

Life and Death in the Gospel of Thomas: Existence and Esotericism in Early Non-Canonical Groups

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The Gospel of Thomas represents some of the earliest attested non-canonical sayings attributed to Jesus, some of which bear a resemblance to canonical gospel sayings and others which are entirely different. Certain thematic emphases in the document, such as secrecy and knowledge, have long been recognized as reflecting division in the beliefs of second-century Christ groups arising from various ideologies often (rightly or wrongly) placed under the banner of Gnosticism. Differences between this gospel and the canonical Gospels help illustrate the shifts that Christian communities underwent in the second century and provide insight into not only how beliefs changed over time but also how syncretism and adaptation took place between belief systems. One area of difference between the Gospel of Thomas and the canonical Gospels is related to concepts of living and dying, which appear frequently in sayings attributed to Jesus. This paper explores the sayings of Jesus related to life and death in the Gospel of Thomas, elucidating how these compare with the canonical sayings, reflect changes and syncretistic adaptations in the beliefs of second-century communities, and how such insights help illuminate early Christian ideas of existence, whether orthodox or heterodox with respect to the earliest tradition.

Keywords: Gospel of Thomas, Death, Life, Existence, Jesus, Second Century

Introduction

The Gospel of Thomas (henceforth GTh) has become the most famous of the manuscripts uncovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945. Both popular interest and scholarly debate have surrounded its 114 sayings, especially since about half the sayings have parallels in the canonical Gospels (henceforth CG); many others are of unknown origin and entirely different, and still others appear to have parallels in non-canonical documents such as the Gospel of the Hebrews.¹ While the version of the document discovered at Nag Hammadi is a complete Coptic manuscript dating to the fourth century, fragments of a second-century Greek version were discovered a generation before at Oxyrhynchus, making GTh the earliest extant non-canonical gospel. While there are scholars who assert a first-century date for GTh, the evidence for this is scant given the

¹ Uwe-Karsten Plisch, *The Gospel of Thomas: Original Text with Commentary*, trans. Gesine Schenke Robinson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2008), 9.

available material, and thus such efforts are largely conjectural.² Along with many interpreters, I presume a second-century date for GTh, though I do not doubt GTh went through revisions.³ My argument in this analysis assumes that the author(s) at least partially relied upon first-century sources like CG, while creatively transforming some of that material and adding material that reflected second-century views held by certain communities.⁴

If we understand GTh as the product of a sectarian group⁵ which syncretized Christian beliefs with some of the many other ideas vying for prominence, the text provides insight into diversity and developments in the earliest Christian communities. It will be in light of this understanding that we will specifically examine the concepts of life and death in GTh, how the Thomasine community's ideas about the nature of existence compare with what is found in CG, and what these differences say about the developments and changes happening in second-century groups. Ideas of existence in GTh are worth examining because of their sheer prominence; the words for life and death occur repeatedly and point toward an overarching *gestalt* of theological ideas of existence which were held by those who used this document. Prior to a direct analysis of these passages in GTh, however, we must first classify what GTh is, what it is not, and where it fits in its second-century milieu.

² For those who argue for a first-century date, see April DeConick, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and its Growth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006), 43-64; Petr Pokorny, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas: From Interpretations to the Interpreted* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2011), 13; Stephen Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins: Essays on the Fifth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 13.

³ For scholars who argue for a second-century date (whether early or mid-second century), see Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), 13; Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 219; Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 112-124; F.F. Bruce, "The Gospel of Thomas," *Faith and Thought* 92, no. 1 (1961): 20-21; Bruce Lincoln, "Thomas-Gospel and Thomas-Community: A New Approach to a Familiar Text," *Novum Testamentum* 19, no. 1 (1977): 65; Jens Schröter, "The Contribution of Non-Canonical Gospels to the Memory of Jesus: The Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter as Test Cases," *New Testament Studies* 64, no. 4 (2018): 447; John Wood, "The New Testament Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas: A New Direction," *New Testament Studies* 51, no. 4 (2005): 579-594.

⁴ For an articulation of the argument that GTh relies upon CG, see Simon Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: Original Language and Influences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 129-144. Gathercole observes that GTh "is at least partially independent of the Synoptics, as it is virtually incredible that the editor of Thomas invented all the material not paralleled with the Synoptics" (130) and "there is not really a single argument for the thoroughgoing independence of Thomas which has any force" (143).

⁵ Some scholars insist against this sort of language, arguing that GTh should not be considered marginal or schismatic, but rather as a legitimate development of mainstream Christianity (per DeConick, "The Gospel of Thomas," *Expository Times* 118, no. 10 [2007], 473). This continues to be a minority view, as there is more evidence for the rejection and dissimilarity of GTh than vice versa (for more see Simon Gathercole, "Named Testimonia to the Gospel of Thomas: An Expanded Inventory and Analysis," *Harvard Theological Review* 105, no. 1 [2011], 53-89).

Classifying the Gospel According to Thomas

Classifying the content of GTh has been controversial and elusive. While it emerged from a Jewish-Christian milieu, it shows evidence of various differing streams of thought, including hermetic wisdom and encratism,⁶ mysticism,⁷ middle Platonism,⁸ Jewish apocalypticism,⁹ and what has long been termed Gnosticism. Although GTh was probably used by some Gnostic groups (such as the Naassenes), most interpreters do not categorize GTh as properly Gnostic.¹⁰ Part of the reason for this is that while GTh undoubtedly came under Gnostic use and influence after the second century, Gnosticism itself was not developed when GTh was written.¹¹ Occasionally one can find Gnostic features, but there appears to be no pattern to the appearance of these features, and this disparateness is part of what makes GTh difficult to categorize.

For example, while GTh repudiates the world, it does not specifically see it as inherently evil (as later Gnostics did), but merely as something “dead” (cf. log. 21; 28), and thus distracting, inferior, and unworthy.¹² The Gnostic repudiation of the material was related to the idea that the world was created by a lesser, inferior deity to the supreme God, but this element is not clearly present in GTh, which retains Jewish-Christian roots.¹³ Elements like the attainment of secret knowledge and the idea of the end as a return to the beginning are common to both Gnosticism and GTh, but these shared

⁶ April DeConick writes that GTh has “an affinity with encratism, a severely ascetic lifestyle characterized by abstinence from sexual activity and marriage, dietary regulations restricting or even prohibiting the intake of meat and wine, and voluntary poverty” (*Seek to See Him: Ascent and Vision Mysticism in the Gospel of Thomas* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017], 3).

⁷ DeConick, *Seek to See Him*, 28-39.

⁸ Seth Clark, “Know Yourself and You Will Be Known: The Gospel of Thomas and Middle Platonism” (PhD Diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2014), 41.

⁹ DeConick, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*, 38.

¹⁰ When I use the term “Gnostic,” I refer to a hybrid religious philosophy indebted first to a Platonic dualism which sharply differentiates the material as inherently evil and the immaterial as good and redeemable, and second to a conglomerate of Greek, Jewish, and Christian concepts basically united by the idea that redemption comes from within oneself and can be attained through the impartation and acceptance of special knowledge. This manifested in a variety of expressions and sects, with many being highly ascetic and rejecting the human nature of Jesus in favor of only his divine nature. For more on the nature and diversity of Gnosticism, see Dylan Burns, “Gnosticism, Gnostics, and Gnosis,” in *The Gnostic World*, eds. Garry Trompf, Gunner Mikkelsen, and Jay Johnston (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 9-25; and Roelof van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 136-205.

¹¹ Helmut Koester argues that Gnostic forms of Christianity only fully developed toward the end of the second century and into the third, where other so-called “Gospels” appear, characterized by long monologues and dialogues about esoteric, quasi-Platonic ideas and little similarity to CG (*Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* [Norcross, GA: Trinity Press International, 1992], 38).

¹² Patterson, 17.

¹³ Bruce, 4.

elements are inconsistent and ununiform.¹⁴ Furthermore, GTh privies certain knowledge, but “the emphasis is not on keeping the sayings secret, but in trying to penetrate the hidden meaning of these sayings.”¹⁵ Even so, it must be recognized that like Gnosticism, “Thomasine Christianity is fundamentally an interiorized religion, one that clearly identifies self-knowledge with salvation.”¹⁶ While both GTh and Gnosticism proper associated special knowledge with the right understanding of existence, the ideas of existence presented in GTh are simply too different from mainstream Gnostic thought to occupy the same label.¹⁷ However, the different strands of thought within it do belong to its second-century environment.

As an example of such strands of thought, GTh logion 80 regards the world as a body, and in the second century “both the Platonists and the Stoics claimed that the world is a body.”¹⁸ GTh represents a step further than this, though, and claims (in log. 56, for example) that the world is a “dead” body, and nothing but a corpse. The one who understands this, says the Thomasine Jesus, is unlike the world, and is worthy to attain what is called “life.” That is, to understand the world both as “body” and as “dead” is insight necessary to make the seeker unlike and separate from the world, being “worthy” while the world is unworthy. Platonic ideas of life and immortality may certainly have been in view in GTh’s development, as from the Platonic perspective, eternal life “is not a state to be achieved at death. It is a state of being that must be cultivated one’s whole life long.”¹⁹ To second-century Platonism, the soul without God is dead, but the one seeking is alive. Having eternal life is not associated with a final resurrection as in the earliest Jewish-Christian thought (cf. 1 Cor 15:40-54; Mk 12:25-27), but it is about seeking and discovering.²⁰ In this view, to die was not an end but a change from one (bodily) frame of existence to another spiritual (immaterial) frame of existence. The sapiential goal, then, was to begin to live in that frame of existence now, not primarily in the future. While there are a few indications within CG of a focus on the present reality and experience of having eternal life before physical death (as in Jn 5:24), the present experience of that existence

¹⁴ Nicholas Perrin and Christopher Skinner, “Recent Trends in Gospel of Thomas Research (1989-2011),” *Currents in Biblical Research* 11, no. 1 (2012): 71-74.

¹⁵ John Horman, *A Common Written Greek Source for Mark and Thomas* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011), 210. I think Horman is right to call GTh “esoteric” as a result (213).

¹⁶ Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas: The Other Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 42.

¹⁷ Jeremiah Mutie, *Death in Second-Century Christian Thought: The Meaning of Death in Earliest Christianity* (London: James Clark, 2015), 103.

¹⁸ Ivan Miroshnikov, *The Gospel of Thomas and Plato: A Study of the Impact of Platonism on the ‘Fifth Gospel,’* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 49. See Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* 9.78, Plato, *Phileb.* 29e. See also Jens Schröter, “Thomas unter den Evangelisten: Zum Ort des Thomasevangeliums in der frühchristlichen Literatur” in *Gospels and Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Experiments in Reception*, eds. Jens Schröter, Tobias Nicklas, and Joseph Verheyden (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 207.

¹⁹ Patterson, 82.

²⁰ Patterson, 83.

is of far greater emphasis in Platonic thought. GTh similarly filters some Christian concepts that are otherwise commonly future-oriented (such as the Kingdom of God) into only a present orientation.²¹ This shift in emphasis is characteristic of the difference between a first-century Jewish-Christian orientation and later second-century conceptions.

In second-century Platonic thought, life (*Zωή*) belonged to the soul (*ψυχή*), which was seen as part of the body, but understood dualistically as belonging to a different, spiritual (or divine) realm.²² In the purview of the Jewish-Christian-Hellenistic fusion held by communities that used GTh,

life belongs definitely to the divine side. But this means that life has lost the sense of strictly human life. It is understood as a physical phenomenon, yet not as the vitality of cosmic being, but as indestructible duration and also as the underlying force which triumphs over all obstacles. *Zωή* is regarded as something which is already present in the divine world.²³

In other words, this Platonic, dualistic view of life that likely influenced GTh sees it as an absolutely otherworldly divine mode which cannot be received in the earthly world in its lesser concept of life (non-spiritual *βίος*-life).²⁴ Unlike *βίος*-life, which is a functional state, *Zωή*-life is contained within a person but hampered by the body (*σῶμα*), so that one “must be taught concerning his true being by revelation in order to liberate himself from the *σῶμα* and to return to *Zωή*.”²⁵ In this view, *Zωή*-life is “true life,” or eternal, spiritual life after death, wherein one is liberated from the constraints of the body which are associated with *βίος*-life.

In transitioning now into a more direct examination of the text of GTh, we recognize that its emergence from this milieu makes it a far more complex text than it appears to be. Even so, we can, at the most basic level, understand that “life” as understood by GTh is a distinct concept or construct; not life as temporal, embodied existence (*βίος*), but the life (*Zωή*) that is transcendent and points to existence beyond the temporal frame and one’s bodily limitations.²⁶

²¹ Perrin, *Thomas*, 36.

²² Rudolph Bultmann, “*Zωή*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, eds. Gerhard Kittel, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 839.

²³ Bultmann, “*Zωή*,” 839.

²⁴ Bultmann, “*Zωή*,” 841.

²⁵ Bultmann, “*Zωή*,” 842. See also *Corp. Herm.*, 1:21, 32.

²⁶ Jaime Clark-Soles, *Death and Afterlife in the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006), 39.

Life and Death in the Text of the Gospel of Thomas

Although there seems to be little in the way of rhetorical or organizational intent in GTh (given the many doubled, contradictory, and decontextualized sayings),²⁷ I would argue that there is an underlying coherence and specificity to the way that ideas of life and death are presented by the author(s).²⁸ What we are presented with in GTh is an esoteric idea of existence, one that has a Jewish-Christian background but has been overlaid with an amalgam of Platonistic, mystical, and encratic concepts, resulting in a syncretistic but essentially consistent picture of life and death. In GTh there are twenty-one sayings (or logia) that directly mention life and death, or just over 18 percent of the total 114 sayings, making it a significant motif.²⁹

In what follows, I propose five divisions of life and death sayings as a way to categorize how GTh presents this theme. In my development of these divisions, I will not discuss every single occurrence but will focus on the fifteen most significant occurrences.³⁰ As I analyze the theology underlying these statements, I am in agreement with Gärtner, who understands GTh to be principally concerned with “the situation of man in the world, the corruptibility of this world and the human body, the particles of heavenly light imprisoned in the material world and their liberation, the Savior’s task here in the world, the way of knowledge leading to salvation, and the way in which the saved should live in this world.”³¹ In light of this, GTh presents Jesus as the true and supreme revealer of this knowledge, and mediator of life.

To “Not Taste Death”—Logia 1, 18, 19, 85, 111

GTh begins with the prologue that speaks of the “hidden words” of Jesus that he proclaims as a way of awakening and calling the reader to a wisdom that “offers a true orientation in life and may lead the awakened people on the true path.”³² It is, in Gathercole’s words, “salvific in theme,” in that “reading Thomas is necessary to avoid tasting death.”³³ Just as life and salvation are major concerns of GTh, death is perhaps

²⁷ DeConick thinks that this may have been intentional, for the purpose of the reader being able to interpret each saying individually (*The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation: With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006], 170).

²⁸ To insist with certainty that there is one author is to say more than is possible given the evidence that we currently possess. We do know that GTh was used among several different communities.

²⁹ Four others indirectly reference death in some way, but these do not engage with the concepts sufficiently or in a relevant enough manner so as to make them worth discussing here (cf. log. 63, 65, 98, 109).

³⁰ Because of space limitations, thematic similarities, and their lesser importance to the overall discussion, I offer no detailed discussion of logia 58, 61, 70, 84, 101, or 114.

³¹ Bertil Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Collins, 1961), 72.

³² Pokorny, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 35.

³³ Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 195.

the clearest evil throughout the sayings. There is a clearly visible dichotomy between the “Living One” and “the place of life” on one side, and on the other side the world as a “corpse,” where the disciples are in danger of being consumed and being thus unable to escape the decay of the temporal mode of existence inhabited by those who are “unworthy” and do not seek nor understand, and thereby do not find true Ζωή-life. The five sayings here, despite their different emphases, are united in their focus on the faithful not experiencing death.

Logion 1: And he said, “Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.”³⁴

The idea presented from this first logion informs the content and purpose of the rest of GTh. The idea of one not “tasting death” is idiomatic and reflects the basic Jewish-Christian orientation of GTh, given that this phrase and basic idea does occur in CG (cf. Mt 16:28; Mk 9:1; Lk 9:27; Jn 8:52).³⁵ However, the attainment of life, and thus the avoidance of death, has lost the same character as we see in earlier Christian literature given its association with seeking and having sufficient knowledge and wisdom so as to understand the esoteric ideas that follow. That is, we see from the first verse the typical reason why GTh is often called Gnostic and why it became popular with certain Gnostic sects; attaining life comes by the mediation of certain information. This is in contrast to various teachings in CG, where attaining life comes by doing the will of God in and through relationship with Jesus Christ (as in Mt 7:21-23); or, more simply, by faith (as in Jn 3:16). For GTh and CG, then, there is a significant difference in emphasis.

Logion 18: The disciples said to Jesus, “Tell us what our end will be.” Jesus said, “Have you discovered, then, the beginning, that you ask now about the end? For where the beginning is, there will the end be. Blessed is he who will take his place in the beginning; he will know the end and will not taste death.”

This saying is rich with theological significance relative to the Thomasine idea of existence, as it outlines both the goal and mode of living. Here the disciples ask about their “end,” which refers to their deaths, and Jesus’ response ironically seems to support the misunderstanding implied in the disciples’ question. Jesus’ teleological response, in the words of Valantasis, “argues that the proper ‘end’ should be understood more accurately as ‘the goal,’ and he argues that the goal of the human endeavor involves a return to the beginning. The beginning, however, exists perpetually: it is discussed in the present.”³⁶ That is to say, what is called “the beginning” exists presently in the text-world,

³⁴ All translations are my own and are rendered from the Coptic text.

³⁵ For more on this language, see Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas*, 44.

³⁶ Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 86.

and when the end comes, the ultimate purpose of existence to that (still future) point is in retrograde, as in a sort of spiritual cycle.

Rather than a redemption or recreation at a future consummation of God's Kingdom, there is the idea of true life as present in the primordial place of origin to which someone must return in order to escape death. This idea is not original to GTh but is evidence for some of the syncretism of such groups, since the saying "presents a mythologized understanding of human origins and destiny common in ancient religion as a future return to a continually existent point of origin."³⁷ Specifically, DeConick observes that this saying reflects hermetic strands of thought, as second-century Hermetics taught that "the goal of each human was to return his or her soul to its heavenly origin," and the return takes place in death.³⁸

The identification of the beginning with the end presents a distinction between Thomasine ideas of existence and earlier Jewish-Christian canonical ideas. Relative to the unfolding of time, the Old Testament would have favored a linear understanding of chronological motion, while later Hellenistic influence would have produced an idea of time as in circular motion, where beginning and end coincide, and the end is already predetermined at the beginning.³⁹ GTh embraces the circular view, with the one who knows Jesus and the right interpretation of his sayings being the one who knows the end from the beginning and sees in the end a return to the beginning. To return thence, in Thomasine thought, is to escape death.

Logion 19: Jesus says, "Blessed is he who came into being before coming into being. If you become my disciples and listen to my words, these stones will minister to you. For there are five trees for you in Paradise which remain undisturbed from summer to winter and their leaves do not fall. Whoever comes to know them will not taste death."

This saying refers to a disciple's awareness of his own preexistence, namely that his life is defined by its beginning more than its end and is defined before its appearance in the material, so "the source of life is in God's creative power, in which the beginning and end meet."⁴⁰ To know these "trees" of paradise is to "take seriously all the sayings of Jesus," which are presented as truth and lead to Ζωή-life.⁴¹ To "know" these is to discover eternity and thereby to be rid of temporality. This notion expresses a Jewish-Hermetic idea "of ascent to Paradise and the transformation of the soul into its primal condition."⁴² This primal condition was, according to Gen 2:17, without the experience of death. We

³⁷ Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 86.

³⁸ DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 103.

³⁹ Plisch, *Gospel of Thomas*, 75.

⁴⁰ Pokorny, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 62.

⁴¹ Pokorny, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 63.

⁴² DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 105.

therefore see a yearning in GTh to return to this state of Edenic perfection more than to attain a post-death resurrection life, as is clearer in CG.

To not “taste death” can refer here to either the saying about paradise or to all the statements in this saying. Given that this logion appears to be a disjointed conglomerate of ideas, it is unclear, but this is quite possibly a conflation of the remnant of a canonical idea in the first part (relative to the part about listening to Jesus and becoming a disciple) and a mystical outworking of the experience of the second-century group(s) in the second part (relative to the more esoteric parts). It is also important that we are presented with what appears to be a path to life that is distinct from others already named, in that being acquainted with the unchanging “trees” of paradise confers the same benefit as previously conferred in GTh by simply the right interpretation of the sayings of Jesus. In this we see that to the groups responsible for or using this document, true life and salvation can be attained “through a number of different enterprises (interpretive, intellectual, and mythological).”⁴³

Logion 85: Jesus said, “Adam came into being from a great power and a great wealth, but he did not become worthy of you. For if he had been worthy, he would not have tasted death.”

Here, we again see the protological focus on GTh and a return to primordial Edenic innocence. Adam’s biological death is not what is in view here, but rather Adam’s spiritual death and expulsion from paradise, whereby he forfeited “the state of primeval innocence.”⁴⁴ To be “worthy” here is to be “worthy of life,” an idea that appears also in log. 114 as related to women being called “unworthy of life.” In the latter case, women are referred to this way with the Genesis narrative again being in view, specifically with regard to the separation or division that took place in Adam when Eve was created. Therefore, in both cases, to be worthy of life is to return to the beginning, to the original prelapsarian life.

Logion 111: Jesus said, “The heavens and the earth will roll up in your presence. And the one who is living from the living one will not see death.” Does not Jesus say, “Whoever finds himself, of him the world is not worthy?”

Here the idea is that one who comes to an awareness of God as the source or cause of his or her life is able to overcome death, attaining life from that knowledge and wisdom. The believer must share in the life of God (“the Living One,” explained below) to escape death. True life comes to the hearers and seekers of Jesus from their engagement with

⁴³ Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 90. Plisch disagrees with this idea of so much diversity in the Thomasine soteriology, arguing that to be acquainted with the trees is simply another way of referring to interpreting Jesus’ sayings (*Gospel of Thomas*, 77).

⁴⁴ Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 517.

and interpretation of his words as they experience his living presence in mystical fashion in the context of their group(s). As those living from Jesus, they will not be affected by the climactic events of the apocalypse (here described as the heavens and earth being “rolled up”) but will be living apart from this and will experience it “in their presence.” The end of all things, then, affects only those who are “dead.”

In all of these sayings there is a common thread, namely that the disciples of Jesus will transcend death, escaping its effects. The idea is not that they will avoid physical death, but that their souls “will instead continue eternally in primordial paradise.”⁴⁵

The “Living Father” and “Living One”—Logia 3, 37, 50; 52 and 59

The single sentence prologue to GTh refers to Jesus as “the Living One,” and similar language occurs throughout for both Jesus and God the Father. The “Living Jesus” in GTh “is the immortal Jesus who brings others the secret of immortality.”⁴⁶ Given its place both in the prologue and throughout the document, the idea of Jesus being the truly “living” wisdom-giver illustrates the importance of the meaning of true existence to the theology of GTh. DeConick has rightly pointed out that “living” in titles is “frequently found in Syrian writings and indicates that Jesus has eternal life at his disposal and gives it to others. ‘Living’ means ‘life-giving’.”⁴⁷ The appellation is also used to stress Jesus’ heavenly origin, for the realm of light where life and truth are found, and as distinct from the material world.⁴⁸ Even so, the prologue uses the past tense of words that Jesus has “spoken,” meaning that this revelation has intercepted the material world and its attendant temporal experience.

Logion 3: Jesus says, “If those who lead you say to you, ‘Look, the kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that you are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and you are poverty.”

Logion 37: His disciples said, “When will you become revealed to us and when will we see you?” Jesus said, “When you undress without being ashamed and take your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then will you see the son of the living one, and you will not fear.”

⁴⁵ Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 197.

⁴⁶ Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins*, 18.

⁴⁷ DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 45. See also Plisch, *Gospel of Thomas*, 32n68; Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 193.

⁴⁸ Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas*, 98.

Logion 50: Jesus said, "If they say to you, 'Where did you come from?', say to them, 'We came from the light, the place where the light came into being on its own accord, established itself and appeared in their image.' If they say to you, 'Is it you?', say, 'We are its children, we are the elect of the living father.' If they ask you, 'What is the sign of your father in you?', say to them, 'It is movement and rest.'"

In early Jewish-Christian understanding, the "Living One" was a designation for God (cf. Matt 16:16), but no single designation prevails in GTh either for Jesus or for God the Father. This saying "contains instruction on how to interpret the expectation of the fulfillment of the eschatological promises" and thus is similar to log. 51 and 113.⁴⁹ All three of these sayings use this sort of designation similarly, as a way of describing God relative to his most important attribute: life.

It must also be recognized that this appellation shows that "the sayings speak not of dead knowledge, nor of ancient knowledge, nor even of eternal knowledge, but a present knowledge. Jesus lives within the loosely confederated group in which these sayings operate; whoever puzzles through these difficult sayings encounters a living voice, a real person, speaking to them."⁵⁰ Since Jesus and the Father both are continually "living," both have the status of "an ever-present mediator of salvific wisdom."⁵¹ The ultimate aim, as we have already shown, is immortality, a life without death, which Jesus has achieved and that the reader must seek. Death in this view is certainly the loss of immortality, but also to be divorced from that which is spiritual and ultimately that which is true.

In log. 3 specifically, the mention of the "Kingdom" echoes back to CG and the frequent mention of the Kingdom of God as an essential component of Jesus' teaching (as in Mk 1:15), but the second half of this logion makes it more mystical and relates the concept to self-knowledge. It is possible that the "Kingdom" here is the same thing as the "place of life" in log. 4, but this is unclear.⁵² While both are spiritual spaces, "Kingdom" in GTh is quite different from "Kingdom" in CG. In CG, the Kingdom of God is polyvalent, but can be synonymous with a present reality of God's presence, influence, and/or actualized will in one sense (cf. Mt 12:28; Lk 10:9), and a future reality of salvation and eternal life in another sense (cf. Mk 10:15; Jn 3:3-5). It is possible that the author of GTh was drawing loosely on Lk 17:21, where Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of God is "within" or "in the midst" of his hearers, but in log. 3 we see the idea recast in light of an interior (or internalized), self-oriented idea of spirituality that understands God's Kingdom as actualized by oneself and within oneself, an idea that is otherwise conspicuously absent from CG.

⁴⁹ Pokorny, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 40.

⁵⁰ Valantasis, *Gospel of Thomas*, 31.

⁵¹ Pokorny, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 36.

⁵² For further discussion, see Samuel Zinner, *The Gospel of Thomas* (Cambridge: Matheson Trust, 2011), 26.

Logion 52: His disciples said to him, "Twenty-four prophets spoke in Israel, and all of them spoke in you." He said to them, "You have overlooked the one living in your presence and have spoken of the dead."

Although in CG (cf. Lk 24:5) we see that the "Living One" can be the resurrected Jesus, in GTh there is no indication that Jesus' resurrection is in view or even is of importance. Here he is "living" because of his spiritual understanding and his belonging to the spiritual realm. Here also we see a difference from other "Living One" sayings in that this one does not specifically refer to God the Father as the "Living One," but to Jesus who is among the disciples in the present. Only the "Living One" can direct the disciples to a correct understanding of where life can be found; the dead cannot provide this in the way that Jesus can.

The mention of the twenty-four prophets may reflect an oral tradition, and Jesus' response, which seems to downplay or otherwise make irrelevant the Jewish prophetic witness to himself (by associating the "prophets" with "the dead" and not those having "life") could reflect a distancing between the Thomasine picture of Jesus and that which is found in CG.⁵³ Rather than affirming what would be an acceptable Christian idea in canonical contexts (that Jesus' life and actions are the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecies), Jesus seems to undercut the idea that past revelation (namely the witness of certain Old Testament passages) is relevant for understanding his person to the Thomasine group(s). That is, log. 52 has the disciples associating the "twenty-four prophets" of Israel with Jesus, but Jesus' response appears to consider even their mention of the prophets to be a way of overlooking the reality of his presence in the midst of the disciples. While the language is not clear enough to be considered an overt repudiation or rejection of the Old Testament prophetic witness, it is a redirection to the readers of GTh who may seek to define Jesus or his message based primarily or most importantly by significant religious figures who preceded him.

Logion 59: Jesus said, "Seek the living one while you are alive, lest you die and seek to see him and you will be unable to see him."

Here Jesus commands his hearers to actively look for, seek, or go after God as the Living One while they still have time. As Kim puts it, "They will not be able to see or search the vision if they search for him after they have died," thus "the opportunity for personal salvation is given to those who are alive."⁵⁴ One's fate, as in CG, is decided during one's earthly life. Only the "Living One" can impart the ability or awareness of how to overcome death, and thus, for GTh, what Jesus says is very much a matter of life and death. In CG,

⁵³ See, for example, Luke 24:27, which indicates that Jesus was thought to have fulfilled the sayings of the prophets.

⁵⁴ David Kim, "Is Thomas Gnostic?" in *The Gnostic World*, 173.

Jesus declares that his time on earth will be limited by his death (as in Mk 2:20), but here “it is instead the spiritual death (the ‘not seeking’) of individual human beings that limits or disrupts communication with God as mediated by Jesus.”⁵⁵ It is from this basis that we read, “take heed of the living one while you are alive.”

The Place of Life and the Rest of the Dead—Logia 4, 51

What is called “the place of life” here is the spiritual realm where God is present. While to live is to be in a state or mode, to attain this “place of life” is not to ascend to paradise but to return to the beginning, to the state of one’s spiritual existence that precedes the physical.

Logion 4: Jesus said, “The man old in days will not hesitate to ask a small child seven days old about the place of life, and he will live. For many who are first will become last, and they will become a single one.”

The saying must be understood in terms of second-century “speculation about the primordial Adam.”⁵⁶ That is, since the Thomasine Christians were concerned with protology and the original intended state of humans, Adam (as the first human) was important. In the view of GTh, the believer is to become as the perfect, prelapsarian “child” by returning to the condition of Adam before the Fall, when death had not yet been introduced and there was unbroken communion with God.⁵⁷ The way of understanding one’s existence that is present here

reverses the common social priorities, so that elders seek the advice of youth about the locus of life. The inversion extends, however, not simply to the discovery of the place, the locus of life, but the relationship confers life on the elder, so that it is the elder who finds and receives life through the young child . . . it is not only that the elder will seek out the youth, or that the last will be first, but that all of these result in some kind of unity.⁵⁸

The final phrase “and become one and the same” goes even further beyond this reversal of norms, however, to what Valantasis calls “a process of collapsing opposites” whereby distinctions (i.e., young and old, male and female) “resolve themselves into a state of non-distinction” and are transformed into a fundamental unity.⁵⁹ We see a similar example of this underlying current of thought in log. 114, where the feminine is rejected for a masculine oneness without which a person cannot be worthy.

⁵⁵ Pokorny, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 36.

⁵⁶ DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 56.

⁵⁷ DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 56.

⁵⁸ Valantasis, *Gospel of Thomas*, 35.

⁵⁹ Valantasis, *Gospel of Thomas*, 35.

Furthermore, to ask such a small child about the place of life is to ask that child about the mode of existence that the child just came from upon being born into the dead world, unlike the old man who is far from it. As Gathercole puts it, “the theological reference of the place of life is the pre-existent paradisaical kingdom, from which the elect have come, and to which they shall return.”⁶⁰ The absurdity of the task of ascertaining wisdom from a newborn emphasizes the importance and urgency of the Thomasine quest for salvific knowledge: “One should stop at nothing, not even at the most preposterous means . . . a person will/should leave no stone unturned to attain the ‘place of life’.”⁶¹

Logion 51: His disciples said to him, “When will the rest of the dead take places, and when will the new world come?” He said to them, “What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it.”

The “rest of the dead” is probably not simply a euphemism for the post-death, nor does it represent a tautological equivalence, as if the rest of the dead is the new world. Given some of the esoteric and hermetic strands already identified within GTh, DeConick is likely right to identify this with the hermetic idea of “journeying soul,” which understands the post-death soul to be reincorporated into God and to thus be at rest, just as God exists at rest.⁶² However, given its temporal context here in a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples, this otherwise second-century idea has been “recontextualized within traditional Jewish eschatological expectations, particularly the advent of the new world.”⁶³

I would contend that “rest of the dead” in log. 51 actually represents a shift from first-century Jewish-Christian thought to more syncretistic and esoteric ideas of existence that began to be accepted in second-century groups. Specifically, we have here a transformation of the orthodox, canonical idea of the “resurrection of the dead,” changed to the “rest of the dead.” If one simply replaces “rest of the dead” with “resurrection of the dead,” what remains is a statement that sounds more orthodox and canonical, since Jewish-Christian thought considered the resurrection of the dead to be indicative of the coming new world.⁶⁴ Such a shift is in line with what we see elsewhere in GTh regarding the post-death state; there is a diminishment of the idea of a future glorified body and an emphasis on the immortality of the soul. If an idea of a glorified body remains, it seems to be focused on the nature of the Edenic, prelapsarian glorified body.

Jesus’ enigmatic response is a return to the esoteric, since the reader is told that this “rest” and even the advent of the new world, are not even in process but have been accomplished—a reality only visible to the one able to spiritually discern and recognize it.

⁶⁰ Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 218.

⁶¹ Plisch, *Gospel of Thomas*, 45.

⁶² DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 182.

⁶³ DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 182.

⁶⁴ As is seen in Mt 22:23-33 or Jn 5:28-29.

The misunderstanding would seem to be first that the Thomasine Jesus does not consider the “rest of the dead” as a future reality, but rather rest belongs already to those who have begun to interpret Jesus’ sayings.⁶⁵ The esotericism of this notion could reflect the increased insulation of ideas of existence within the sorts of groups using GTh, as they shifted from the idea of the eschatological consummation of the Kingdom of God to the present actualization and recreation of the protological Edenic state through the practices of the community. Log. 50 may provide insight into this, as there Jesus states that the “sign of the Father” being “in” the disciples is, in part, the “rest” that they experience in the present. The spiritual “rest” that is mentioned as part of Jesus’ teaching in CG (most clearly in Mt 11:28) is distinct from this Thomasine idea of rest, since in Mt 11:28 Jesus promises to give rest for the souls of those who come to him in faith, but this is a rest more akin to peace or wholeness which frees the resting person from religious striving.⁶⁶

The World as a Corpse—Logion 56

As discussed above, the idea of the world as a body present in GTh is evidence of its syncretistic character and is likely due to the author(s) borrowing from and expanding on Hellenistic thought. Seeing the world as a dead body associates death with matter, and the Thomasine Jesus therefore has little interest or involvement in the material. The deadness of the world is contrasted with the life that is spiritual, otherworldly, and can be reached through illumination in the sayings of GTh, whereas those without this knowledge are of the dead world and themselves are dead.

Logion 56: Jesus said, “Whoever has come to know the world has found (only) a corpse, and whoever has found a corpse, of him the world is not worthy.”

In seeing the world this way, the Thomasine Jesus suggests that the disciple “who is able to recognize this character of the world is superior to it in its present form, and the world is in this sense not worthy of him, since he and all those with him belong to the divine side.”⁶⁷ As Gärtner elaborates, “All things which are in the power of death and corruption are useless, and only smother true life. None but the man who values the world as he would value a corpse, and recognizes that it stifles the heavenly life, is worthy to

⁶⁵ Valantasis, *Gospel of Thomas*, 129.

⁶⁶ For a more detailed elaboration on the meaning of “rest” here, see the discussion in Craig Evans, *Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 247-248. An astute reader may notice similarities with other early Christian texts, namely Heb 4. In Heb 4, the author calls his readers to enter God’s “rest” as a way of referring to the state of peace and right relationship with God that is attained by faith and lost in disobedience (seen most clearly in 4:1-3). This can be contrasted with what is found here in GTh, in that it is spiritualized and made to refer to the post-death state and clothed in the language of later hermetic thought, which emphasizes the soul’s oneness with the divine.

⁶⁷ Pokorny, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 101.

arise from the world.”⁶⁸ Although physically alive (or possessing βίος), those who belong to the world do not have true spiritual life (or do not possess Ζωή). This Ζωή only comes from those who are enlightened and, in being enlightened, come to a knowledge of themselves (also made clear in log. 70). These never truly die but have entered a different mode of existence. In so doing, they surpass the world and show that the decaying world cannot house them.

To Consume or to Be Consumed—Logia 11, 60

A supporting idea in GTh, as seen in these sayings, is consumption. To be consumed is to die, and to consume is to transform what is already dead. One who is truly alive cannot and will not be consumed, but for those who do not yet possess life, there remains a danger of being consumed by the world.

Logion 11: Jesus said, “This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will pass away. The dead are not alive, and the living will not die. In the days when you consumed what is dead, you made it alive. When you are in the light, what will you do? On the day when you were one, you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?”

The mention of the living and the dead can be understood as referring to “people in the world who live without contact with the true spiritual life. They are spiritually dead and will not be alive in the kingdom. They are as dead, that is, without any future prospect, just as this world,” which, as log. 56 and 80 show, is a lifeless corpse.⁶⁹ Those who are dead are those who forget or do not know their true protological origin in God, and the living are those who possess knowledge of God and their origin in him, and will find Ζωή regardless of the nature of their βίος. Also in this saying we see a reflection on the Genesis narrative in the idea of originally being “one.”⁷⁰ That is, we again see a desire to return to the prelapsarian state, and even the state originally described in the early creation of Adam, prior to his “division” into Adam and Eve.

*Logion 60: He saw a Samaritan carrying a lamb on his way to Judea. He said to his disciples, “That man is walking around the lamb.”
They said to him, “So that he may kill it and eat it.”
He said to them, “While it is alive, he will not eat it, but only when he has killed it and it has become a corpse.”
They said to him, “He cannot do otherwise.”
He said to them, “You too, look for a place for yourself in rest, lest you become a corpse and be eaten.”*

⁶⁸ Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas*, 159.

⁶⁹ Pokorny, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 52.

⁷⁰ A point made by DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 79.

This saying offers a key to understanding log. 56, where the world is presented and described as a dead body. Since the lamb will not be eaten, “the conclusion is that those who are alive . . . (who) are linked with the source of life . . . will not die. Otherwise they would become a corpse like the slaughtered lamb.”⁷¹ In this we see a powerful Thomasine word picture, as the alternative to rest and life is consumption (also visible less explicitly in other places, like log. 9, 76). To be consumed is to be destroyed, and to be destroyed is to experience death.⁷² We also see an interesting instance of the idea of “rest” which is recurrent in GTh. To be at rest or “within rest” is contrasted with consumption and death, and thus is associated with the experience of having life. It is, as Plisch puts it, synonymous with “the transcendent place of fullness” or the “place of life” referenced earlier.⁷³

Conclusion

We see in these various groups of sayings that death “is not an end to existence, but a change, from mortal, bodily existence, to immortal, spiritual existence.”⁷⁴ This examination has shown that in GTh, the author(s) understands and presents “life” as a metaphor for salvation, as absolute non-death, contrasted with death which must come to all people in a physical sense but is already a present spiritual state in the unenlightened.⁷⁵ To “live” in GTh is to no longer experience the dead material world; to live is to participate in and experience a mode of existence that God experiences, and to consume that which is of that realm, attained through the right understanding and interpretations of the sayings of Jesus, the “Living One.”

For a Thomasine Christian to “live,” this required the adaptation of a new way of seeing made possible through mystical pursuit, whereby one can adopt a superior mode of existence, penetrating through what is seen to unlock true knowledge. The group(s) developing or using this document would have focused on protology over eschatology, seeing life as related to an attainment of or return to the prelapsarian state through interpreting Jesus’ sayings and thus becoming worthy of such a state.⁷⁶ We have in this understanding something significantly different from the ideas of existence found in CG or even in later Gnostic texts. Rather, it is an example of the syncretism and ideological eclecticism that characterized a particularly influential and diverse strand of early Christian expression.

⁷¹ Pokorny, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas*, 104.

⁷² Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 441.

⁷³ Plisch, *Gospel of Thomas*, 148.

⁷⁴ Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins*, 88.

⁷⁵ Plisch, *Gospel of Thomas*, 32.

⁷⁶ Zinner, *Gospel of Thomas*, 17.

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