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THE *GOSPEL OF THOMAS* AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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I. Introduction

The New Testament Gospels offer two different pictures of Jesus: there is Jesus of Nazareth, and then there is Jesus Christ. The distinction between these two figures is most clear in terms of time period, either before or after Easter. Most people, particularly members of the Christian tradition, are more familiar with the post-Easter Jesus Christ, the divine savior who was crucified and resurrected. But pre-Easter, Jesus of Nazareth was a historical figure, a first-century Palestinian Jew. Christ is not Jesus' surname; it is a title given to him by those who believed him to be the *christos*, or Messiah. But who is the man behind the title?

The Gospels do provide us with information about this "historical Jesus," but it is modified, overlaid, and re-written by the early Church based on their identification of Jesus as the Messiah. Beginning in the 1700s, scholars have struggled to extricate the historical information from theological texts, and even today there is little consensus among them. The "Quest of the Historical Jesus" is far from complete.

But before undertaking a (new) study of the historical Jesus, it is crucial to understand the limits and constraints of such a study. Therefore it must be stated at the outset exactly what is meant by the phrase, "the historical Jesus", and that is "the Jesus constructed by historical research" (Dunn 125). The Quest tends to assume that its reconstructed Jesus will be the same as the actual Jesus of Nazareth, but this is not necessarily true. Dunn, a contemporary scholar, reminds us that the "'historical Jesus' is properly speaking a nineteenth- and twentieth-century construction using the data provided by the Synoptic tradition, *not* Jesus back then and *not* a figure in history whom we can realistically use to critique the portrayal of Jesus in the Synoptic tradition" (126). We can never get back to the "real" Jesus, but we can reach a good picture of him based on the available sources.

So why study this historical Jesus? The “Quest of the Historical Jesus” has existed primarily for two reasons: because it is important to history, and because it is important to faith. On its significance for history, Dunn writes,

The historical figure of Jesus will always stimulate curiosity on the part of those who are interested in the great men and women of history. Those who want to understand better the historical, social, and ideological forces which have shaped their culture will always want to inquire more closely about the man whose title (Christ) is borne by the most important and longest-lasting influence (Christianity) on the European intellectual and artistic as well as religious and ethical traditions. And since individuals are shaped by their culture, the insatiable human curiosity to ‘know thyself’ means that interest in Jesus is even part of the quest for self-understanding and self-identity for the individual’s own deep roots (100).

Thus, the historical person Jesus of Nazareth has immeasurably influenced the culture in which we live—even our current calendar is based around the year when he was (thought to have been) born. But this intellectual desire to learn about Jesus is perhaps overshadowed by the curiosity on the part of those who identify with the Christian faith: “Christians cannot but want to know what Jesus was like, since he shows them what God is like” (Dunn 101). The theological claim that Jesus was the incarnation of God necessarily makes knowledge about the person of Jesus imperative to faith in God.

There have been three major periods of historical Jesus scholarship, and although my study builds primarily on current research of the so-called “Third Quest”, I begin section two with a survey of previous work, from the time of the Enlightenment until the present day. I will attempt to show where current scholarship is heading, and why my own research presents a new and different perspective on the issue at hand. In section three I discuss the critical tools used by historical Jesus scholars, and in section four I analyze previous methodology and explain my own method. The final sections detail the application of my method and the conclusions I draw about Jesus. I hope to make two significant contributions to the field of study: first, that the

extracanonical sources, the *Gospel of Thomas* in particular, have either been ignored or misused by previous scholars. Second, when *Thomas* is taken seriously and used in conjunction with the canonical texts, the resulting picture of Jesus is that of an eschatological prophet, who preached the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God.

II. Survey of the Three Quests

A. The First Quest

The “Quest of the Historical Jesus” began in 1700s with the Enlightenment, when scholars first applied the methods of historical criticism to the previously untouched biblical texts. Gregory Dawes describes the beginning of this trend:

Insofar as the Christian scriptures spoke of the incarnation of God at a particular point in human affairs, the accuracy of their reports was taken for granted. Beginning in about the seventeenth century a fateful change began to occur, a change which would result in a divorce (or at least an uneasy separation) between the claims of faith and those of history (1).

One key scholar of this period was Hermann Samuel Reimarus, writing in 1778. Reimarus was the first person to address the apparent contradictions in the four gospels. He concluded that the gospels actually contained two different doctrines, one based upon “an intended temporal redemption of Israel,” and another which was invented by the disciples and evangelists “only when their hopes had been disappointed after his [Jesus’] death” (qtd. in Dawes 77). Reimarus labeled the gospels as fraudulent documents, and their claims as deliberate deceptions on the part of the followers of Jesus.

In 1835, David Friedrich Strauss built on the developments made by Reimarus, though he argued that “much of what we find in the Gospels is neither history nor deception but ‘myth’” (Dawes 87). Strauss posited that myths were the narratives created from the early Christians’

ideas about Jesus. Furthermore, it was those ideas that were of primary importance to the contemporary believer, not the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth (Dunn 32-3¹).

Early scholarship was marked by the standards of the Enlightenment; the scientific method drove a wedge between the natural and supernatural, and the miracle stories were dismissed as non-factual. But the conclusion of most significance was the understanding of the Bible as a human product, influenced by culture and time period, rather than a divine, universal authority.

The next major period of scholarship (still a part of the First Quest) began developing in the mid-1800s and was represented by the “conviction that Jesus, the ‘historical Jesus’, the Jesus stripped of dogmatic accretion, would/must have something to say to modern man” (Dunn 38-9). Schleiermacher, Kant and Harnack all rejected Strauss’ ideas and argued that the historical Jesus—and not the early church’s ideas about Jesus—was of primary relevance to contemporary faith. This movement, sometimes called the “liberal quest,” urged a return from “the religion *about* Jesus to the religion *of* Jesus” (36), and the resulting image of Jesus was that of a timeless, moral teacher, and a good example (39).

Though this image of Jesus was to be rejected, the liberal quest did make two extremely important, lasting contributions to the Quest as a whole. First, liberal scholars decided that the Gospel of John was not very useful, because it was more theologically (and therefore less historically) based than the Synoptics. Second, by analyzing the parallels within the Synoptics using the method of redaction criticism—the study of how authors use their sources, which sources are used and how they are edited together—scholars concluded that there were two

¹ James Dunn has recently begun a study of the historical Jesus, which gives a comprehensive overview of the major scholars and methods. Much of the information here about the three stages of the Quest comes from his Jesus Remembered, though I supplement it with the works of the original scholars and others contemporary to Dunn.

primary sources behind the Synoptic tradition. In 1863, H. J. Holtzmann established the Gospel of Mark as the earliest gospel, which was then used by both Matthew and Luke, as was another document made up of the sayings of Jesus (designated "Q"). This "two-source" hypothesis, discussed in further detail in section 3, is still foundational for contemporary study of the New Testament Gospels (Dunn 40-45).

The liberal quest collapsed under criticism from scholars like Albert Schweitzer. The biggest problem with the liberal quest was that, in searching for a timeless Jesus, scholars actually removed Jesus from his historical context, without which "each individual created Him in accordance with his own character" (Schweitzer 4). That is, scholars were biased in reconstructing the historical Jesus. They did not effectively draw Jesus' teachings from the source material, but instead constructed Jesus in such a way as to reflect on him their own ideals. Any historical reconstruction of Jesus inevitably depends on the method used, but it should never depend on the ideals and beliefs of the historian.

Schweitzer further damaged the liberal quest with his work on eschatology. His claim that Jesus' message centered around the imminent end of time was irreconcilable with the claims of the liberal scholars. If Jesus was the ultimate good example, "who would wish to follow or take as an example a failed eschatological prophet?" (Dunn 47).

The liberal quest finally came to an end due to the work of Wrede, Kähler, and Bultmann, all writing around the turn of the 20th century. They drove home the point that the gospels were not informative about the life-history of Jesus, but were primarily faith documents. According to Wrede, even Mark, the earliest of the Synoptics, was not an accurate portrayal of the historical Jesus: "As a whole the Gospel [of Mark] no longer offers a historical *view* of the real life of Jesus. Only pale residues of such a view have passed over into what is a suprahistorical view for

faith” (qtd. in Dawes 116). Bultmann and Kähler went a step further in saying that not only was history unable to extract Jesus of Nazareth from the gospel accounts, but such knowledge of the historical Jesus was inconsequential for Christian faith: “The risen Lord is not the historical Jesus *behind* the Gospels, but the Christ of the apostolic preaching, of the *whole* New Testament” (Bultmann qtd. in Dawes 232). The Quest of the historical Jesus was deemed both impossible and illegitimate, because it could not use the gospels as historically accurate documents, and because historical study could in no way “prove” faith (Dunn 78).

B. The Second Quest

However, the Quest was reopened with *The Problem of the Historical Jesus*, the work of Ernst Käsemann, wherein he made two crucial conclusions. First, the early Christian community had identified the earthly Jesus as the exalted Lord; therefore, there should not be too sharp a distinction between the two as separate figures. Second, the very existence of the Gospels showed that the life-history of Jesus of Nazareth was important for faith in Jesus the Christ—certainly the early Christians thought so! Käsemann noted, “Primitive Christianity is obviously of the opinion that the earthly Jesus cannot be understood otherwise than from the far side of Easter, and...conversely, the event of Easter cannot be adequately comprehended...apart from the earthly Jesus” (qtd. in Dawes 290). History could not hope to find the historical Jesus as an entity separate from the Christian faith, but neither could faith hope to worship Christ as a figure apart from history.

This new effort was marked by the idea that a certain amount of the Gospel material could be authentically attributed to Jesus. Thus, scholars developed a variety of methods for getting back the “real” Jesus within the texts. The most prominent of these methods was the “criterion of dissimilarity” (sometimes called the criterion of difference or the criterion of

exclusion) advocated by Norman Perrin, namely that material could be considered authentic if it was dissimilar to known characteristics of both second-temple Judaism and early Christianity (Theissen & Mertz 8). The problem with this criterion, however, was that it removed Jesus from his appropriate context much like the liberal scholars had done before. When the criterion of dissimilarity is applied, “the historical Jesus who emerges is bound to be a strange creature, with anything which links him to the religion of his people or to the teaching of his followers automatically ruled out” (Dunn 82). Other scholars have constructed various other criteria, but none has produced a satisfactory and widely agreed-upon image of the historical Jesus.

C. The Third Quest

The third and current stage of the Quest developed as a direct response to the shortcomings of the criterion of dissimilarity, the key conviction of the new Quest being that “any attempt to build up a historical picture of Jesus of Nazareth should and must begin from the fact that he was a first-century Jew operating in a first-century milieu” (Dunn 85-6). E. P. Sanders makes the argument that it is not primarily the sayings of Jesus that give us the best information about Jesus’ life. In *Jesus and Judaism*, he says, “No matter what criteria for testing the sayings are used, scholars still need to move beyond the sayings themselves to a broader context than a summary of their contents if they are to address historical questions about Jesus” (17). Thus, in the latest phase of the search for the historical Jesus, scholars have directed their study towards second-temple Judaism and the socio-political context of Palestine during the time when Jesus lived. This is particularly noteworthy because the previous two hundred years of scholarship had—intentionally or otherwise—set out to define Jesus as distinct and superior to Judaism (Dunn 86-88).

However, the Third Quest (like the others) has thus far been characterized by much diversity and little consensus. Not all scholars of the Third Quest give serious treatment to Jesus' Jewish-ness. This other side is sometimes labeled "Neo-Liberal" scholarship, indicating that new scholars have "resurrected the old liberal image of Jesus, along with distinctive characteristics of the old liberal quest: "flight from dogma, the claim to new sources which make possible a reconstruction of the 'historical Jesus', the focus on Jesus' teaching, and the stripping away once again of the embarrassing apocalyptic features" (Dunn 58). Scholars like Robert Funk and Paul Hollenbach, the leaders of the Jesus Seminar, are attempting to rescue the "true" Jesus from the corruptions of Christianity. Their construction of Jesus is that of a non-eschatological teacher of subversive wisdom (62).

But the "neo-liberal" section of the Third Quest is also particularly interesting in its use of non-canonical sources like the *Gospel of Thomas*². J. D. Crossan has argued that an early layer of *Thomas*, along with Q and other sources which he reconstructs, can be dated to around 30-60 CE, earlier than the canonical (biblical) Gospels. The lack of apocalyptic material in these texts, he says, supports a non-eschatological construction of the historical Jesus (Dunn 59-60). More conservative scholarship, however, maintains that *Thomas* is a second-century Gnostic document and is useful for study of the historical Jesus primarily because it contains parallels to the Synoptic material and supports use of the Synoptics as the most accurate sources: "The very concern of some scholars to justify use of the *Gospel of Thomas* by seeking to demonstrate its consistency with a stripped-down Synoptic tradition is actually a backhanded recognition of the normativeness of the Synoptic tradition" (Dunn 134).

² The term "non-canonical," or "extracanonical," refers to early Christian texts which were not included in the canon of material in our New Testament today.

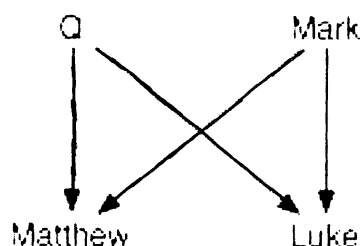
So far, scholars who have used *Thomas* as a legitimate source have used it as evidence for a non-eschatological Jesus. On the other hand, scholars who argue for Jesus' eschatology have generally dismissed *Thomas* and base their conclusions primarily on the Synoptic tradition. This is where I intend to make a new contribution to the Quest. The *Gospel of Thomas*, when properly understood and sectioned into Kernel and accretive material, is not only a useful source but actually confirms an eschatological construction of Jesus.

III. Survey of Critical Tools and Methods

Each new wave of scholarship brought new critical tools for studying and reconstructing the historical Jesus. It is worth noting the major ones because—for better or for worse—they are still considered foundational for much of contemporary study.

A. Redaction Criticism

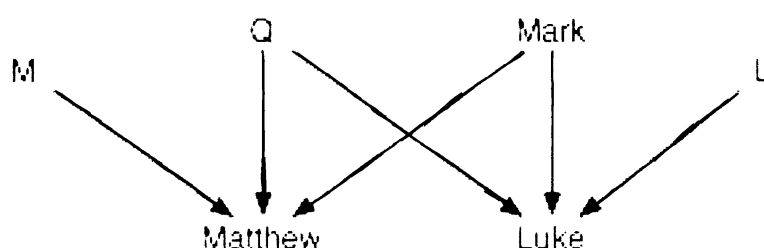
Redaction criticism enabled Holtzmann and other scholars of the liberal quest to establish the two-source hypothesis:



By carefully studying the parallels within the Synoptics, Holtzmann determined that Mark was composed earliest based on three principles: very few verses in Mark do not also appear in Matthew and Luke, the Markan order of episodes appears primary, and the Markan form of episodes seems to be more primitive than what is found in Matthew and Luke. There is also considerable verbal agreement in Matthew and Luke on material that is not found in Mark, and in response, scholars conjectured a Greek sayings gospel. Thus, the conclusion was that

“Matthew and Luke copied (1) from Mark and (2) from a second written source no longer directly available to us...known as the synoptic sayings gospel or Q” (Funk 7). The Q material appears in different order in Matthew and Luke; scholars think that Luke kept the material in the original order of Q when composing his Gospel (Dunn 43). This conjecture is based on the fact that Luke copies Mark (a text we do have, unlike Q) more faithfully than Matthew does.

The four-source hypothesis represents an extended version of the two-source hypothesis:



Here Matthew and Luke both use material that is unknown to the other. Material which appears in Matthew but not in Mark, Luke or Q is known as special Matthew, or M, and Lukan material absent in Mark, Matthew and Q is denoted special Luke, or L. The “sources” M and L, however, “do not necessarily represent written sources; the material each adds probably derives from oral tradition” (Funk 7).

The difficulty with redaction criticism and its conclusions is that it is based—incorrectly—on a literary paradigm. The fact that many episodes in the Synoptic Gospels contain the same core of material but little verbal agreement is evidence that many of the Jesus traditions circulated orally and were used by the Gospel writers but not in a process of editing or literary redaction:

In oral tradition one telling of a story is in no sense an editing of a previous telling; rather, each telling starts with the same subject and theme, but the retellings are different; each telling is a performance of the tradition itself, not of the first, or third, or twenty-third ‘edition’ of the tradition. Our expectation, accordingly, should be of the oral transmission of Jesus tradition as a sequence of retellings, each starting from the same storehouse of communally remembered

events and teaching, and each weaving the common stock together in different patterns for different contexts (Dunn 209).

We should be careful, therefore, to avoid placing the texts within a literary framework, even though the only surviving form of the tradition is written. The literary model is probably not an accurate one, and we should not attempt to understand the relationship between the texts as being one of literary dependence.

B. Form Criticism

Scholars like Julius Wellhausen and K. L. Schmidt developed the method of form criticism by using it to study Old Testament texts, but it was Rudolph Bultmann who first applied it to the historical Jesus sources. Hypothesizing that between the time of Jesus' death and the composition of the Gospels, the Jesus traditions circulated orally, form critics sought to work backward from the Gospels. They first suggested that the traditions about Jesus existed in brief, oral units. The units were generally void of historical and geographical details, which were provided as editorial material by the Gospel authors. Therefore, Bultmann said, the objective of form criticism was "to rediscover the origin and the history of the particular units and thereby to throw some light on the history of the tradition before it took literary form" (qtd. in Dunn 75).

The first step taken by form critics was to classify the units within a text according to form—individual sayings, parables, pronouncements, miracle stories, and so on (Blomberg 1.1-1.2.1). They next attempted to reconstruct how the forms changed, and thereby build a model of the transmission process. Form criticism claimed that certain tendencies existed regardless of form; Bultmann described these tendencies with a "law of increasing distinctness." Therefore, stories got longer, nameless characters and places were given names, introductory and interpretative material was added, etc. These revisions were often utilitarian for the early church;

stories were adapted so as to be more applicable to issues faced by contemporary believers (Blomberg 1.2.3).

Even if the tendencies assumed by form critics hold true, the entire metaphor of “layers” of earlier and later material is inherently flawed because it imagines the process to be similar to editing in a literary sense, wherein “each successive edition (layer) is an edited version...of the previous edition (layer)” (Dunn 195). Such a linear model of composition is not a good representation of the oral transmission process in a rhetorical culture, when traditions flowed between oral and literary formats.

In addition, the “earliest” layer of a text does not necessarily correspond to the original teaching of Jesus; Bultmann himself acknowledged this, that the observed tendencies could effectively stratify earlier and later layers in the texts, but could not reach beyond the texts into the pre-writing transmission process: “‘we have no absolute assurance that the exact words of this older layer were really spoken by Jesus,’ since there is the possibility of still earlier development in the tradition ‘which we can no longer trace’” (qtd. in Dunn 76). It is this earlier development—the transmission of Jesus’ words between the time of his death and the composition of the texts—which form criticism fails to uncover.

Bultmann also recognized that even the earliest forms in the texts were still primarily the message of the early church, that is, “the tradition as we have it bears witness first and foremost to the ‘life-setting [*Sitz im Leben*],’ which gave the tradition its present form” (Dunn 76). Therefore, the Jesus traditions were recorded not just to record what Jesus said and did, but because they were valuable to the early Christians. And “since the needs and circumstances of the earliest churches would differ from those of Jesus, the traditions would inevitably have been adapted and shaped” (76-77). Thus, the teachings of Jesus that were recorded in the Gospels

were not comprehensive, but were those most useful to the early Christian communities, and could potentially represent only a small part of what Jesus actually said. Furthermore, what had been written down in the Gospels had probably already been modified to serve the early church during the pre-literary transmission process.

This conclusion provided Bultmann with an important critical tool: “whatever betrays the specific interests of the church or reveals characteristics of later development must be rejected as secondary” (qtd. in Dunn 77). It was essentially one-half of the criterion of dissimilarity.

C. The Criterion of Dissimilarity

The criterion of dissimilarity, as previously stated, requires rejection of all Jesus material that fits the context of second-temple Judaism and/or early Christianity. The idea is that the critic is left with a core of material, a “critically assured minimum,” that must be attributed to Jesus because it could not have come from any other Jewish or Christian thinkers.

The criterion of dissimilarity has come under much criticism for two basic reasons. First, though it may produce a “critically assured minimum,” this material is not necessarily adequate for a reconstruction of the historical Jesus. The criterion “at most...can produce the distinctive Jesus but cannot guarantee the characteristic Jesus” (Catchpole qtd. in Theissen & Winter 297). Traditions develop in small increments; researchers simply cannot assume that there is no continuity from Judaism to Jesus and from Jesus to Christianity.

Second, application of the criterion of dissimilarity without restraint can open the door to the theological judgments of those applying it. Albert Schweitzer warned against liberal scholars who were not purely interested in history, but who “turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma” (4). Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar, advocates of the criterion of dissimilarity, describe their cause as “a clarion call to enlightenment. It is for those

who prefer facts to fancies, history to histrionics, science to superstition, where Jesus and the gospels are concerned” (*Red Letter Mark* xvii). Such an openly declared theological agenda is bound to introduce some amount of bias into research, something against which the criterion of dissimilarity does not protect.

D. Other Criteria of the Third Quest

Some Third Quest scholars, the Jesus Seminar in particular, have recently focused on putting out “red-letter” editions of the Gospels, wherein they use an extensive list of criteria to seek the “authentic” words of Jesus. These criteria include immediate rejection of parts of the text that are not quoted words of Jesus (*Red-Letter Mark* 47), as well as any quoted words that are not single aphorisms or parables (36). The burden of proof rests on the individual sayings; if they cannot pass the evidentiary tests, they do not come from Jesus. Only about 15-18% of the sayings “put on the lips of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark” are deemed authentic (53), an incredibly small percentage, especially considering Mark is the earliest of the canonical Gospels. The remaining sayings—there are between 17 and 20—provide the Jesus Seminar with their reconstruction of the historical Jesus.

This approach is troublesome because of its disproportionate focus on the exact sayings that come from Jesus. First, with so many years of oral transmission between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels, finding Jesus’ exact words is not a realistic objective. Even understanding the oral transmission process will not allow scholars to reconstruct word-for-word what Jesus said. Second, as with the criterion of dissimilarity, studying the sayings alone is inadequate (Sanders 17). The Jesus tradition is about more than just the recorded words of Jesus; a preliminary rejection of anything but quoted sayings is far too broad, and is unlikely to produce an accurate historical reconstruction.

IV. Methodology

Building on the contributions of previous scholars, I hope to create my own reconstruction of the historical Jesus. That said, I agree with Bultmann's conclusion that our primary sources about Jesus' life and teachings were created for use in practicing and spreading the Christian faith. They do offer us good historical information, but they may not give us the entire picture of who Jesus was. The process is analogous to speculating about a creature based on the footprints it has left behind. Perhaps the creature was waving its arms about or eating as it walked, but we can only conclude from the footprints that it was walking. Therefore, the best I hope to achieve is a picture of "Jesus remembered"—borrowing Dunn's term—that is, the impressions and impact made by the "historical" Jesus. We can learn much about Jesus by studying the traditions about him that were imprinted on his earliest followers.

Here I discuss the available sources, as well as various criteria for analyzing the sources, both in the works of previous scholars and in my own method.

A. Sources

The first step in reconstructing the historical Jesus is determining which sources will be used, and how they will be used. Many contemporary scholars begin with the canonical Gospels, though as Patterson points out, "in a source-critical discussion, the term 'apocryphal' means absolutely nothing, and the status of 'canonical' cannot lend privilege in the debate" (*Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* 16). Nevertheless, the majority of scholars begin with Mark and stick to a "firm consensus" on three basic points: Mark was composed earliest of the surviving Gospels, it was written approximately forty years after Jesus died, and it contains "traditions about Jesus which must have circulated in the generation prior to that date" (Dunn 146). According to these scholars, our earliest Gospel dates to around 70 CE. At the other end of the spectrum, Crossan

argues that we have source material about Jesus—including Q and Thomas I (an early layer of *G. Thomas*)—which can be dated between 30 and 60 CE (427-9). Here I agree with the scholars whom Dunn would label “neo-liberal”. The canon was not put together until many generations after Jesus’ death, and it is therefore unreasonable to begin with the assumption that the canonical Gospels offer better or more legitimate information about the historical Jesus.

The extracanonical texts, *Thomas* in particular, can be used effectively in studying the historical Jesus. However, I do not think that scholars on either end of the spectrum have correctly assessed the usefulness of *Thomas*. It is incorrect to assume—as Dunn does—that *Thomas* is “best categorized as a ‘Gnostic’ document” (162). It is also wrong to assume—as Funk and the Jesus Seminar do—that *Thomas* as a whole is a witness to the Jesus tradition which “represents an earlier stage of the tradition than do the canonical gospels” (*Red-Letter Mark* 11). Kloppenborg et al suggest that *Thomas* can be dated by “bracketing out the extremes,” that is, by essentially ignoring sayings that undoubtedly come from the earliest stage of development as well as those that have undoubtedly been added as late as the third or fourth century (89), but this is also not satisfactory.

The *Gospel of Thomas* is a unique source for the study of the historical Jesus in that it is made up entirely of sayings of Jesus without a narrative framework. This is a potentially positive characteristic, for it represents one of the earliest genres of writings about Jesus. *Thomas* is a speech gospel, the type of document that scholars think was used as a source in the composition of Gospels like Matthew and Luke. Therefore, “the beginnings of the Gospel of Thomas...certainly lie in the first century” (Theissen and Mertz 38-9). If these beginnings can be properly sorted from later material, *Thomas* may contain some of our earliest information about the historical Jesus.

Thus far, the most compelling argument for an early (and non-Gnostic) understanding of *Thomas* comes from April DeConick. She introduces a “Rolling Corpus” model for the composition of *Thomas* that takes into account both oral and literary transmission in rhetorical culture. DeConick argues that *Thomas* began as an oral collection of the sayings of Jesus, which were taught to missionaries and written down as memory aids. At some point there was an “initial scribing” of the gospel, which took place at a time of crisis or conflict in the community, most likely the death of the eyewitnesses. The text then entered a period of “oral-literate composition,” wherein the traditions continued to be performed and modified in order to maintain relevance for the changing community (1.33-39). Therefore, DeConick says,

Traditions that were scribed down into texts continued to develop as the texts were remembered, read aloud, recited, expounded, exegeted, translated, reinterpreted, and rescribed for various audiences over long periods of time. They moved freely in and out of oral and written formats. So it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify the “original,” although we might recover an “initial” scribing (2.21).

Thus, *Thomas* contains a core of very early tradition as well as accretive material from oral instruction and other written texts that eventually became part of the written version of the gospel we have today.

But DeConick thinks that the initial scribing, the core of early tradition which she calls Kernel Thomas, can be carefully reconstructed. She first identifies revisions and expansions according to the principle of theological development, paying close attention to indicators like interpretative clauses and rhetorical question-and-answer units. For example, when the disciples ask Jesus questions about specific issues, these probably represent issues within the early church, and Jesus’ responses are therefore secondary. DeConick analyzes the sayings that fit into this category to find characteristic themes and vocabulary, which are then used to eliminate other accretive material. There is a final elimination of sayings that do not fit into the context of the

earliest period of Christianity, and the sayings that remain represent the Kernel, approximately 80 sayings which belong in the time frame of 30-60 CE (3.2).

Crossan also attempts to stratify *Thomas*, by placing into the early layer sayings that have independent attestation, the idea being that there is no literary dependence between *Thomas* and the Synoptics, and therefore parallel sayings in the texts come from a larger body of early, oral tradition. However, one cannot assume that multiply-attested material is necessarily the earliest. As DeConick points out, “it is quite probable that some of the singly-attested sayings are also early but just not preserved in other extant sources” (2.15). Crossan’s *Gospel of Thomas I*, his reconstructed early strata, identifies approximately 57 of DeConick’s 80 Kernel sayings. However, he places 21 non-Kernel sayings into the period 30-60, and puts the remaining sayings, which he calls *Gospel of Thomas II*, into the period 60-80. DeConick, by contrast, argues for 3 accretive periods, ending at 120 CE (3.46).

Because *Thomas* contains only sayings of Jesus, it provides very little biographical information about Jesus, and it can be dangerous to try to base a full historical reconstruction solely on sayings material. The material in *Thomas* does not include a passion story—should we therefore conclude that the crucifixion did not happen, or that it was not important to believers in the Thomasine community? There is also the potential for circular logic when working only with the sayings, as Sanders points out: “conclusions about Jesus are based on passages, especially sayings, whose authenticity and meaning depend on a context which is, in turn, provided by the conclusion” (10). It is therefore necessary to take great care in constructing the criteria with which I will evaluate the sayings material. Next I present an analysis of the criteria already in place; most have both positive and negative features, and are at least partially useful for my own work.

B. Analytic Criteria

1. Older = Better

Generally speaking, the sources composed closest to the time of Jesus are most likely to be historically accurate (Ehrman 87). This is certainly true, for example, when comparing the writings of the Gospel authors to the writings of the church fathers; the Gospels will contain more historical information about Jesus. However, it is extremely difficult to assess the “age” of a document when it contains traditions that circulated in a rhetorical culture, with both oral and written transmission processes occurring simultaneously. The final scribing of such a document could have taken place nearly a century after Jesus’ life, but it may contain an earlier version of one of Jesus’ sayings than a document composed fifty years prior. Thus, this rule is not particularly helpful. When evaluating historicity, it is much better to take sayings and events individually rather than focusing on the age of the whole documents in which they are embedded.

2. Theological Development

The idea behind this criterion is that “accounts of Jesus that are clearly imbued with a highly developed theology are less likely to be historically accurate” (Ehrman 88). For example, if we have a saying where Jesus rejects Jewish kosher food laws, this probably reflects the concerns of Gentile converts in the early church and is not an original saying of Jesus. This criterion is extremely useful in situations like the *Gospel of Thomas*, where we need to sift through a text to find its “initial scribing.” It can help us to rule out material that clearly does not go back to the historical Jesus. Therefore, the criterion of theological development will be used, but because it only excludes non-authentic material, other criteria are necessary to determine the authenticity of the sayings that pass this test.

3. Multiple Attestation

The logic of the criterion of multiple attestation is that a saying or event recorded in multiple independent sources is more likely to be historical (and less likely to be fabricated) than a tradition found in only one source (Ehrman 89). While it is impossible to *prove* the historicity of a saying which is not corroborated in another source, it is also likely that some authentic sayings are preserved in only one source. Therefore, it is perhaps best to treat singly-attested sayings with more suspicion than multiply-attested ones, but they should not be ruled out altogether.

4. Dual Dissimilarity, Dissimilarity, and Embarrassment

This has already been discussed, but it is worth noting that the criterion of dissimilarity can mean two different tests, one of which can be helpful to us. “Dual dissimilarity” refers to the idea that authentic Jesus traditions should be distinct from both Judaism and Christianity. As previously noted, this test is far too broad and does not provide a picture of Jesus who could have come from within Judaism or whose teachings could have inspired the founding of Christianity. On the other hand, “dissimilarity,” as Ehrman and some others use it, means that “traditions...that do not support a clear Christian agenda, or that appear to work against it, are difficult to explain unless they are authentic” (92). This is also sometimes called the criterion of embarrassment; the early Christians have no motivation to fabricate sayings of Jesus which are embarrassing to the church or contrary to early Christian doctrine. Thus, dissimilarity can be used to make a strong case for the authenticity of such sayings. However, we should be careful not to use it to declare other sayings inauthentic. There must be a certain degree of continuity between Jesus and Christianity.

Dunn advocates what he calls a reverse criterion of coherence, but I find it to be another version of dissimilarity:

Any feature which is characteristic within the Jesus tradition and relatively distinctive of the Jesus tradition is most likely to go back to Jesus... The logic is straightforward: if a feature is characteristic within and relatively distinctive of the Jesus tradition (in comparison with other Jewish traditions), then the most obvious explanation of its presence in the Jesus traditions is that it reflects the abiding impression which Jesus made on at least many of his first followers (333).

This description does not seem to be particularly useful, for it does not offer a concrete way to distinguish the features that are characteristic of authentic Jesus tradition. The logic is, as he says, straightforward, but we must first use other criteria to establish a characteristic Jesus tradition and then try to determine what makes it distinctive. Furthermore, Sanders warns that “the use of such words as ‘unique’ and ‘unprecedented’ shows that [New Testament scholars] have shifted their perspective from that of critical history and exegesis to that of faith” (320). He argues that the *result* of Jesus’ life and teaching is what makes him distinctive, but to claim that his life and teachings were themselves unique introduces a theological bias. Therefore it is presumptuous of Dunn to try to find what is distinctive or unique in the Jesus tradition.

5. Coherence

Generally, the criterion of coherence is used in tandem with the dissimilarity principle: “It increases the amount of authentic Jesus material in that additional tradition can be declared authentic when it coheres with that which cannot be derived from Judaism or Christianity” (17). I will use a modified version of this test, with two major changes. My criterion of coherence will be used in conjunction not with dissimilarity, but with my other criteria. I will also use it not only to add to the authentic Jesus material, but to rule out inauthentic traditions. For example, a multiply attested saying can lend authenticity to a similar, independently attested saying.

Conversely, a saying can be ruled out if it coheres with material already deemed inauthentic by some other test. Similarities can include theme, characteristic vocabulary, etc.

6. Historical Plausibility

Theissen and Winter have attempted to come up with a criterion which takes into account the continuity between Judaism, Jesus and Christianity. Their historical plausibility, therefore, is a two-part test. It replaces dual dissimilarity on one end with “the criterion of plausibility in the Jewish context,” and at the other end “the criterion of Christian plausibility of effects” (25).

Sanders makes a similar claim at the beginning of *Jesus and Judaism*: “the evidence shows that ...there is substantial coherence between what Jesus had in mind, how he saw his relationship to his nation and his people’s religion, the reason for his death, and the beginning of the Christian movement” (22). I think that this criterion does not really provide a test for screening sayings material, but rather offers a check on the overall reconstruction of the historical Jesus. Any individual saying need not explain why Jesus was crucified or why the Jesus movement continued after his death. However, a reconstruction of Jesus as a whole must be able to answer these questions. Thus, the criterion of historical plausibility is most useful for making sure our image of Jesus is credible.

7. Orality

Studies in orality by Werner Kelber and Kenneth Bailey have shown that oral transmission tends to preserve the most essential information while readily changing specific details (Dunn 200). Bailey also discovered that form plays an important role—poems and proverbs are transmitted with little or no flexibility, while jokes and casual news are extremely flexible. Parables and stories fall somewhere in the middle: “Here there is flexibility and control. The central threads of the story cannot be changed, but flexibility in detail is allowed” (Bailey; in

Dunn 206-7). Thus, it is likely that certain forms of sayings material are more likely to have been transmitted accurately than others. Recorded proverbs of Jesus are probably closer to what Jesus actually said, word-for-word, than parables.

A criterion of orality, therefore, can help to identify some of the most accurately transmitted sayings. If we begin with short, proverbial sayings and then work through possible interpretations to find one (or more) that are historically plausible, this can provide a framework for understanding the rest of the sayings material in our sources.

C. My Criteria for Analyzing the Sayings

In determining which criteria are to be used, the most important thing is making sure not to be too dependent on any one criterion. Thus far, scholars who have relied too heavily on one criterion—the Jesus Seminar with the criterion of dissimilarity, or Crossan with the criterion of multiple attestation, for example—have failed to produce a satisfactory reconstruction of Jesus. Therefore, I will use a combination of the criteria outlined above, in the following process:

Step 1: Eliminate material that is obviously inauthentic.

Criteria: Theological Development, Coherence

Step 2: Prioritize the material left over; identify a core of short, proverbial sayings.

Criteria: Orality, Multiple Attestation, Dissimilarity/Embarrassment

Step 3: Identify material which is thematically similar to core.

Criteria: Coherence

Step 4: Work through possible interpretations of material to reconstruct Jesus.

Criteria: Historical Plausibility/Continuity.

V. Reconstructing the Historical Jesus

I begin with the *Gospel of Thomas* because its genre indicates that it contains some of our earliest written material about Jesus, and because it does not require sifting through narrative to get at the sayings. DeConick's work separating *Thomas* into Kernel and secondary material

essentially performs the first step toward working back to the historical Jesus—she eliminates material that shows theological and contextual development, using careful literary analysis. When just the Kernel is studied, several categories of sayings can be found, including parables, proverbs, apocalyptic sayings, and special esoteric knowledge from Jesus. The most common of these found in the canonical gospels are parables and proverbs, and according to my criterion of orality, the proverbs were probably transmitted with the least flexibility (and therefore the most accuracy). Other material, the apocalyptic material in particular, is often debated; many scholars think it is authentic, but others argue that it represents later tradition about Jesus, not the historical Jesus himself. I will therefore focus on the proverbs in *Thomas*, giving priority to those with multiple attestation and structural features that would have made them easiest to remember and transmit orally. I also include proverbial sayings that are structurally similar, but are found in the Synoptic and Johannine traditions rather than in *Thomas*.

This is significantly different from the approach taken by most scholars; even form critics like Bultmann thought that the parables were closest to the teachings of the historical Jesus. They argued that proverbs were commonly used in Judaism and therefore could have been constructed by Jesus' followers or even a different Jewish teacher. But proverbs were useful in presenting oral teachings specifically because they were short and memorable. Furthermore, the fact that other Jewish rabbis taught proverbs means that a proverb-speaking Jesus is historically plausible.

Thus, I do not begin with parables like the form critics, nor do I work from "facts" as E.P. Sanders advocates. I begin with Jesus' proverbs, and in particular two sub-groups. The first group contains sayings that have their own, internal poetic structure. The second group consists of sayings, which probably belong collectively to a poetic discourse. Of course, not all of the

proverbs from the Kernel fall into these groups, and I do not simply ignore the others; they will be most useful in reaching a credible interpretation of Jesus' message.

A. Group One: Chiasmus

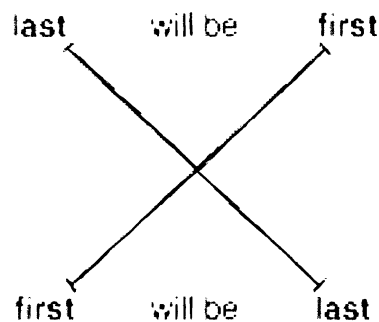
(1³) The last will be first, and the first will be last.

(2) Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

(3) The one wishing to find his life will lose it, but the one losing his life will find it.

(4) Five people will be in a house. There will be three against two, and two against three, father against son and son against father.

Each saying in this group is marked by chiastic structure, that is, a reversal of word order in two parallel phrases. Chiasmus gets its name from the shape of the Greek letter Chi, as seen in the following diagram:



This criss-crossing of words is a common literary device, but it also makes a particular saying more easily remembered. Thus, these sayings—because of their structure—probably represent some of the most accurately transmitted words of Jesus. In addition, all four sayings in this group are multiply attested; Crossan places them in his first stratum, which he dates to 30-60 CE. Sayings (1), (2) and (4) are all found in DeConick's *Kernel Thomas*, while saying (2) is in 1 Peter, saying (3) is in the Gospel of John, and saying (4) may have a parallel in Micah.

³ I give each saying a number, and distinguish variants with lowercase letters. The numbers refer only to the order in which the sayings appear in my paper.

(1) The last will be first, and the first will be last.

(1a) Mt. 20:16: Thus, the last will be first, and the first last⁴.

(1b) Lk. 13:30: Behold, there are some last who will be first, and there are some first who will be last.

(1c) Mt. 19:30: Many who are first will be last, and the last first.

(1d) Mk. 10:31: Many who are first will be last, and the last first.

(1e) *G. Thom.* 4.2: For many who are first will be last, ((and the last will be first))⁵.

There are only minor variations between the different versions of this saying, for example, the order of the parallel clauses. Matthew (1a) and Luke begin with “the last will be first,” while Matthew (1c), Mark, and *Thomas* have “the first will be last”. In addition, all versions except for Matthew (1a) soften the saying by adding “some” or “many”. Matthew (1a) does not have these embellishments and therefore probably represents the most original form of the saying. However, it should be noted that the variants (excluding *Thomas*, which is in Coptic) contain significant verbal agreement. The same Greek words are used for “first” (*prótoi*⁶) and “last” (*eschatoi*), as well as “will be” (*esontai*). Thus, the core of the saying is that the first and the last will be reversed at some future time.

(2) Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, but whoever humbles himself will be exalted

⁴ I have tried to give very literal translations to help the reader understand the Greek structure. Thus, all translations of New Testament passages are my own, based on The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition. Ed. Barbara Aland, et. al. 2001.

⁵ Translations of the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* are from DeConick, The Complete Gospel of Thomas.

⁶ Greek words are transliterated into English, with an η represented by é and ω represented by ó.

(2a) Mt. 23:12: Whoever shall exalt himself will be humbled, but whoever shall humble himself will be exalted.

(2b) Mt. 18:4: So whoever shall humble himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

(2c) Lk. 14:11: Everyone exalting himself will be humbled, but the one humbling himself will be exalted.

(2d) Lk. 18:14b: Everyone exalting himself will be humbled, but the one humbling himself will be exalted.

(2e) 1 Pet. 5:6: So be humbled by the mighty hand of God, in order that he might exalt you at the appointed time.

(2f) *G. Thom.* 46: Whoever from among you will become a child, he will be more exalted than John [the Baptist].

Here, Matthew and Luke each record two different versions of this saying. Luke's two versions have only one word change, so minor that it is not apparent in the English translation.

Matthew's versions, however, are completely different. (2a) retains two parallel clauses, while (2b) is a single statement, as is the tradition recorded in *Thomas* and 1 Peter.

The four versions of the saying that contain the word exalt (this excludes (2b)) use the same word, *hupsoó*, and all five use the same word for "humble," *tapeinoó*. The future passives of both are used in Mt. (2a), Lk. (2c) and Lk. (2d). These are most likely divine passives⁷; in 1 Peter (2e) the person doing the exalting is God, and presumably God is doing the exalting and the humbling in the other versions as well. The core of the saying is that people who choose to be humble will be exalted in the future, and people who wish to be exalted will instead be humbled in the future.

(3) The one wishing to find his life will lose it, but the one losing his life will find it.

⁷ The divine passive refers to the use of a passive verb that is equivalent to an active verb with God as the actor.

(3a) Mt. 10:39: The one finding his life will lose it, and the one losing his life for my sake will find it.

(3b) Mt. 16:25: For the one who wishes to save his life will lose it, but the one who will lose his life for my sake will find it.

(3c) Mk. 8:35: For the one who wishes to save his own life will lose it, but the one who would lose his own life for my sake and the gospel's, he will save it.

(3d) Lk. 9:24: For the one who wishes to save his life will lose it, but the one who would lose his life for my sake, this one will save it.

(3e) Lk. 17:33: Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever would lose (it), he will save it.

(3f) Jn. 12:25: The one who loves his life loses it, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it into eternal life.

This saying is an example of chiasmic structure which does not have any direct parallels in *Thomas*, but is nonetheless attested in Mark, twice each in Matthew and Luke, and the independent tradition of John. It also shows the most variation between versions. We can trace Christological development in the addition of the phrase *heneken emou*, “for my sake” in Mt. (3a), Mt. (3b), Mk. (3c), and Lk. (3d). Mark’s version goes one step farther with the anachronism “gospel,” *tou euaggeliou*. John shows development in a different way, with the promise of eternal life. In this sense, Luke (3e) appears to be the most original version.

There is less verbal agreement among the versions of this saying than the others, but that is not to say there is no verbal agreement at all. The same three-word phrase for “his life,” *tén psuchén autou*, appears in every variant, as does the verb for “lose,” *apollumi*, though it takes many different forms⁸. There is disagreement, however, between the different versions and word choice for “save” or “find”. Mk. (3c) and Lk. (3d) use the verb *sósai*, “save” in both clauses,

⁸ The five Synoptic variants (4a-4e) all have the future indicative, *apolesei*, in the first clause, while John (4f) has the present indicative, *apolluei*. In the second clause, Mt. (4a) uses a future participle, and 4b-4e use an aorist subjunctive with the particle *an*.

while Mt. (3a) has *heurései*, “find,” in both clauses. Mt. (3b) uses both: “the one who wishes to *save* his life will lose it, but the one losing his life...will *find* it.” Lk. (3e) is entirely different, using *peripoiésesthai*, “to preserve,” and *zóigonései*, a different word meaning “save”. The language of salvation probably indicates a later theological development. Therefore, the core saying is more than likely a combination of the traditions preserved in Mt. (3a) and Lk. (3e): the one who wants to find his life will lose it, and the one who loses his life will find it.

(4) Five people will be in a house. There will be three against two, and two against three, father against son and son against father.

(4a) *G. Thom.* 16: Perhaps people think it is peace that I have come to cast upon the world. And they do not know it is division that I have come to cast upon the earth—fire, sword, war! For there will be five people in a house. There will be three people against two, and two against three, father against son, and son against father.

(4b) Lk. 12:51-53: You think that I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I say to you, but rather division. For there will be five now in one house divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

(4c) Mt. 10:34-36: Do not think that I came to bring peace upon the earth; I did not come to bring peace but war. For I came to turn man against his father, and daughter against her mother, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man’s enemies will be the ones of his own household.

(4d) Micah 7:6: Therefore a son dishonors his father, a daughter will rebel against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and all of a man’s enemies are the men of his own house.

It is difficult to determine which variation of this saying is most authentic. On one hand, we have chiastic structure in *Thomas* and Luke; on the other hand, Matthew records a less poetic version that is very similar to Micah from the Hebrew Bible. That Jesus may have quoted from Micah is certainly historically plausible. However, it is also possible that the early church attributed such a saying to Jesus in order to make his teachings line up with the Jewish prophetic tradition. The author of Matthew is writing primarily for a Jewish audience and goes to great

trouble to connect Jesus to ancient prophecies and prophets. This fact indicates to me that Thomas and Luke record the more original version of the saying, while Matthew revises it as an intentional reference to Micah.

However, the beginning of the saying is consistent in all three Gospel versions. Jesus tells his disciples that he has not come to bring peace, but war and destruction. More significantly, all three versions indicate a future event that will disrupt ordinary familial ties.

Thus, all four of the chiastic sayings have a distinctive structure and a distinctive message. What is consistent throughout is the future verb, indicating an event that has yet to take place. Furthermore, each saying represents a curious paradox, a reversal of what is normally expected. The last *will be* first. The humble *will be* exalted. Those who lose their lives *will* find them. Families *will be* divided. Expectations will be overturned.

B. Group Two: The Beatitudes

(5) Blessed are the poor.

(6) Blessed are the sad.

(7) Blessed are the hungry.

(8) Blessed are the persecuted.

(9) Blessed are the powerless.

(13) Woe to you wealthy.

(14) Woe to you who have been satisfied now. Woe to you laughing now.

(15) Woe whenever all men speak nicely about you.

The “Beatitudes” refers to a list of blessings that Jesus makes during Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. The title itself is not biblical, but comes from the Latin word *beatus*, meaning happy or blissful. The promises of the Beatitudes represent a common literary form called a

macarism, and are arranged in a poetic discourse, each one starting with the Greek word *makarioi*, which translates “blessed”. Luke contains a different version of these sayings, and a few of them also appear in *Thomas* or elsewhere in the tradition. I begin with those that have independent parallels.

(5) Blessed are the poor.

(5a) Mt. 5:3: Blessed are the poor in spirit, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

(5b) Lk. 6:20b: Blessed are the poor, because the kingdom of God is yours.

(5c) *G. Thom.* 54: Blessed are the poor, for the kingdom of heaven is yours.

(5d) James 2:5: Did not God select the poor in the world to be rich in faith and inheritors of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him?

What is meant here by “the poor”? Though Matthew says “poor in spirit,” he uses the same word as Luke and James. This word, *ptóchoi*, traditionally means “poor” or even “beggars”. The corresponding Coptic word in *Thomas*, *héke*, has the same connotation. Therefore, it appears that Matthew intentionally adds a spiritual element to the promise, perhaps indicating that a blessing upon the poor would offend his wealthier audience⁹. This might also account for the fact that Matthew says “the kingdom of heaven is *theirs*,” rather than “yours”, introducing a distinction between his readers and the poor, to whom the promise is made. Luke and *Thomas* probably offer the more authentic readings.

It is difficult to determine whether “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” is more original. There are several options; perhaps the earliest sources read “kingdom of God,” and Matthew changed the term for some theological purpose. Perhaps the earliest sources read “kingdom of heaven” and it was Luke’s author who made the change. It is also possible that the

⁹ Warren Carter has made the argument that “Matthew’s audience is assumed to have some familiarity with wealth” (*Matthew and the Margins* 25). He notes that Matthew appears to have been written for a more urban, more educated, and generally wealthier community.

two terms were interchangeable in early tradition, both written and oral. For my purposes, the core of the saying is not significantly different; either way, Jesus promises that the kingdom belongs (present tense) to those who are poor.

(6) Blessed are the sad.

(6a) Mt. 5:4: Blessed are those mourning, because they will be comforted.

(6b) Lk. 6:21: Blessed are those weeping now, because you will laugh.

(6c) *G. Thom.* 58: Blessed is the person who has suffered. He has found life.

(6d) Jn. 16:20: Truly, truly, I say to you that you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice, you will be sorrowful, but your grief will turn to joy.

(6e) Jn. 16:22: And so you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.

This grouping of variants has very little verbal agreement, but considerable thematic agreement.

The versions in *Thomas* and John are probably least original. *Thomas* records a past tense verb while John retains the future, but John's Jesus says "I will see you again," a reference which indicates secondary theological development. The core of this saying is that those who are sad or in mourning now will no longer be so in the future.

(7) Blessed are the hungry.

(7a) Mt. 5:6: Blessed are those hungering and thirsting for righteousness, because they will be satisfied.

(7b) Lk. 6:21: Blessed are those hungering now, because you will be satisfied.

(7c) *G. Thom.* 69.2: Blessed are those who are hungry, for whosoever desires, his belly will be filled.

As in saying (5a), Matthew spiritualizes this promise and creates an element of distance by emphasizing that the subject is "they". He uses a third person plural verb but also includes the redundant pronoun *autoi*, drawing a contrast between his audience and the recipients of the

blessing. Luke, however, uses only the second person plural verb. It is significant that both use the same words for “hungering,” *peinóntes*, and the future passive “will be satisfied,” *chortasthésomai*. By comparison with *Thomas*, it becomes clear that the most original form of the saying promises future satisfaction to those who are currently hungry.

(8) Blessed are the persecuted.

(8a) Mt. 5:10: Blessed are those having been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

(8b) Mt. 5:11-12a: Blessed are you whenever they insult you and persecute and speak all evil against you on account of me. Rejoice and be glad, because your reward is great in heaven.

(8c) Lk. 6:22-23a: Blessed are you whenever men despise you, and whenever they exclude you and insult and reject your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and you shall leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven.

(8d) *G. Thom.* 68.1: Blessed are you when you are hated and persecuted.

It is difficult to determine whether or not this saying is authentic. Mt. (8a) follows the same pattern as the verses that come before it, but it is at this point that both Matthew and Luke switch from poetry to prose. Though this saying begins with *makarioi* like the rest of the Beatitudes, it has a completely different rhythm, as well as significant Christological development. *Thomas* appears to record the most original form, whereas Matthew adds that the promise is made to those persecuted “for the sake of righteousness” and then “on account of me”. Luke goes so far as to use the title “Son of Man”. This saying probably reflects the problems of the early church, dealing with persecution after Jesus’ death.

In addition to these, Matthew and Luke both include sayings not recorded in the other or elsewhere. They can be helpful in understanding and interpreting those sayings they do have in common. The sayings that I think are most authentic are in bold.

(9) Mt. 5:5: **Blessed are the powerless, because they will inherit the earth.**

- (10) Mt. 5:7: Blessed are the merciful, because they will be shown mercy.
- (11) Mt. 5:8: Blessed are the pure in heart, because they will see God.
- (12) Mt. 5:9: Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called sons of God.
- (13) Lk. 6:24: **But woe to you wealthy, because you receive your comfort in full.**
- (14) Lk. 6:25: **Woe to you who have been satisfied now, because you will hunger. Woe to you laughing now, because you will mourn and weep.**
- (15) Lk. 6:26: **Woe whenever all men speak nicely about you.**

As we can see, Matthew is probably writing for an audience that no longer continually struggles with issues like hunger, powerlessness, and poverty. He therefore records the more traditional promises, sometimes adding softening phrases such as “poor in spirit” and “hungering and thirsting for righteousness,” but intersperses them with promises that will make more sense to his community members. The more original sayings are harsh; they offer unexpected blessings to unexpected groups of people. Usually these blessings will culminate at some future time—hence the mourners *will* be comforted, the powerless *will* inherit the earth, and so on. Matthew’s other promises, however, are not unusual or unexpected; the peacemakers, the pure in heart, and the merciful should be rewarded. Believers in Matthew’s community may reflect a different demographic than Jesus’ audience. A wealthy convert cannot be expected to become destitute in order to receive God’s promises, but he or she can choose to act mercifully. Matthew skillfully invites this believer into the kingdom alongside the poor peasant.

Luke, in contrast, gives a list of woes that parallel his earlier blessings. He emphasizes that those who currently live in comfort and wealth will soon find themselves in the reverse situation. Though the woes are only singly attested and Crossan places them in the third stratum of development, I think that they may be original because they cohere with the blessings and do

not offer any new or secondary information. The blessings tell us that the poor and mourning will be rewarded and comforted; the woes say that the comfortable and wealthy will mourn. The criterion of coherence justifies keeping the woes.

From the Beatitudes, we learn that Jesus has made a list of promises, which defy traditional social convention. The outcasts in society—the poor and hungry, the mourning, the persecuted—are those who are truly blessed. And the word *makarioi*, which is translated “blessed,” has the connotation of extreme happiness or bliss. Jesus tells the unfortunate that they are fortunate, that they should in fact be delighted with their position!

It is also noteworthy that nearly all of Jesus’ promises use a future tense. With the exception of sayings (5) and (8a), which promise ownership of the kingdom, all of the others indicate some future reward. Luke’s woes complement this fact, denying the future reward to the people who are already wealthy and comfortable. They can also count on a future event, but rather than reward, it is punishment.

VI. Interpretation

So how are we to understand these curious sayings? It seems there are three possible interpretations. First, Jesus could be speaking in eschatological terms, about the coming end of the world. In this case the kingdom is future and imminent, very close to breaking through. He could also be referring to the end coming at an uncertain time, also in the future but much farther off. Finally, perhaps the “kingdom” does not refer to an eschatological event, but something that has already come, just not in the way the disciples expected it. I think that the most plausible interpretation is the first one, the imminent eschaton. In order to prove the validity of my hypothesis, I will analyze all three interpretations, examining the literary evidence and using tradition criticism. I then intend to examine other sayings in Kernel *Thomas* and the canonical

tradition to make sure that my interpretation is credible within the bigger picture of Jesus' life and message.

There is ample textual evidence supporting the imminent eschaton interpretation of Jesus' proverbs. First, within the sayings themselves there is consistent use of the future verb—thus, the promises Jesus makes have yet to be fulfilled. Assuming the Greek is an accurate representation of an originally Aramaic saying¹⁰, the Greek future verb translates just like an English future verb; if Jesus says “this will happen,” his use of the future can only mean that “this” has not happened yet, but will happen at some point in the future. It cannot mean, “this already happened, but you did not realize it.” Even sayings (5) and (8a), which promise present tense ownership of the kingdom, do not necessarily imply that the kingdom has already come. It is plausible that Jesus promised a share in the kingdom to the poor and persecuted, even though the kingdom was not yet present on earth.

Furthermore, the sayings discuss a future time when ordinary reality and expectations will be overturned, a common feature in Jewish apocalyptic thought. The idea was that “at the end, when the suffering of God's people was at its height, God would finally intervene on their behalf and vindicate his name. For in this perspective God was not only the Creator of this world, he was also its Redeemer” (Ehrman 122). The blessing of the poor and suffering, the exaltation of the humble—these all fit the pattern of eschatological reversal. The Jews also expected the end to be marked by a polarity of good versus evil, and a cosmic battle when good would finally win (121). Thus, the reference to war, destruction, and division among families in saying (4) supports the same eschatological interpretation.

¹⁰ It is unlikely that, during the oral transmission process, the earliest Christians would have tolerated a performance of Jesus' sayings that did not offer a reasonably accurate translation between Aramaic and Greek.

When we move beyond these particular sayings, we find other, explicit references to the coming eschaton. In the *Kernel Thomas* alone, Jesus tells his followers, “This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will pass away” (10), and “The heavens and the earth will roll up in your presence” (111). These sayings appear very near the beginning and end of the *Gospel of Thomas* as a whole; they provide something of an introduction and conclusion to the text, which clearly expounds the theme of eschatology. But Jesus does not just preach the end of the world—he actually says that it will happen during the lifetime of his earliest followers.

The Synoptics record a similar tradition, with several variants (the most original in bold):

(16a) Mk. 9:1: Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.

(16b) Mk. 13:30: Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.

(16c) Mt. 10:23: Truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

(16d) Mt. 16:28: Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

(16e) Mt. 24:34: Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place.

(16f) Lk. 9:27: But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.

Variants (16c) and (16d) introduce the theological title “Son of Man,” which is not present anywhere in the *Thomasine* tradition. “Son of Man” refers to the eschatological judge in Daniel 7, and these sayings associate Jesus with that figure. Variants (16a), (16c), (16d) and (16f) all soften the proclamation by saying “some standing here”—this probably reflects the early church dealing with the deaths of some of the eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry. Therefore, Mark’s (16b) and its direct parallel in (16e) are most original. The “things” which will take place refer back to

a period of tribulation, wherein “the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken” (Mk. 13:24-25), and “nation will rise against nation...and there will be famines and earthquakes” (Mt. 24:7-8). This language is clearly imminent and eschatological; Jesus is predicting the violent end of the world within the generation of his first followers.

However, these eschatological sayings appear in the Gospels alongside others that claim the eschaton is a long way off or has even already happened. For example, in (16c) Jesus commissions his disciples and then tells them they will not be able to reach all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes, that is, before the end of time. But in the same passage, Jesus also says, “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; *and then the end will come*” (Mt. 24:14, italics mine). Elsewhere, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the Pharisees, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed...for behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (17:20-21). The RSV translation reads “in the midst of you,” but the Greek preposition *entos*, the intensified version of *en*, is more accurately represented by “within”. *Thomas* contains a similar saying in its accretive material: “The Kingdom of Heaven is inside of you and outside” (3)¹¹. Clearly, all three ideas about the timing of the kingdom are attested in the texts, but which is primary? What are the Church’s motivations for rewriting the primary tradition?

Suppose that the historical Jesus did not preach the imminent eschaton. If this is the case, then the best explanation for the eschatological sayings is that they represent an attempt by the Church to fit Jesus to messianic expectations. Traditionally, the Jews expected that the Messiah would be either a king from the house of David, a priest, or a prophet like Moses. All three of these positions were initiated by an anointing ceremony—“Messiah” in Hebrew actually means

¹¹ This logion is not part of the Kernel, and DeConick argues that there may be a relationship of dependence between *Thomas* and Luke (Class lecture April 2006).

“anointed one”. The genealogies in Mt. 1 and Lk. 3 trace Jesus’ lineage through David, an attempt to align him with the king expectation. But the crucifixion meant that Jesus did not fulfill the victorious military role of a King Messiah, and he also did not re-establish correct practices in the Temple like the Priest Messiah should.

So the early Church turned to the Prophet Messiah because it was the best fit; indeed, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible were often persecuted or killed, as pointed out in Matthew 5:11-12: “so men persecuted the prophets who were before you”. The Old Testament prophets also preached a message of repentance in preparation for God’s judgment, an eschatological theme. Thus, the non-eschatological sayings in the Gospels (those where Jesus says the kingdom has already come) would be original to the historical Jesus, and the eschatological sayings would be secondary development, associating Jesus with the expected prophet Messiah.

However, in light of the fact that the world did *not* end, it seems extremely unlikely that the early Church would invent an eschatological message and attribute it to Jesus. Similarly, if Jesus preached an eventual eschaton, and the world did not end soon after his death, there would be no motivation for the Church to re-write the traditions and claim that Jesus said the end would come sooner rather than later.

The best explanation for the contradictions in the texts is that Jesus preached the imminent eschaton, and the traditions were reinterpreted in two different ways when the kingdom did not arrive. Some Christians delayed the eschaton, as in Mt. 24:14. Rather than Jesus incorrectly predicting the end, Matthew transfers responsibility to the disciples—the end can come only after the “gospel” has been preached to all nations. The other reinterpretation also blamed the disciples for incorrectly understanding Jesus:

G. Thom. 113: His disciples said to him, “When will the Kingdom come?”
“It will not come by waiting. It will not be said, ‘Look! Here it is!’ or ‘Look!

There it is!’ Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread out over the earth, but people do not see it.”

This change—making the “eschaton” an event that already occurred, and making the kingdom a present reality—can be seen in the canonical Gospels as well as Paul’s letters, which represent some of the earliest Christian writings and were composed even before the Gospels. It was an effective solution because it made the kingdom no longer dependent on the actual end of the world.

In order to conclusively determine that Jesus’ message centered around the imminent kingdom, we return to the other proverbial material in *Thomas* and the other Gospels and check whether they support this interpretation. For example, Jesus tells a young man whose father has recently died, “Leave the dead to bury the dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Lk. 9:60; Mt. 8:22). The man’s father is already dead, but there are others alive who are not yet ready for the end; preparation for the eschaton takes priority over everything else, including social convention. Jesus also orders his followers to sell their possessions and give to the poor (Lk. 12:33), to store up treasures in heaven rather than on earth (Lk. 12:34; Mt. 6:19; *G. Thom.* 76), and not to worry about what they need to eat or wear in the future (Lk. 12:22-31; Mt. 6:25-34; *G. Thom.* 36). The true believer should “seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness” (Lk. 12:31; Mt. 6:33). The Kingdom is what everyone should be concerned with precisely because it is so imminent.

Similarly, *Thomas* includes, the following saying:

(17a) *G. Thom.* 55: The person who does not hate his father and mother cannot become a disciple of mine. And the person who does not hate his brothers and sisters and carry his cross as I do will not be worthy of me.

Clearly, the phrase “carry his cross” is an anachronism referring to the crucifixion and does not go back to the historical Jesus. However, the saying more generally is also attested in the canonical Gospels:

(17b) Lk. 14:25-26: If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, and wife and children, and brothers and sisters, and still even his own life, he is not able to become my disciple.

(17c) Mt. 10:37: The one loving father or mother over me is not worthy of me, and the one loving son or daughter over me is not worthy of me.

In first-century Jewish Palestine, the most important social unit was the family; why then would Jesus tell people that they could only follow him if they denounced—even hated—the members of their own household?

This saying makes the most sense if Jesus is preaching about an alliance that is *more important* than traditional familial ties. We see this in Logion 99 of *Thomas* (and its Synoptic parallels), where the disciples tell Jesus that his brothers and mother are waiting outside for him. He replies, “Those here who do the will of my Father, they are my brothers and my mother. They are the people who will enter the Kingdom of my Father.” Jesus calls his followers to make a radical decision, to transgress the bonds of family so that they are on his side—the correct side—when the eschaton divides the world into light versus dark, good versus evil. Blood relation no is no longer relevant in the face of the end of the world; spiritual alliance is all that matters.

There is another possible interpretation of saying (17), and that is that Jesus calls his followers to leave their families and join a new, better family with God as the father (Patterson 116). Thus, saying (17) can be read as advocating an itinerant community. However, saying (4) from the chiasmus group has essentially the same theme but there is no mention of actually leaving one’s family. Spiritual allegiances will divide the members *within* a household, but the

kingdom is so close that there is no need to exit the household and become part of an itinerant community group.

Not all contemporary scholars agree with my assessment; Stephen Patterson uses almost the exact same sayings I have focused on, and comes up with a completely different reconstruction of Jesus. He claims that the “Empire of God” (his translation of *basileia tou theou*, which I render “kingdom of God”) is already upon the earth, “already breaking in on the present world, challenging old loyalties, and demanding a decision for or against the new reality” (*God of Jesus* 94). This new reality, however, is not a literal eschaton but an ideal, a potential social situation where traditional human values—wealth, power, etc.—are overturned and believers are invited into an intimate, transformative relationship with God. This is very similar to Crossan’s “Historical Jesus”.

But Patterson’s conclusions are based primarily on his understanding of the sources, and on methodology very different from mine. He argues, along with Crossan and the Jesus Seminar, that the earliest sources contain wisdom sayings and are not eschatological: “Throughout the four canonical and one noncanonical gospels covered in [the Jesus Seminar’s] report, one will find no apocalyptic sayings printed in red” (170). Crossan places the eschatological sayings in later strata and then does not have to address them. Of the six variants of saying 16 (the kingdom will come within the current generation), none even appear in Crossan’s scripture index—that is, they are never referenced in his book—and only one (Mark 13:30) is ever mentioned in Patterson’s. The method these scholars use allows them to automatically throw out as inauthentic every saying where Jesus predicts the imminent end of the world!

Regardless of the chronological stratum where the eschatological sayings are placed, they cannot simply be ignored. Their presence in the texts indicates that the eschaton—or lack thereof—was an extremely controversial issue for the early Christians. Either Jesus was non-apocalyptic and the Church invented his eschatological message, or Jesus was apocalyptic and the Church reinterpreted his message when the eschaton did not happen. The latter of these is more plausible. Patterson and Crossan claim that they can understand Jesus by evaluating only the most authentic material, which according to their methodology is non-apocalyptic. I have attempted to identify a core of authentic material and a possible interpretation, while still addressing the sayings that do not fit my thesis. Reconstructions of the historical Jesus will always depend on the method used, but that method should be able to take into account all aspects of the texts, not just those which are most useful.

Thus, my historical Jesus is thoroughly eschatological, urging everyone to prepare for the imminent end of the world. His vision of the kingdom is the literal reign of God on earth, during which time the faithful will be rewarded and the downcast will be uplifted. This reconstruction is based on analysis of the four canonical Gospels and the extracanonical *Gospel of Thomas*. It is significantly different than any other picture arrived at by scholars who have taken *Thomas* seriously as a credible source.

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