct the world from within the text and its sayings. In a sense, my commentary was designed to lay the foundation for subsequent research in the biblical and theological intertextuality of the Gospel of Thomas.

I have especially avoided the designation "gnostic" and any explicit articulation of gnostic myths or theologoumena. The precise meaning of such terms, and their significance for understanding, has become even more clouded since the mid-1970s. There seems no longer to be either a consensus about the definition, nor the referent, nor even the chronology and content of gnosticism. The gnostic character of these sayings needs the same sort of re-evaluation as the entire study of gnosticism in early Christianity. I have tried to explain the sayings without invoking either that body of research or that body of mythology.

Only occasionally have I introduced the language of asceticism into my explanation (even though I believe it to be an ascetical text). The elements of my definition (such as performances, dominant and minority groupings, the construction of a subjectivity, attention to alternative social relationships, and attention to the construction of a symbolic universe) have provided an important lens through which the sayings have been read, but I have resisted making it the heart of my own reading.

I have begun with the Greek fragments from Oxyrhynchus. These have recently received little attention in the scholarly literature, and they have been virtually ignored by the popular press in their discussions of the Gospel of Thomas. I present these Greek fragments as a "Window on Thomas" to assist people from outside the theological disciplines as well as the general public to engage with the sayings of Jesus and their particular perspective on a limited corpus before proceeding to the fuller Coptic text. The Coptic text develops those literary and theological themes in greater detail.

The importance of the Gospel of Thomas to early Christianity is actually only beginning to be understood. The previous work has brought us all to the point that there is some need for a fresh start, a new and vigorous reading of these sayings. This commentary will, I hope, help to clear the way of old detritus, while also opening new avenues of interpretation. In the end, I hope my commentary establishes this gospel as a serious and articulate historical-theological source that not only deserves our respect, but also deserves to become part of the unofficial canon of texts studied to create a history of primitive and formative Christianity before the Christianization of the Roman empire.