



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Almighty God, you have conquered death through your dearly beloved Son Jesus Christ and opened to us the gate of everlasting life, grant us by your grace to set our mind on things above, so that by your continual help our whole life may be transformed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit in everlasting glory. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, Easter Day

Class #4:

- **Whose Orthodoxy?: The Challenges of Docetism, Encratism and Gnosticism**
- **Early Christian Non-Canonical Gospels and the Development of the New Testament Canon**
 - **The Gospel of Thomas as an Example of a Non-Canonical Gospel**
 - **The Rule of Faith as a Pre-Canonical Criterion for Accepting Traditions About Jesus**
 - **The Rule of Faith and the Formation of the New Testament Canon**

Docetism: Rejecting Jesus' Bodily Suffering

δοκέω (*dokeo*)= "to seem", so "docetic Christology"=the view that Jesus only *seemed* to suffer, but in reality did not actually suffer.

- This was often joined with the view that the Jesus only *seemed* to have a human body, but in reality only took on the *appearance* of having such a body.
- A view combated already in the New Testament (see 1 Jn. 4:1-2) and at the beginning of the second century by Ignatius (Stevenson, NE, pp. 14-15) and later attributed to Marcion and the principal Gnostic teachers of the second century (Valentinus, Saturninus, Cerdon and Julius Cassianus).
- Later (third and fourth centuries) applied to teachers and groups that argued for the ascetic discipline of the body on the basis of esoteric knowledge about the origin and composition of this present world (Bardaisan, the Manichaeans, and perhaps also the Archontics mentioned by Epiphanius).
- Some of the early non-canonical gospels held to a docetic Christology, e.g. the Gospel of Peter mentioned in Stevenson, NE pp. 126-127, which asserted, "And

they brought two malefactors and crucified the Lord in the midst between them. But he held his peace, as if he felt no pain").

- It is probably to combat docetism that the Apostles' Creed includes the phrase "*suffered* under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried."

Questions:

(1) What would be the appeal of such a view? Why would the absence/appearance of a human body be seen as appealing or helpful? In what way might this assumption shape one's other assumptions about salvation, life in this world, and the relation of saved persons to God/Jesus?

(2) What would be the downside of such a view? Why not believe it? What would be lost if Jesus did not have a physical body like our own and why would this be relevant? Why would it make any difference to our understanding of salvation, life in this world, the relation of saved persons to God/Jesus, etc.?

Encratism: Contenance and Extreme Asceticism (Tatian)

ἐγκράτεια (*enkrateia*)="temperance, continence," i.e. the character of being self-controlled so that one does not pursue sensual desires or base pleasures, but rather

- lives a chaste life in accordance with the faith one confesses and
- exercises moderation and restraint with respect to food and drink (fasting as a means to restrain disordered and immoderate desires).

The assumption here is that if the body becomes disordered through excessive consumption (or excessive focus upon consumption), the body is less able to follow the direction of the mind and the spirit and this will lead to increasing disorder in one's inner life.

The early Christians regarded *enkrateia* as

- necessary to advance in prayer, humility, Christian love and other virtues and spiritual activities (Gal. 5:22-23; 1 Thess. 5:6,8; Titus 2:12; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 Peter 1:6) and also
- a prerequisite for those who would exercise spiritual leadership within a Christian community (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8).

Questions:

(1) Is there a similar concept within contemporary popular Christianity in North America (e.g. church sermons, the books one finds at the local Christian bookstore or the messages one hears from specialized parachurch ministries that broadcast on Christian radio or send you direct mailings)?

(a) If so, what concept is used today to convey this concept (or cluster of concepts)? In what ways do we reframe these issues and why?

(b) If not, why not? Where are the points of difference and why do they exist?

(2) Does your church commend and make regular use of the practices that would support this kind of life? What about other church or parachurch ministries with which you have been involved? In what ways? Why or why not?

(3) What do the churches to which we belong assume that spiritual maturity would like? What framework of spiritual practices (if any) do they assume would move one toward this ideal?

(4) What do you think real spiritual maturity would look like? In your view, what framework of spiritual practices would support advance toward a life of greater faithfulness?

This concept was taken to unhealthy extremes by certain people in the second half of the second century, who repudiated marriage and consumption of meat and wine because they viewed matter as evil, impugning the goodness of the Creator and the material creation.

Tatian is said by Irenaeus (Stevenson, NE, pp. 100-101) to have given rise to this movement in some way(s). Exactly how is difficult to determine.

- Tatian apparently believed
 - There was a material spirit within all created things (including human beings, who were a composite of flesh and spirit [=mortal soul]).
 - This material spirit was inferior to the spiritual or divine [immortal] spirit (=image and likeness of God, since God is spirit), which human beings had originally received from God.
 - This material spirit separated from the soul when one desired and chose to pursue material things (although the soul kept a spark of the divine spirit, though it could no longer see spiritual matters and therefore fell into polytheism and idolatry).
 - Souls obedient to wisdom are able once again to attract the divine spirit.
- On devoting oneself to the divine spirit instead of material things and therefore needing to abstain from sexual intercourse, see Tatian fr. 5 (Whittaker) at the top of p. 81 on the handout. Tatian apparently denied the salvation of Adam but how this was related to the preceding is unclear.
- On abstention from wine out of faithfulness to God, see fr. 9 (Whittaker) on the top of p. 83 of the handout (the testimony of Jerome in fr. 11 is probably misleading and irrelevant).
- It is possible but not at all certain that Tatian (like Marcion) distinguished the Creator (Demiurge) who fashioned the world from a higher power (see fragments 6-8 [Whittaker] in the middle of pp. 81 of the handout) but this is difficult to reconcile with other aspects of his views (e.g., the divine spirit being breathed into man at creation).

Esotericism and Gnostic Traditions

Questions:

(1) Do you see any features common to every one of the selections read for this week under the heading of "gnosticism"?

- If so, which ones? If not, why not?
- In what areas does significant diversity exist?
- Is "gnosticism" really useful as a descriptive or analytic term?
 - Did the various figures included under this rubric actually use this term to describe themselves or the systems of thought they promoted?

(2) Why is the idea of hidden knowledge revealed only to a choice few attractive?

(3) Do the readings give us any explicit information about the social background of these teachers/groups?

- How did the teachers spread their doctrines?
- What kind of persons were interested in their teachings?
- Where did they meet?
- What texts or rituals did they use?

γνωστικός (*gnostikos*) is an adjective related to γνώσις (*gnosis*="knowledge").

- Applied to the spiritual life, it can mean "wise" or "enlightened" in spiritual matters and can refer especially to a person who is
 - perfect (in the sense that they have attained to the fullness of the Christian life) or
 - is able to grasp the spiritual interpretation of Scripture and communicate this to others.
- Irenaeus uses this term incidentally and ironically of the followers of Valentinus (Valentinians) and of the Carpocratians and Ophites (two groups of lesser influence and importance).
- In the eighteenth century, it began to be used by modern scholars as a catchall phrase to describe second-century dualist heresies of all types (i.e. groups that taught that the present universe may be understood in terms of two opposing and irreducible principles, i.e. good and evil).
- The usefulness of the term "gnosticism" has increasingly been questioned in recent years and rightly so, since these groups are quite diverse in character.
 - Not all are necessarily dualist and not all necessarily have elaborate cosmologies (explanations of how the world came into existence or came to be what it is).
 - Not all have extensive lists of mediating figures or connections with popular forms of Middle Platonism or later Jewish angelology or apocalyptic or make use of numerical and/or astrological correspondences.
- It is also debatable whether there is anything that can reasonably be called "gnostic" or "proto-gnostic" in the New Testament or in the earliest non-canonical gospels (including the Gospel of Thomas).
- If the term "gnostic" were to be retained, the most one could say is that many of these individuals/groups to whom the term is conventionally applied believed that to be liberated or redeemed one needed special knowledge of the world's origin.

composition or government which was not generally known, but this definition may still be too broad to be truly useful.

The Gospel of Thomas

- (1) What were your initial impressions of this document?
- (2) Does it have any clear internal principle of ordering?
- (3) Does it have any clear and unified editorial principle that is evident in the way material known from the canonical gospel tradition has been adapted and given a new slant or emphasis?
- (4) What picture of Jesus, the Kingdom or the redeemed life emerges when one reads through this document?

The Transmission and Adaptation of the Text

- The fragments of the Gospel of Thomas show that it went through very significant changes during the course of its transmission
- It may be impossible to reconstruct the original form of this document with certainty

History of the Development of the Text of the Gospel of Thomas, as Reconstructed from the Earliest Testimonies

A gospel attributed to Thomas is mentioned by Hippolytus (writing about 230) and Origen (writing about 233).

(a) Hippolytus gives the following Greek quotation from this work:

"He who seeks will find me in children of seven years upward, for there hidden in the fourteenth aeon I am revealed."

This is similar to (but not identical with) part of a logion (=saying) that appears in a mid-fourth century Coptic manuscript found at Nag Hammadi that bears the title "The Gospel according to Thomas":

"Jesus said, 'The person old in **days will not hesitate to ask a little child seven days old about the place of life**, and that person will live. For many of the first will be last and will become a single one' (logion 4)

(b) Hippolytus also later attributes to the Naasenes (a second century group) another saying that is interesting, but is not explicitly attributed to the Gospel of Thomas:

"So they say, 'If you ate dead things and made them living, what will you do if you eat living things?'"

This is similar to (but not identical with) part of logion 11 in the Coptic text from Nag Hammadi:

"The dead are not alive and the living will not die.

During the days when you ate what is dead, you made it alive. When you are in the light, what will you do?"

Questions:

(1) What does a comparison of these texts tell you about the relation of the sayings/Gospel mentioned by Hippolytus to the text found over a century later at Nag Hammadi?

(2) Why is the previous question important?

Some of the sayings found in the Nag Hammadi Gospel of Thomas are also found in three Greek papyri found in a rubbish heap at Oxyrhynchus (modern Bahnasa) in Egypt, i.e. Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1, 654 and 655. These papyri all contain sayings of Jesus, including ones that parallel the later Nag Hammadi Gospel of Thomas sayings 1-7,24,26-33,36-39 and 77.

Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 654.1-3 has an incipit (beginning of the text) that reads

- "These are the [hidden] **sayings** [that] **the living Jesus spoke** [and Judas, who is] also (called) **Thomas**, [recorded]."

This is similar to the incipit of the Nag Hammadi Gospel of Thomas, which reads:

- "These are the hidden **sayings** that **the living Jesus spoke** and Judas **Thomas** the Twin recorded"

The question is whether we are justified in assuming that there was even a Gospel of Thomas prior to 230 A.D. and whether it looked anything like the fourth-century Coptic text from Nag Hammadi.

As an alternative hypothesis, one could argue that

- (1) there were sayings that were collected and went through a process of editing and transformation in the second half of the second century,
- (2) were placed under the name of Thomas by 230 A.D. and then
- (3) underwent further editing and transformation prior to the mid-fourth century (as evidenced by the Coptic text from Nag Hammadi). The question then is whether the earliest form of the material we now identify as "the Gospel of Thomas" is even recoverable.

The Principles Used to Organize the Sayings

- The transmission of sayings collections in various forms was familiar in the ancient world, i.e. sayings-collections of Jesus like Q comparable to the *gnomai*

- (“judgments”) and *chreiai* (“useful sayings) of the Cynics and other ancient philosophers and rhetoricians in the Greco-Roman world.
- The sayings collected in the Gospel of Thomas may be organized according to the principles used to organize Greek sayings collections.

Various principles appear to be used in ordering of the 114 sayings included in the Gospel of Thomas:

- catchword connections (e.g. "brother" and "eye" appear in 25-26)
- similar themes (the authority of James the Just and the preeminent authority of Thomas appear in 12-13)
- similarities in respect to form or type (8-9, 63-65 and 96-98 are parables)
- dependence upon a written or oral source similar to the Synoptic Gospels (32-33, 43-45, 65-66, and 92-94 present an arrangement of sayings similar to that found in the Synoptic Gospels)

It is not impossible that the sayings collections later placed under the name "Gospel of Thomas" contain some authentic sayings of Jesus that are not otherwise attested (e.g., saying 82; cf. already Acts 20:35 and 1 Thess. 4:15-17 parallel to 1 Cor. 15:52 on unwritten sayings [*agrapha*] attributed to Jesus and compare the material interpolated into Jn. 7:53-8:11 in mss. of the sixth century and later). Others may represent pedagogical expansions of material known from the Synoptic Gospels to bring certain things into focus for the reader (compare Gospel of Peter 10 in Bernhard, *Other Early Christian Gospels*, 73).

The question, however, is how these sayings have been edited and adapted prior to their appearance in their complete form in the mid-fourth century.

- The sayings exist in different forms in the Church fathers, the Oxyrhynchus papyri and the Nag Hammadi Coptic Gospel of Thomas and
- the evolution and adaptation of these sayings is not easy to understand, given the limits of the extant evidence.

The Rule of Faith (*Regula fidei*)

- Rule of faith=brief summary of faith (often taught to the person who was to be baptized and then repeated back by them at baptism) which emphasized the essential features of the faith.
- This could be referred back to as a criterion for rejecting teachers/teachings that supported docetism (see Ignatius *Trallians* 9) or claimed to transmit hidden sayings/teachings of Jesus that did not agree with the faith of the Church (see Origen *On first principles*, preface 2-10).

Irenaeus' Account of Marcus the Magician: How to Run a Gnostic Small Group!

(1) Where did Marcus stay? Where did he hold his meetings and in the context of what social event?

(2) Who appear to be his primary or target audience?

(3) What does he purport to offer them?

- (4) In reflecting upon the answers to (1)-(3) above, how do you see Marcus' mode of operation as being comparable to earlier Christian practices of gathering, celebrating and worshipping?
- (5) How is redemption understood and ritually symbolized?
- (6) How is Marcus' system supposed to work? What principles and correspondence are used? From what source would you guess that these are derived?
- (7) From a pastoral perspective, what problems are raised by Marcus' mode of ministry?

Stevenson's (NE, pp. 68-91) Collection of Excerpts on Gnostic Belief and Biblical Interpretation

- (1) What role does knowledge play in redemption and the definition of one's identity in these texts?
- (2) How does Ptolemy interpret the Old Testament (pp. 86-88)?
- (3) How do the Ophites (pp. 89-90), like Marcus' followers, try to bind the hostile intermediate powers (the Archons or the Judge) that might try to prevent one's ascent to the heavenly realms?