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The Fifth Gospel – Better Than The Rest?

By

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The Gospel of Thomas

Robert Funk, The Jesus Seminar and Westar Institute would have us believe that the Gospel of Thomas is the 5th Gospel account of the life of Jesus – and may be more accurate than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Are they right?

In our previous series about the Jesus Seminar, we saw that the seminar “scholars and specialists” determined the **vast majority** of the sayings and deeds of Jesus from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are NOT authentic –

“Eighty-two percent of the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospels were not actually spoken by him, according to the Jesus Seminar.” Robert Funk, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?*, HarperOne, 1996, p 5

They also differentiate between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.

“The church appears to smother the historical Jesus by superimposing this heavenly figure on him in the creed: Jesus is displaced by the Christ, as the so-called Apostles’ Creed makes evident ... the figure in this creed is a mythical or heavenly figure, whose connection with the sage from Nazareth is limited to his suffering and death under Pontius Pilate.” Robert Funk, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?*, HarperOne, 1996, p 7

The five Gospels in *The Five Gospels* are listed in this order –

1. Mark
2. Matthew
3. Luke
4. John
5. Thomas

We know what the Jesus Seminar determined about the traditional Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), but what about Thomas? Why did Funk and other leaders of the ‘seminar’ believe it was important to designate the Gospel of Thomas as a “fifth” Gospel account of the life of Jesus?

“A significant new independent source of data for the study of the historical Jesus is the Gospel of Thomas. The Coptic translation of this document, found in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, has enabled scholars to identify three Greek fragments, discovered earlier, as pieces of three different copies of the same gospel. Thomas contains one hundred and fourteen sayings and parables ascribed to Jesus; it has no narrative framework: no account of Jesus’ trial, death, and resurrection; no birth or childhood stories; and no narrated account of his public ministry in Galilee and Judea.

The Gospel of Thomas has proved to be a gold mine of comparative material and new information. Thomas has forty-seven parallels to Mark, forty parallels to Q, seventeen to Matthew, four to Luke, and five to John.

About sixty-five sayings or parts of sayings are unique to Thomas.” Robert Funk, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?*, HarperOne, 1996, p 15

Who is the “Thomas” of the Gospel of Thomas?

“The Gospel of Thomas is attributed to Didymus Judas Thomas, who was revered in the Syrian church as an apostle (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13; cf. John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2) and as the twin brother of Jesus (as claimed so by the Acts of Thomas, a third-century C.E. work). The attribution to Thomas may indicate where this gospel was written, but it tells us nothing about the author.” Robert Funk, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?*, HarperOne, 1996, p 20

Gospel Q?

Before we move on with the Gospel of Thomas, let’s look at Funk’s comment about Thomas having forty parallels to Q. What is **Q**?

Funk and his team wrote that **Q** was a source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. If true, it would seem important to look at **Q** to see what’s in it. There’s just one problem – there’s no evidence **Q** ever existed. None of the early Church fathers ever mentioned anything like a “Q” gospel. Nothing has been found in writing that would support the claim that **Q** was written or oral tradition. Nothing.

It appears as if someone just made up the whole idea of a **Q** gospel source, but let's dig a little deeper to see why many people believe **Q** was a source for Matthew and Luke and be sure we're not missing something.

Why the name **Q**? It comes from the German word *quelle*, which means "source."

Why make up something like **Q**?

Many people believe that Matthew, Mark and Luke, known as the Synoptic Gospels, have so many similarities they must have copied other writings. That has led to some hypotheses concerning this alleged copying –

The **Two-Source Hypothesis** has been around since the 19th century. The theory is that the Gospel of Mark was a primary source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and that a collection of oral traditions about Christ, known as **Q**, were also a source for Matthew and Luke.

The **Three-Source Hypothesis** has also been around since the 19th century. The theory is that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source and that Luke also used Matthew as a source. **Q** may have also been involved as a source.

The **Four-Source Hypothesis** is a theory from the early 20th century that expanded on the Two-Source Hypothesis. The Four-Source theory is that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke had at least four sources: Gospel of Mark, **Q**, M-Source, and L-Source.

M-Source? L-Source? What's that?

M-Source is a hypothetical source for the Gospel of Matthew. It's supposed to be special material not from Mark or **Q**.

L-source is a hypothetical source for the Gospel of Luke. It's supposed to be special material not from Mark or **Q**.

Any evidence for **Q**, M-Source or L-Source? None. The idea for all of them is that they were oral traditions that Matthew and Luke used as sources for their Gospel accounts. The problem is that **Q**, M-Source and L-Source have no evidence to support their existence.

So, then, why would anyone make up theories with no evidence at all? Glad you asked.

The "scholars" who put forth these theories believed that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were written *after* 70 AD, so Matthew, Mark and Luke, the people prior to 70 AD, could not have written them.

The theory continues.

Members of the Jesus Seminar and others theorize that since the *real* authors of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were not first-hand witnesses, they would have to use other sources for what Jesus had said and did decades earlier.

They believe that since Mark is the shortest Gospel account and had the least amount of material that was original, Mark must have been the first Gospel and the authors of Matthew and Luke used Mark as a primary source. They also believe that since Matthew and Luke have similar content that is not in Mark, there must have been another source. That source, they believe, was **Q**.

What many members of the Jesus Seminar and Westar Institute do not believe is that the supernatural Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Gospels. That's a clue to why they came up with other sources for the Gospel accounts. If you don't believe in God, then God couldn't possibly be involved. Right? So they think.

The Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas **does** exist. It is part of the Nag Hammadi library that contains ten codices discovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945. The Gospel of Thomas is part of Codex II –

“These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded.” *Gospel of Thomas*, Translated by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer

What follows are 114 supposed sayings of Jesus. Here is the first “saying”

–

“And he said, ‘Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.’”

Here is the last “saying” of the 114 –

“Simon Peter said to them, ‘Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life.’ Jesus said, ‘Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.’”

Does that not sound like something the New Testament Jesus would say?

Here are some other examples from the Gospel of Thomas –

“Jesus said, ‘Lucky is the lion that the human will eat, so that the lion becomes human. And foul is the human that the lion will eat, and the lion still will become human.’ #7

“Jesus said, ‘Look, the sower went out, took a handful (of seeds), and scattered (them). Some fell on the road, and the birds came and gathered them. Others fell on rock, and they didn’t take root in the soil and didn’t produce heads of grain. Others fell on thorns, and they choked the seeds and worms ate them. And others fell on good soil, and it produced a good crop: it yielded sixty per measure and one hundred twenty per measure.’ #9

“The disciples said to Jesus, ‘We know that you are going to leave us. Who will be our leader?’ Jesus said to them, ‘No matter where you are you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.’ #12

“Jesus said, ‘Congratulations to the one who came into being before coming into being. If you become my disciples and pay attention to my sayings, these stones will serve you. For there are five trees in Paradise for you; they do not change, summer or winter, and their leaves do not fall. Whoever knows them will not taste death.’ #19

“Jesus saw some babies nursing. He said to his disciples, ‘These nursing babies are like those who enter the (Father’s) kingdom.’ They said to him, ‘Then shall we enter the (Father’s) kingdom as babies?’ Jesus said to them, ‘When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom].’ #22

“Jesus said, ‘Where there are three deities, they are divine. Where there are two or one, I am with that one.’ #30

“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. During the days

when you ate what is dead, you made it come 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?" #11

Many of the "sayings" in the Gospel of Thomas don't sound like the sayings of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but some have similarities –

"The disciples said to Jesus, 'Tell us what Heaven's kingdom is like.' He said to them, 'It's like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, but when it falls on prepared soil, it produces a large plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky.'" #20

"Jesus said, 'You see the sliver in your friend's eye, but you don't see the timber in your own eye. When you take the timber out of your own eye, then you will see well enough to remove the sliver from your friend's eye.'" #26

"Jesus said, 'No prophet is welcome on his home turf; doctors don't cure those who know them.'" #31

"Jesus said, 'If a blind person leads a blind person, both of them will fall into a hole.'" #34

"Jesus said, 'Seek and you will find. In the past, however, I did not tell you the things about which you asked me then. Now I am willing to tell them, but you are not seeking them.'" #92

The theology that comes out of reading the Gospel of Thomas does not align with the theology of other writings that are part of the New Testament Canon. In fact, Thomas aligns better with gnostic writings of the 2nd century. Many gnostic themes are found in Thomas –

- Jesus is a wise teacher, divine, but not necessarily human
- Jesus is not the promised messiah of the Old Testament
- Many gods exist
- The Kingdom of God is “internal”
- The physical body is evil, spiritual is good
- People are saved by learning secret knowledge and looking inward

So, the question before us - should we accept the Gospel of Thomas into the Canon of the New Testament?

I don't think so.

Comparing Thomas

Thomas is unlike the Four Gospels. It says nothing about Jesus' birth, death or resurrection. Instead, in line with other Gnostic writings, it contains "secret" sayings of Christ. We looked in our last study at some of the 114 sayings in Thomas and saw that most were "unlike" the sayings of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

"These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded." *Gospel of Thomas*, Translated by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer

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There really is no comparison between Thomas and the Four Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are historical and evidential narratives. Thomas is secretive sayings belonging to the gnostics.

Dating Thomas

Funk and his group of “scholars” believe that the Four Gospels were written after 70 AD, too late for the real Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to have written the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. They are wrong about dating the Four Gospels, but we’ll lay that aside for the purpose of determining whether Thomas is worthy to be added to the Gospel count.

So, when was Thomas written?

The writings that are part of the Nag Hammadi Library are thought to be from the 4th century AD, but some scholars believe the Gospel of Thomas was written during the 2nd or 3rd centuries.

Did the early Church Fathers know about it? Good question.

The earliest of the Church Fathers who were writing at the end of the 1st century and early and middle 2nd century do **not** refer to a *Gospel of Thomas* and do **not** quote from it **at all**. Those Church leaders quoted heavily from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but not from Thomas. That would indicate, most likely, that Thomas was written at a later time.

Since Thomas was one of the original Twelve disciples of Christ, he would have certainly been dead by the end of the 1st century. If he had written a “gospel” account, it would seem that the early Church Fathers would have known about it and either quoted from it as one of the “Five Gospels” or warned Christians to beware of its theology as being dangerous. Since we have no record of any early Church Father quoting from Thomas or warning about it, it would seem fair to say it didn’t exist during the first century and early second century of the Church.

There is this quote in 2 Clement that sounds a bit like Thomas, so let’s look at it for the possibility of Clement supporting the Gospel of Thomas, at least by quoting from it.

Here’s a quote from 2 Clement –

“For the Lord Himself, being asked by a certain person when his kingdom would come, said, When the two shall be one, and the outside as the inside, and the male with the female, neither male or female.” 2 Clement 12:2

Here’s a quote from Thomas –

“They said to him, ‘Then shall we enter the kingdom as babies?’ Jesus said to them, ‘When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make

eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom].”

Could it be that 2 Clement quoted from Thomas? If so, would that make Thomas the Fifth Gospel?

Another question would be whether the author of Thomas quoted 2 Clement? Which one was written first?

Ancient Church historian Eusebius wrote this about 2 Clement –

“But it must be observed also that there is said to be a second epistle of Clement. But we do not know that this is recognized like the former, for we do not find that the ancients have made any use of it.” Eusebius, *Church History*, Book III, Chapter 38, point 4

Clement of Rome wrote a letter, known as 1 Clement, that is acknowledged by Church Fathers to have been written by him at the end of the 1st century AD. However, none of the Church Fathers mentioned or quoted from a second letter by Clement. Eusebius (in the 4th century) is the first to mention the doubtful claim of a second letter. It seems more likely that the author of the Gospel of Thomas quoted from 2 Clement, which appears to have been a homily preached prior to the 4th century.

So, when was the Gospel of Thomas written and what did early Christian apologists (prior to Eusebius in the 4th century) say about it?

“In 1897 and 1903 three ancient papyrus fragments from Greek copies of the Gospel of Thomas were discovered during archeological excavations on the site of an ancient town at Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. These excavations eventually recovered over 5000 papyrus fragments of ancient Greek texts, including both sections from the Gospel of Thomas and fragments from the Gospel of Mary. (In ancient times, Oxyrhynchus was the chief town of its district and the seat of a local governor. In the Roman period it was a flourishing place with about twenty temples, colonnaded streets, and an open air theatre. When Christianity came, it was famous for the numbers of its monks and nuns. Most of the papyrus documents found had been discarded in the ancient town’s garbage sites.)

The three fragments of Thomas found at Oxyrhynchus apparently date to between 130 – 250 CE, and each probably represents a separate unique copy of the Gospel. The textual source of the sayings contained in the fragments was initially unclear; based on the logion found in pOxy 654 – now identified as containing the prologue and first saying – it was speculated they might represent remains of the lost Gospel of Thomas. The Nag Hammadi discovery in 1945 which unearthed a complete and well-preserved version of Thomas in Coptic made it possible to definitely identify the Oxyrhynchus texts as fragments from a lost Greek edition of the Gospel.” *The Gospel of Thomas Collection*

The three fragments of the Gospel of Thomas contain 20 of the 114 sayings. That find would seem to confirm what Eusebius wrote about the document. It was written before the 4th century.

The fact that the early Church Fathers and apologists writing at the end of the 1st century and during the 2nd century don't mention a *Gospel of Thomas* would seem to indicate that they were unfamiliar with it or deemed it unnecessary to address.

Christian apologists in the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries mentioned Thomas negatively and not as a "real" gospel account of the sayings of Jesus.

Hippolytus of Rome mentioned the Gospel of Thomas in the early part of the 3rd century. He wrote in Book V of *Refutation of All Heresies* that the Naassenes gnostics used it as part of their ancient mystery cult.

Here are some other thoughts on the legitimacy of Thomas as a "fifth gospel" –

"Should the gospel of Thomas be in the Canon?"

The early church councils followed something similar to the following principles to determine whether a New Testament book was truly inspired by the Holy Spirit: 1) Was the author an apostle or have a close connection with an apostle? 2) Was the book being accepted by the Body of Christ at large? 3) Did the book contain consistency of doctrine

and orthodox teaching? 4) Did the book bear evidence of high moral and spiritual values that would reflect a work of the Holy Spirit?

The gospel of Thomas fails all of these tests. The gospel of Thomas was not written by Jesus' disciple Thomas. The early Christian leaders universally recognized the gospel of Thomas as a forgery. The gospel of Thomas was rejected by the vast majority of early Christians. The gospel of Thomas contains many teachings that are in contradiction to the biblical Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. The gospel of Thomas does not bear the marks of a work of inspiration of the Holy Spirit." *What is the gospel of Thomas?*

"Craig Evans argues that the Gospel of Thomas was not written prior to A.D. 175 or 180. He believes that Thomas shows knowledge of the New Testament writings and that it contains Gospel material that is seen as late. Evans adds that the structure of Thomas shows a striking similarity to Tatian's Diatessaron which was a harmonization of the four New Testament Gospels and was written after A.D. 170. This late date would exclude Thomas from consideration for the canon because it would be too late to have a direct connection to one of the apostles." *The Gospel of Thomas – A Christian Evaluation*

"While the text claims to have been authored by the Apostle Thomas, scholars reject this attribution. The Gospel of Thomas appears far too late in history to have been written by Thomas or any other reliable eyewitness of the life of Jesus. The oldest manuscript fragments of the text (found at Oxyrhynchus, Egypt) are dated from 130 to 250AD, and

the vast majority of scholars agree that the Gospel of Thomas was written no earlier than the mid-2nd Century. These scholars cite several passages in the text appearing to harmonize verses from the canonical Gospels. This would require the canonical Gospels to be in place before the writing of this text. In addition, scholars believe the Gospel of Thomas borrows from the language of Luke rather than the language of Mark. If this is the case, then this text must have followed Luke, a gospel which is known to have borrowed from Mark (and was, therefore, later than Mark). Some scholars even believe the Gospel of Thomas is dependent on Tatian's "Diatessaron" (an effort to combine and harmonize the four canonical Gospels, written after 172AD), based on the use of Syriac colloquialisms. Bart Ehrman argues the Gospel of Thomas is a 2nd Century Gnostic text based on the lack of any reference to the coming Kingdom of God and return of Jesus. The earliest leaders of the Church also recognized the Gospel of Thomas was a late, inauthentic, heretical work. Hippolytus identified it as a fake and a heresy in 'Refutation of All Heresies' (222-235AD), Origen referred to it in a similar way in a homily (written around 233AD), Eusebius resoundingly rejected it as an absurd, impious and heretical 'fiction' in the third book of his 'Church History' (written prior to 326AD), Cyril advised his followers to avoid the text as heretical in his 'Catechesis' (347-348AD), and Pope Gelasius included the Gospel of Thomas in his list of heretical books in the 5th century."

Conclusion

I think we're within good historical scholarship to say that Thomas is NOT the *fifth gospel*. It was not written by an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, it was probably a 3rd century gnostic writing pretending to be secret words of Jesus. Christians should reject the false claims of Thomas and all such gnostic writings.

Not surprisingly, Robert Funk, The Jesus Seminar and Westar Institute are wrong, again.

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