EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 1 IN THE
GOSPELS OF THOMAS AND JOHN

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Just as the Gospels of Thomas and John, for all their similarities, nevertheless articulate somewhat conflicting traditions about Jesus, so also these two Gospels articulate conflicting traditions about creation. Several scholars recently have investigated the former; this article primarily explores the latter. In his recent monograph, Greg Riley, for example, depicts the “communities of John and Thomas” living “in close . . . proximity” with one another, sharing both agreements and disagreements. Riley concludes that John’s author writes in response to earlier traditions that survive in Thomas, intending his teaching on bodily resurrection to refute the view of spiritual resurrection expressed in the Gospel of Thomas. April De Conick, in her recent monograph and subsequent article, disagrees with Riley’s characterization of the conflict, but agrees with the premise, suggesting instead that John’s author is arguing against a Thomas tradition encouraging the disciples to seek visions through ecstatic ascent. Helmut Koester and Stephen Patterson have set forth a comparative analysis of sayings involving, for example, Christology and anthropology, that

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1 As we might expect, however, the interpretation of creation articulated in Thomas bears implications for Thomas’s view of Jesus, as we shall see.

points toward the same conclusion: that the Johannine author polemizes against certain traditions about Jesus and his message that we find in the Gospel of Thomas. Without accepting all their conclusions (since this research, like Michael Williams’s recent book, raises questions concerning the category “gnostic,” which Koester and Patterson sometimes apply to Thomas’s logia), I adopt here a similar method, comparing patterns of Genesis exegesis in these two respective Gospels.

In order to relate what happened “in the beginning” to bring about the present human condition, each Gospel author invokes and interprets Genesis 1—John in his remarkable prologue (which may, of course, predate the Gospel itself), and Thomas in a cluster of sayings that occur throughout his Gospel. Stevan Davies, in his incisive recent article, points out that both John and Thomas, in contrast with the Synoptic Gospels, speak of the kingdom of God not eschatologically but protologically—that is, by comparing ordinary life in the present not with that of the coming kingdom but with that of the primordial creation. Davies persuasively demonstrates that “Jesus, as Thomas portrays him, insists that the world ought to be considered to be in the condition of Gen

1:1-2.4 and, accordingly, that people should restore themselves to the condition of the image of God.”

Davies focuses primarily on similarities between Thomas and John; but what I find even more striking are the differences. When we compare their respective Genesis exegeses, we may find a clash of exegetical traditions.

We do not know, of course, whether or not John actually read the text we call the Gospel of Thomas; but comparison of the Johannine prologue with the above-mentioned cluster of Thomas sayings suggests that he knew—and thoroughly disagreed with—the type of exegesis offered in Thomas. As we suggest, John’s author not only was aware of this clash of traditions but actively engaged in polemic against specific patterns of Genesis exegesis he intended his prologue to refute.

This is not to say that Thomas’s Genesis exegesis was original or unique. Even a glance at the cultural environment indicates the opposite: namely, that the basic pattern of Thomas’s Genesis exegesis was widely known and shared among various groups of Genesis readers, ranging from Jews living in Egypt, who read the Septuagint in the light of Greek philosophic reflection (of whom Philo is, of course, the most obvious example), to people engaged with Hermetic practice (whether Jews, Gentiles, or both). Nor is Thomas’s theology so characteristically “gnostic” as earlier interpreters often have assumed (and certain contemporary interpreters still seem to assume; see, e.g., n. 6 above).

Instead, Thomas’s Genesis exegesis articulates a conviction commonplace, in generalized form, in Jewish exegesis—one that Paul shares and articulates in Rom 1:19:

> What is knowable of God is clear to them (ανθρώποι, human beings); for God himself revealed it to them. For the invisible things of God—namely, his eternal power and deity—have been seen, intelligible since the creation of the universe, in the things that are made.

But besides such generalized correlations as these between cosmology and anthropology, Thomas’s Genesis exegesis goes much farther, back to the time before cosmic creation. Furthermore, as we shall see, it apparently follows an exegetical pattern articulated in a range of extant sources.

Briefly summarized, Thomas takes Gen 1:3 to mean that when the primordial light appeared on the “first day,” prior to the world’s creation, there appeared in that light the form of a primordial ἄνθρωπος—whom log. 77

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6 See, e.g., Ancient Christian Gospels, 83, 118–25; Stephen Patterson repeatedly invokes “Thomas’s gnosticizing proclivity,” for example, on pp. 135, 155, and 157 of The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus. Further, Ismo Dunderberg’s incisive analysis has demonstrated the complexity of making such a comparison and rightly warns against “generalizing about the relationship of the Gospel of Thomas to the Johannine writings,” considering that “their relationship may vary from one saying to another” (“John and Thomas in Conflict?” in The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years, 361–80). See also I. Dunderberg, “Thomas’ 1-sayings and the Gospel of John,” in Thomas at the Crossroads, 33–64.

7 Use of these names is not meant to denote actual authorship, but to follow a conventional terminology, without presuming that we know the identity of either author.


9 Ibid., 664.

implicitly identifies with Jesus—through whom all things are to come into being. As Hans-Martin Schenke has shown, much of Thomas’s theology (and that of other “gnostic” exegesis) is based on interpretation of Gen 1:26–27, which describes the creation of “humankind according to the image of God.”11 According to log. 84, Jesus declares that his disciples will come to see “your images which came into being before you” (ἀνεστρίψαντας ἐκ τῆς γενεσίας 21 τούτῳ) —that is, before the creation of the world, in the primordial light/anthropos.12 Such logia as 22 and 61 suggest that Gen 1:27b (“male and female he created them”) depicts humanity’s subsequent loss of its original, singular condition, and its devolution into a “divided” condition, deprived of the divine image. But those who succeed in overcoming division (exemplified especially by sexual division; cf. log. 11 and 61) recover their original identity with the “undivided” (πάντων)—the singular primal anthropos (cf. log. 4, 11)—and thereby find access to recognize themselves as “sons of the living Father” (Ῥωμαὶ ἐν ὑμῖν ζωὴν, log. 3). Such exegesis articulates Thomas’s conviction that whoever “seeks and finds” (cf. log. 2) must—and can—find access to God through the divine “image” given in creation.

All this may sound familiar—and with good reason: Hellenistic and rabbinic Jewish exegesis, as well as Philo and the Pseudepigrapha tractate, offer, as we shall see, many affinities with this sketch of Thomas’s Genesis exegesis. But as Schenke has shown in his masterful monograph, we find the closest parallels in certain of the Nag Hammadi texts and related sources, namely, in The Writing without Title. Eugnostos, the Apocryphon of John, and Irenaeus’s account of “Ophite and Sethian” Genesis exegesis (Adv. haer. 1.30.1). Such evidence indicates that the exegetical pattern Thomas sets forth was well known and diversely interpreted, perhaps especially among Jewish circles in Egypt.13

Tracing this exegetical pattern in the Thomas logia and in parallel texts and placing these in their cultural environment offer new insights into the Johannine prologue. Seen from this perspective, John’s author aims the polemic in his prologue not only, as commentators long have noted (see n. 35), against Jewish, pagan, and “gnostic” readers of Genesis (whatever we mean by “gnostic”; see n. 5) but also against those Christians who (like Thomas’s author) follow such an exegetical pattern. Against such views, as we shall see, John, interpreting Gen 1:1–3, insists that the primordial divine light—far from being accessible through the “image of God” implicitly present in human nature—remains exclusively in the logos (cf. John 1:3) and becomes perceptible to humankind exclusively through the logos incarnate. For his polemical purpose, John builds into his prologue what I call the “three negations.” First, John declares, when the primordial light shone forth, it shone into what John regards as utter darkness, “and the darkness did not understand [or: overcome, καταλύει] it” (John 1:5). Second, when it came into the cosmos, human beings failed to recognize (“know,” ἐγνώ, 1:10) that light; and third, that even when it came to “its own,” its own rejected it (1:11).

Let us look first, then, at the Gospel of Thomas. Logia that refer to the creation account (or to its themes, such as “the beginning”) include, for example, log. 4, 11, 18, 19, 37, 49, 50, 77, 83, 84, and 85. Those implicitly related to it include such logia as 22, 24, 61, and 70.14 Many of these sayings relate, too, to Thomas’s understanding of baptismal ritual, which, as Jonathan Smith persuasively argues, was understood to restore the initiate to the situation of Adam in paradise.15 Reflecting on the work of Davies, Smith, De Conick, and other scholars, the following section sketches the widespread pattern of Genesis exegesis that underlies these passages.

Let us begin from the opening of Thomas’s Gospel, adopting the hypothesis that the sayings are not randomly arranged, but carefully ordered to lead one through a process of seeing and finding “the interpretation of these sayings” (log. 1). This is not to suggest, however, that the author follows an obvious or syllogistic rationale. Instead, as Louis Painchaud has shown in the case of two other texts discovered at Nag Hammadi,16 the author of Thomas sets forth a complex, riddling composition that requires the reader to “continue seeking

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12 Schenke notes affinity between such a view and, for example, Heb 1:3: δός δὲ εἰς ἐπιστήμην τοῦ δακτύλου καὶ χαράσσεις τοῦ υποστάσεως αὐτοῦ; cf. also Col 1:15, Wis 7:26. Schenke sees such exegesis also standing behind such passages as Phil 2:6, which characterizes the son as δός εἰς ἔμπνευσιν ὑποστάσεως (Schenke, Der Gott “Mensch” in Der Gnostik, 134). For another reading of πάντων, see Dunderberg, “Thomas’ I-sayings,” 49–56.


14 We need to keep in mind Ismo Dunderberg’s warning to base our analyses on specific sayings, not upon whole (and so, of course, composite) texts (“John and Thomas”). In addition, De Conick has contributed much to our understanding, especially of Jewish and Hermetic sources that may relate to these sayings (Seek to See Him).


16 The Writing without Title and the Gospel of Philip; see Louis Painchaud, L’écrit sans titre: traité sur l’origine du monde (Louvain: Peeters, 1995), and his forthcoming article on the Gospel of Philip, presented at the Annual Meeting of the SBL in 1996.
until he finds,” experiencing in the process (as the “living Jesus” explains in log. 2) both distress and astonishment while struggling to intuit its hidden truth.

According to the very first logion, Jesus promises great reward: whoever succeeds may overcome the power of death (log. 1), the power that killed Adam, and, by implication, all his descendants (log. 85). Logion 2 adds that whoever persists in the painful and startling process of “seeking” will recover the birthright of Adam—will “rule over all things,” which Gen 1:26–28 characterizes as the appropriate role given to human beings of every species at creation. Continuing the contrast with Adam, log. 3, echoing Gen 1:26–28 (. . . ἄρχέτωσαν τῶν ἰχθύων τῆς θαλάσσης καὶ τῶν πετεινῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. . . καὶ πάσης τῆς γῆς. . .), warns that those who miss the divine kingdom will fall behind the “birds of the sky” and the “fish of the sea” instead of ruling over them, according to divine command. Those who fail to “know (themselves),” failing to recognize themselves as “sons of the living Father,” Jesus declares, “dwell in poverty”—indeed, “are poverty”—their situation contrasting sharply with that of Adam, who “came into being from a great power and a great wealth” (Adam ὕπνος ἐβολ. . . τις ὡριμής, log. 85). Logion 4 continues to point toward the situation of Adam: the “small child, seven days old” dwells in the “place of life” at the beginning of time, that is, as Davies points out, on the sixth “day” of creation.11 As those who are old must become reborn (cf. John 3:5–6), so those who are many “shall become one and the same” (οὐχ οὐκ ψυχ., literally, “one alone,” log. 4), recovering the singular image of God originally bestowed in creation (cf. Gen 1:27a). Underlying log. 4 (and related logia, including 22 and 61, as we shall see) is the inference that its author shares with Philo, Poinmpires, and certain rabbinic exegetes such as R. Samuel bar Nachman, that Gen 1:27 describes human creation occurring in two stages.12 When “God created adam in his image,” he first created a singular being (“in the image of God he created him”). Yet immediately after that, humankind devolved into a dual species, divided into male and female (“male and female he created them,” 1:27b).13 Logion 11 describes the dilemma this devolution has caused: “On the day you were one, you became two. When you become two, what will you do?” The central theme that connects the cluster of sayings here discussed is the disciple’s hope of being restored from his present, divided existence back into the image of the original “single one”—the unity with the primordial ἄνθρωπος enjoyed in the “place of light.”

In the previous sentence I use the masculine pronoun deliberately, since, although several logia indicate the author’s awareness of women among Jesus’ disciples, Thomas apparently regards gender—especially feminine gender—as an obstacle to recovering the original divine image.20 Apparently assuming that Gen 1:27 (like Genesis 2) describes a two-stage process, log. 61 instructs the disciples to reverse that process—to go back and undo the damage. Beginning from a well-attested Q saying, log. 61 relates a dialogue in which Salome challenges Jesus, questioning his identity in sexually charged language: “Who are you, man, that you have come up on my couch, and eaten from my table?” Jesus’ response shows that he rejects the divisive categories of sexual identity (cf. Gen 1:27b) and declares instead that “I am he who is from the undivided” (πεπώμαι—that is, from the singular one of Gen 1:27a). When Salome responds, “I am your disciple,” Jesus warns her that whoever is divided “will be filled with darkness,” and implies that whoever identifies with the “undivided”—apparently the ἄνθρωπος κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ—will be “filled with light.”

Logia 17–19 pick up this theme of restoration. According to log. 18, Jesus rebukes those who look for the kingdom of God eschatologically. Instead, he directs them toward “the beginning”—the place where one may “stand,” “know the end,” and “not taste death,” restored to the dawn of creation, before Adam became mortal. In log. 17, Jesus has promised to give his disciples what is impossible to perceive in the ordinary world. According to log. 19, Jesus pronounces blessing as follows: “Blessed is the one who came into being before he came into being.” Going back to the beginning, then, requires that one go back not only to the beginning of time, but even before the Genesis account of human creation.

But how can one accomplish this paradox? What was there before human creation—or even before the creation of the universe? Logion 77 suggests the answer. Before human creation—indeed, before “all things” (πάντα)—there

17 Davies, “Christology and Protology,” 668.
18 For discussion, see, e.g., the monograph by R. Baer, Philo’s Use of the Categories Male and Female (Leiden: Brill, 1970); and W. A. Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity,” HR 13 (1974) 165–208; see also the references in nn. 19, 20 below.
was the primordial light—the light that appeared on the first “day” (Gen 1:3). Davies notes from log. 77 that the primordial light pervades all creation, “is evident, for example, within logs and under stones.” 21 Yet even before creation, that light appeared, manifesting itself as well in human form. For log. 77 personsifies the divine light, which here speaks in the first person, with a human voice:

Διόκειναι ποιούναι παρ' ετεροκτίων θρόνοι

Διόκειναι πεπληροῦνται παρ' εποχαὶ ἡμῶν

χριστοφόροι· ποιεῖσθαι θεοὶ ἡμῖν

I am the light which is above them all.
I am the all. From me did the all come forth,
and to me did the all extend.

This exegesis, which envisions the light, so to speak, as an anthropomorphic being, surely echoes, as many scholars have noted, a pun on φῶς and φῶς, 22 apparently read into the Septuagint translation of Gen 1:3. Yet if log. 77 follows Jewish tradition by anthropomorphizing the primordial light, it simultaneously diverges from such tradition, of course, by depicting “the living Jesus” speaking with that divine voice. Predictably, extant parallels most often identify the one who appears in the light as the “first man.” Some mean by this not the “first man” of Gen 1:26 but rather his predecessor (cf. Gen 1:3), a being of radiant light. The Writing without Title (NH II.5 and XIII.2), for example, explains that this “immortal man, a man of light” (οὐνομάζεται ἀκάθαρτος προγονής, 103.19; 107.26–27) exists before all things, manifested in that light “in which a human being appeared, very wonderful” (108.9–10). The text goes on to explain that “the first Adam, he who is of the light, is spiritual (περιτεταῖρος Gk ἀκάθαρτος προγονής) who appeared on the first day. The second Adam is psychic (οὐτωχικός). He appeared on the sixth day.” The same text goes on to say that a third Adam “is earthly (οὐχοχικός) who appeared on the eighth day”—the latter referring, apparently, to Gen 2.7, read through the lens of 1 Cor 15:43ff., as Louis Painchaud has shown.

A similar pattern apparently underlies Egnostos, which associates an “immortal man” with “the beginning of the light” (III.76.21–23; 81.12). Irenaeus attests that certain heretics, whom the Greek text identifies as “Sethians, whom some call Ophani, or Ophites,” call anthropos the God of all things, also calling him light, and blessed, and immortal (Adv. haer. 1.30.1). According to the Latin text, such people say there is “a certain first light in the power of Bythus, blessed and incorruptible and infinite, who also is the first man.”

21 Davies, “Christology and Protology,” 664; see also the excellent discussion on pp. 664–74.

24 De Conick, Seek to See Him, 67.
25 See Waldstein, “Primal Triad,” 43.
rhythm of John implicitly identifies the appearance of the divine anthropos with that of the primordial light. The second manuscript of the Apocryphon of John makes this identification explicit by repeatedly identifying the divine anthropos, in its various manifestations (including its human antitype), as light (11.14.33; 15.4).

The parallel sources we have cited, then, like log. 77, similarly identify the being who appears in the primordial light as both anthropos and theos, in ways that their authors leave (and, no doubt, understand to be) mysterious. And while Thomas has the “living Jesus” speak from that light, what he says is that this divine light simultaneously pervades the universe, shining forth from beneath the nearest rock, and from within any rough-hewn log. What God calls into being in Gen 1:3, then, is an emanation of his own being—light that simultaneously manifests the divine, the prototype of the human, and the energy manifested throughout “all things.”

Readers who adopt such exegeses of Gen 1:3 would, of course, be asking the obvious question: How does the primordial light relate to that anthropos whose creation is told in Gen 1:26–27? As Schenke has shown, most of the sources cited assume that the medium of that relationship is the divine image. Several present complex scenarios of celestial sabotage, some involving discrepancy between the “image and likeness” (Gen 1:27). The Writing without Title, for example, tells how the archons plotted to create humankind “according to the image of their body, and the likeness of the Adam of Light” (12.33-35). The Hypostasis of the Archons describes how the archons made a human being “wholly chotkos” (cf. 1 Cor 15:47) for the purpose of luring the luminous image down from above (12.87.12–88:10). The Apocryphon of John sets forth an elaborate tripartite scheme of interpreting Gen 1:26 (and Gen 5:3), which narrates the birth of Seth in Adam’s image; see n. 13 above).

Exegetical strategies such as these, involving conflict between the Father and lower cosmic powers, are, however, entirely absent from the Gospel of Thomas. Instead, Thomas’s author sets forth a simpler exegesis, and one far more appropriate to the context of traditional Jewish monism. As we have seen, Poinandres interprets Gen 1:3 similarly, attributing to the “voice of light” these words: “I am nous, your God,” and goes on to say:

... the nous, father of all, being life and light, brought forth a human being equal to himself, whom he loved as his own offspring. For he was very beautiful, having the image of his father.

26 Schenke, Der Gott “Mensch,” esp. 95–156.

Thomas’s log. 50 interprets the relationship between the primordial light and its manifestation among human beings, explaining that the light “became manifest through their image.” The unexplained appearance of the plural refers, as De Conick observes, to the plural of Gen 1:26, “since it states that the light was manifested through a collective image.”

Davies concurs: the plural “presumably refers to unmanifest images of God (i.e., actualized people) who perceive the primal light, and so manifest the light to themselves.” Logion 50 proceeds as “Jesus” instructs his disciples, when asked their identity (literally, “you—who?”) to answer, “We are his sons, and we are the elect of the living father.” Asked for “the sign of your father in you,” they are to answer that it is “movement and rest”—a question that again recalls Gen 1:3–2:2, which begins with the spirit’s movement over the waters, continues through the six days of creation, and concludes with divine “rest” (2:2).

Thus, the cluster of logia that interpret Genesis 1 directs those who seek access to God toward the divine image given in creation. According to log. 24, Jesus rebukes those who seek access to God elsewhere, even—or perhaps especially—those who seek it by trying to follow Jesus himself. The disciples who ask Jesus to “show us the place where you are, since it is necessary for us to seek it” (log. 24), do not even merit a direct reply for so misguided a request. Instead, Jesus’ answer sounds like a non sequitur. He directs the disciple not toward himself (as does the Jesus of John 14:6) but toward the light hidden within: “There is light within a man of light, and he lights up the whole world; if he does not shine, there is [or: he is] darkness.” That is, one must discover, through the divine image, the light that illuminates “the whole world,” or else live in darkness, within and without.

Logion 83 explains that “the images are revealed to man, but the light in
them remains concealed in the image of the light of the father” (. . . ἄνθρωπος ἡμών ἄνθρωπος θεοῦ). This difficult saying seems to suggest that although one may glimpse the divine image, one may not see its full radiance, nor that of its prototype. The following saying (log. 84) contrasts the pleasurable experience of seeing one’s face in a mirror with the—nearly unbearable—experience of seeing your images which came into being before you.”

Helmut Koester has taken such statements in Thomas as evincing a kind of “gnostic understanding,” which takes as its premise the discovery of one’s own divine origin.31 Hence, he explains, “for the gnostic understanding it is crucial to know that one’s own origin lies before the beginning of earthly existence.”32 Now we can further specify this statement by observing that what Thomas directs the disciple to seek is not “divine origin” in the sense inferred from an underlying “gnostic myth,” according to which humanity—or some part of it—is naturally divine. Instead, the disciple is to recover the form of the original creation κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ.

What effects that transformation, as I read Thomas’s gospel, is baptism. For when the disciples ask when they shall “see” Jesus, he replies in words that recall them back to the state of Adam in paradise: “When you take off your clothes without being ashamed” (log. 37). As Jonathan Smith has shown, this statement, coupled with the injunction to put one’s garments underfoot and “tread upon them, like little children,” suggests a baptismal context. Logion 50, which De Conick interprets in the context of Jewish ascen- tancy literature, also fits plausibly into the context of baptismal instruction. Thus, the questions and responses may be intended for use either—or both—in catechetical instruction and in baptismal liturgy.

Our evidence suggests, then, that Thomas’s theology and anthropology do not depend upon some presupposed, generic “gnostic myth.” Instead, as Schenke previously suggested and subsequent research has confirmed, the source of this religious conviction is, quite simply, exegesis of Genesis 1—and, as we have seen, exegesis that follows a pattern both widely known and varied in the ancient world.33 Such exegesis connects the eikon of Gen 1:26–27 with the primordial light (or: light/anthrōpos of Gen 1:3), to show that the divine image implanted at creation enables humankind to find—by means of baptism—the way back to its origin in the mystery of the primordial creation.

The Johannine Gospel, of course, also opens with reflection on Genesis 1. But the Johannine prologue and the Thomas logia emphasize, respectively, very different “moments” in that first creation account. Subsequently, each draws from it very different—even, in many respects, opposing—conclusions.

Thomas privileges the appearance of the primordial light (Gen 1:3) as “Act 1” of the drama, and moves quickly to “Act 2,” the creation of humankind in its image (Gen 1:26). “Act 1,” then, shows how the divine manifests itself “in the beginning; “Act 2” shows how it actually manifests itself to humankind. John’s author, too, apparently has Gen 1:3 in mind as he describes what he takes to be “Act 1”—the divine logos effecting all creation (John 1:3–5). But according to John, “Act 2” occurs only long ages after creation—when the logos becomes incarnate (1:14). Here John differs not only from Thomas, but from all other exegesis that derives from mainstream Jewish Genesis speculation, evinced in sources ranging from Philo and Poinandres to the Odes of Solomon or The Writing without Title (for discussion, see the appendix to this article).

For John, then, “Act 1” includes the whole revelation of the logos from creation of the primordial light, the universe, and humankind, through the Torah to the time to John the Baptist—all these only setting the stage, so to speak, for the culmination of the divine drama. As we noted, John envisions “Act 2”—the successful revelation of the divine—as occurring only when the logos, previously manifest as light (1:3–4), finally appears in the world in human form. For John insists that whenever the light previously had appeared—in three scenes preceding “Act 2”—it met with stunning failure. First, John declares, the light encountered opposition and incomprehension (1:5); second, lack of recognition (1:10); and finally outright rejection (1:11).

By interpreting Genesis in this way, John implicitly refutes the premise that, as we have seen, Thomas shares with many other Genesis exegetes—that throughout the ages since creation, the divine light has manifested itself successfully—in the cosmos and in humanity. Philo, for example, sometimes takes light as the symbol of God or the knowledge of God revealed to humanity and to the cosmos (De Som. 1.75). Alternatively, Philo explains that the river gushing forth from Eden symbolizes the wisdom of God, or, alternatively, the logos of God (Leg. All. 1.65.) Philo elsewhere takes these to be the embodiment of the primordial light, or, as he calls it, τὸ ὁπόθνη ὁφολός.

But John’s author, as we have seen, disagrees. What happened when the divine light first appeared? To this question John responds with the three negations that mark his prologue. First, John declares, the divine light “shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not understood—or overcome—it (the verb καταλαμβάνειν, which can be translated either way, is a well-known double entendre).34 Many commentators, from Rudolf Bultmann to Thomas Tobin,35

30 Davies, “Christology and Protology,” 670.
31 Koester, Ancient Christian Gospels, 120.
32 Ibid., 118.
33 Davies, “Christology and Protology”; De Conick, Seek to See Him.
have pointed out the resistance, opposition, and even hostility that characterize the initial response of “the darkness” to the light. Second, even though John defines the light as “the light of humanity” (1:4), and “the true light which enlightens everyone” (1:9), his account emphasizes the universal human failure to recognize it. When it came into the world (1:9) and, indeed, already “was in the world, and the world came into being through it [διὰ παντός, the light, or logos]” still “the world did not know [οὐκ εὐδοκεῖται, the light/logos]” (1:10). Third, even when the light (οὐκ εὐδοκεῖται, logos) came to its own, it was rejected by those to whom it is most akin.

The difficulty in translation indicated in vv. 10 and 11 derives, of course, from well-known grammatical inconsistencies. John switches the pronoun from the expected neuter to masculine, having chosen, apparently, to privilege the presence of the divine logos rather than the light; here, apparently, light is only an aspect of logos. So, Dodd notes:

In verse four a transition is made to Φως, and φως, not λόγος, is formally the subject of the propositions made in verses 9–11. While, however, φως is formally the subject, the corresponding pronoun, referring to the subject of the sentence, is in the masculine, αὐτός, not agreeing with φως, which is neuter.

Dodd concludes that “the propositions in question really refer to the masculine λόγος, here considered in its aspect as light”; yet he also acknowledges the possibility that “the thought of incarnation is already in the evangelist’s mind, and the propositions of verses 9–12 refer to Christ as incarnate.” I agree with both suggestions, against those interpreters who have made the latter the centerpiece of their exegesis. Raymond Brown, for example, is one of many who interpret the “three negations” as foreshadowing the rejection of the incarnate logos. As I read the prologue, however, both its intellectual and cultural context (see the appendix, for example, for a brief review of recent studies comparing it with the Odes of Solomon, on the one hand, and with Trimorphic Protennoia, on the other) and its dramatic structure, indicate the opposite. What the prologue shows is that the “word of the Lord,” having first acted to create and sustain the universe, and then having manifested itself to Israel, nevertheless, despite all of this, failed to penetrate the deep darkness in which John sees the world plunged. Finally, then, the word “became flesh and dwelt among us,” incarnate—so that some people now could declare triumphantly, with John’s author, “we saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father!” (1:14).

Even writing nearly fifty years ago, without knowledge of the Nag Hammadi library, C. H. Dodd suggested that both hellenized Jews like Philo and other Egyptians (whether Jews, Gentiles, or both, he does not specify) engaged with Hermetic tradition set forth, as their basic premise, the exegetical pattern we have found in the Thomas logia, which proclaims the syngennia between the anthrōpos kat'eikon, created within humankind, and its divine prototype, characterized variously as anthrōpos, logos, nous, and phōs. Investigating the relationship between the Johannine prologue and these other sources, Dodd attempts to delineate both its affinities with them and its differences from them, as well as from rabbinic Judaism and “gnosticism” (a term he uses as synonymous with dualism and docetism). Such scholars long have recognized that the prologue includes a “clearly polemical purpose.” Rudolf Bultmann, who wrote those words in 1941, finds polemic against followers of John the Baptist, against Jewish exegesis, and against “gnosticism.” In agreement with Bultmann, both Dodd and Brown read the Johannine prologue as “strongly antignostic.” (Whatever we may speculate about its author’s intent, however, the Gospel of John remains so evocative that followers of Valentinus would read it—even, or especially, its prologue—as a source of their theology.)

The present investigation suggests, however, that John directs his polemic not only against Jewish and pagan readers of Genesis, and not only against “gnostics”—whatever one takes that to mean—but against a pattern of Genesis exegesis adopted as well by such followers of Jesus as Thomas’s author. For John, indeed, “cosmology is not . . . a path to knowledge of God and eternal life.” But many of his predecessors and contemporaries, Christian as well as Jewish and pagan—including Paul, for example—did understand cosmology to offer such a path. We noted above Rom 1:19, where Paul declares the conviction (received, no doubt, from his own religious education) that “what of God is invisible” has been revealed to human beings by God himself, “intelligible since the creation in the things that are made.”

Although John seems not to challenge this Pauline view—if, indeed, he knew it—he apparently does intend to take on all whose Genesis exegesis differs markedly from his own. Dodd incisively compares the prologue with a wide range of non-Christian Genesis exegesis, and goes on to conclude that the “decisive difference” marking John as a Christian text is that “the evangelist conceives of the Logos as incarnate, and of the aleithinos anthrōpos as not merely dwelling as nous in all men, but as actually living and dying on earth as a man.” The recent discoveries have shown, however, that not all of John’s fellow...
Christians would agree with this statement. What Dodd regards as the glory of John’s Gospel message—that of the logos “who actually lives and dies on earth as a man”—is never mentioned in Thomas’s Gospel. Its author may assume, of course, that the “living Jesus” once lived and died “on earth as a man,” but does not suggest that he finds this significant. Conversely, what Dodd regards as religiously inadequate—the conviction that the divine anthropos “merely dwells as nous (or, as Thomas would say, phōs) in all men”—is, as we have seen, closely analogous to the hidden “good news” that Thomas’s Gospel proclaims.

Of course we cannot fault Dodd, writing before the publication of the Nag Hammadi texts, for labeling such views “docetic,” then “gnostic.” Now, however, we can see that John apparently directs polemics against a type of Genesis exegesis used by a wide range of readers, both Jewish and Christian, and perhaps even pagan as well. In one sense, these observations validate the insights earlier expressed by Bultmann, Dodd, and Brown—namely, that John opposes convictions traditionally identified as “gnostic.” Yet we now see that what scholars traditionally identified as “gnostic tendencies” instead sometimes turn out to be forms of Jewish and Christian teaching relatively unfamiliar to us—unfamiliar precisely, in all probability, because of the active and successful opposition of such writers as the author of John. Finally, our analysis suggests that Thomas’s author understood his message to be based not on some presupposed “gnostic myth,” but, like John’s prologue, on exegesis of Genesis 1.

Appendix

Gesine Schenke, John Turner, and Carsten Colpe, among others, have participated in the complex discussion of the prologue’s relationship to religious poetry with which it shares a common provenance—especially Trimorphic Protennoia (CG XIII, 1) and the Odes of Solomon. Schenke, in her pioneering edition of Trimorphic Protennoia, has noted many parallels to the Johannine prologue; Carsten Colpe, too, itemizes what he characterizes as “stupendous parallels” between the two. John Turner, in the introduction to his edition, suggests that a later editor inserted Johannine language for the purposes of polemizing against orthodox Christian Christology “in favor of a higher (Sethian) one.” Such analysis allows us to locate the religious milieu from which the prologue emerged more precisely than, as suggested by Dodd, within a range of “Jewish wisdom tradition.”

For our purpose here, we focus upon only one aspect of such comparison: namely, how each poem characterizes the modes of divine revelation. Certain passages from Trimorphic Protennoia suggest that its author, like the Johannine author, may have in mind—and probably does—the opening verses of Genesis 1. Consider, for example, the following passage: Trim. Prot. 46.10-13: “(The speech of the one who begins) exists from the beginning, in the foundations of all. For there is light that exists hidden in silence, and it was the first to come forth” (cf. Gen 1:3). Does Trimorphic Protennoia presuppose the exegetical pattern that we have seen in the Gospel of Thomas and related sources? This passage’s references to the “speech existing from the beginning and light . . . (that) was the first to come forth” clearly echo Gen 1:3. Furthermore, according to 36.6–8, the divine presence manifested in the forms of protennoia, voice (wʰē), and logos, is depicted as light pouring down upon darkness, and within the primordial water: “I came down to the underworld and I shone (down upon the) darkness. It is I who poured forth the water. It is I who am hidden within (radiant) waters.” Besides these apparent allusions to Gen 1:2–3, Trimorphic Protennoia celebrates divine revelation given “from the beginning” from creation, which manifests itself within “everyone”: “I move in every creature . . . I move in everyone, and I dwell in them all. . . . I exist before the all, and I am the all, since I exist in everyone.” Thus, the poem emphasizes that the divine presence manifests itself through a kind of genetic affinity, so to speak, with all beings, indwelling them.

Trimorphic Protennoia, like John 1:5, goes on to tell how the divine light “shone down upon the darkness,” but sees the opposite result from the one John describes. Instead of encountering only hostility and resistance (cf. the “first negation” of John 1:5), here the light illuminates the darkness, so that the divine presence is recognized:

I shone down upon the darkness. It is I who poured forth the water. It is I who am hidden within (radiant) waters . . . I am the real voice; I cry out in everyone, and they recognize me, since a seed indwells them . . . I reveal myself—yes, I—among all those who recognized me, for I am joined with everyone by virtue of the hidden thought. (36.5–27)

What allows for such recognition, then, is the repeatedly affirmed connection between the divine and the things below. Yet Trimorphic Protennoia makes no explicit mention of the divine “image” indwelling humanity, however, and no apparent reference to Gen 1:26.

The conviction that protennoia descends in three successive manifestations, however, appearing finally as logos, clearly does presuppose some difficulty in communication between protennoia and human beings. Because of hostile forces opposed to the light, the logos tells how he hid from his adver-
Odes of Solomon suggest that its author may be alluding to Gen 1:3 and may envision a human form manifest in the primordial light: "The spirit brought me before the face of the Lord, and because I was the son of man, I was named the light, the son of God." Sanders notes verbal similarities between passages he selects from various Odes and the Johannine prologue. For each of the passages central to our current discussion—John 1:4–5, 1:10, and 1:11—Sanders cites parallels he draws from various of the Odes. Opposite John 1:5, for example, he places Odes Sol. 18.6; opposite John 1:10, Odes Sol. 24.12; opposite 1:11, Odes Sol. 7.12; 41.11; and 8.12. Such parallels may demonstrate literary relationship, as Sanders intends to suggest.

More striking, however, is that the Odes of Solomon, like Trimorphic Protennoia, communicate through similar language a message diametrically opposed to that of the prologue. Where John declares that "the light shone into darkness, and the darkness has not grasped (or overcome) it," the author of Ode 18 instead envisions the possibility that the light may vanquish darkness, or, conversely, that darkness may vanquish light; but the outcome of this conflict is far from decided, nor is it perceived as a singular cosmological event. Instead, the odist entreats the Lord to resolve the—apparently continual—conflict in favor of light and truth: "Let not light be conquered by darkness, nor let truth flee from falsehood." Second, we have noted that the prologue insists that "the true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world, and the world did not recognize it" (1:10). But what Sanders places as a parallel to this verse actually states the opposite: "The dwelling place of the word is humankind, and his truth is love." The same Ode goes on to praise the word's presence and activity in humankind from the dawn of creation: "He is the light and the dawning of thought; and by him the generations spoke to one another; ... from him came love and equality, and they spoke one to another what was theirs." Not only did the divine logos enable "the generations" to communicate with one another and recognize one another, but also it enables human beings to recognize itself: "they were inspired by the word, and they recognized him who made them." In agreement with John 1:2, then, the odist praises the logos as the one through whom all beings are brought into being, but—contrary to John 1:10—sees as a natural consequence that those created by the divine word recognize that word within them. Further, by contrast with John 1:11, the seventh Ode declares that "his own" do recognize the divine word—and the odist takes for granted that, recognizing him, they receive him with joy:

The Father of knowledge is the word of knowledge ... the created one ... he has allowed him to appear to those who are his own, in order that they may recognize him that made them, and not suppose that they had come into being on their own.

Sanders, seeking parallels to the "negations" of the Johannine prologue, cites, as if parallel to 1:10 ("the world did not receive him"), Odes Sol. 24.12:
"They were rejected, because the truth was not within them"—but the latter phrase refers not to human failure to receive the divine word, but, as the context shows, to the Lord’s rejection of foolish arrogant people who contrive lies (24.9–13)—a statement very much in the mode of the psalmist. And lest anyone conclude from such human wickedness that the divine revelation was obscure, the disjunction concludes by proclaiming the widespread availability of divine truth: “... for the Lord revealed his way, and spread widely his grace. And those who recognized (his way) knew his holiness.” Again, seeking parallels to the “third negation” of the Johannine prologue (“he came unto his own, and his own did not receive him,” 1:11) and finding one parallel in content, Sanders places three passages that include verbal parallels but state rather the opposite of John 1:11. The first is Odes Sol. 7.12, cited above: “(the Father) has allowed (the word) to appear to those who are his own, in order that they may recognize him who made them,” and 8.12: “I turn not my face from my own, because I know them.” Both of these hymns suggest that the Lord’s “own” are his from the beginning of time (see Odes Sol. 7.13–14); 8.13 seems to suggest, like the Gospel of Thomas, that their images existed before their actual creation (“and before they had existed, I recognized them, and imprinted a seal on their faces”).

The diversity of our sources and the enormous hermeneutical inventiveness we find in ancient exegesis of Gen 1:1–2.5 should warn us not to attempt to hammer all of our sources into a single mold. Nor should we imagine that we can find a single key to unlock the hermeneutical difficulties of such a great range of texts. But, having glanced at two sources central to discussion of the provenance of the Johannine prologue—Trimorphic Protennoia and the Odes of Solomon—we can see that they reflect the basic theological premises we find in the Gospel of Thomas and its parallels—that divine “light,” existing from the beginning, is available to humanity from the time of creation, and ever since. As we have seen, the authors of Trimorphic Protennoia and the Odes of Solomon may have had in mind exegesis of Gen 1:3 that identifies the “first light” with the “son of man” or, equally, the “son of God.” But neither text, so far as I can see, links the divine light’s access to humanity specifically with the “image and likeness” of Gen 1:26 as do the Gospel of Thomas and its parallels. Yet both Trimorphic Protennoia and the Odes of Solomon seem to agree with the more generalized theme widespread in Jewish theology, that (in Paul’s words) “what can be known of God was visible through the things that were made” (Rom 1:19), through creation as a whole, often connected more specifically with the creation of humankind in a kind of implicit relationship with God (or his divine word).