INTRODUCTION

1 Theme: the composition of *Thomas*

In some ways, the *Gospel of Thomas* needs, as the old cliché goes, no introduction. Its place in the origins and development of the Jesus-movement is one of the most hotly debated topics in early Christian studies at present. It has already been the subject of hundreds of books and articles, but the present volume does nevertheless hope to make a fresh contribution for the reasons set out below. It may well be asked why we should have another study of *Thomas* at this particular moment, especially a study which is in part concerned with the old *canard* of *Thomas*'s relationship with the Synoptic Gospels. For many scholars, as we shall see, this matter is settled. In reality, however, the two principal (and intersecting) subjects of this book are very much still bones of contention.

The title of the present book can obviously encompass a range of different topics: "composition" is on its own not a terribly illuminating term. The English word is ambiguous in being able to refer either to the *process* by which a work is composed or the factors involved therein (the "composing"), or that of which a work consists (what it is composed of). So it is necessary to specify that the present book is focused in two areas, first *Thomas*'s original language, and second the early Christian influences upon *Thomas*.

1.1 Original language

The first matter, then, is that of the original language of *Thomas*, covered in Part I. The only surviving complete manuscript of the *Gospel of Thomas* is in Coptic, but no scholars consider *Thomas* to be an original Coptic composition. It may be a surprise to those outside of the small Thomasine guild that the work's original language could be such an emotive issue, but opposing positions have – since the very beginnings

of *Thomas* scholarship – been vigorously argued on various different sides. One reason for this is that conclusions on this matter can impinge upon the questions of the date and provenance of *Thomas*, as well as of its relationship to the canonical Gospels. This is because, as we shall see in more detail later, a *Western Aramaic* original for *Thomas*, or parts thereof, often means that it occupies a position in the study of Christian origins at least as important as that of the Synoptic Gospels, and perhaps an even more important one.[1] A *Syriac Thomas*, on the other hand, often means *Thomas* is consigned to the long grass of the late second century – where it is often three stages removed from Jesus, via not only the Gospels but also Tatian's *Diatessaron* as well.[2] Part I of the present book argues that both of these extreme views are dependent on a number of (often similar) misjudgements about Aramaisms whether in general or in particular instances. An argument will be made here instead for a *Greek* original. This first part of the present book is, as far as I know, the first time that a sustained critique of the Aramaic/Syriac hypothesis has been mounted in combination with positive evidence being given for a Greek original.

1.2 Influences from other early Christian literature

This has several implications (spelled out in Chapter 5) for the subject of Parts II and III, which focus on works which – it will be argued – have exerted an influence upon *Thomas*: Matthew and Luke, as well as Paul, Hebrews and the early Christian "Two Ways" tradition. In brief, two of the implications of Part I can be mentioned at this stage. (1) The putative early Aramaic *Thomas* credited by some scholars would be unlikely to be influenced by the Synoptics, but with a Greek *Thomas* the question of the relationship between it and the Greek Gospels (and epistles) arises more naturally. (2) If divergent Greek translations of sayings from Aramaic can be identified in the Synoptics on the one hand and *Thomas* on the other, then this would speak in favour of *Thomas* being independent of the Synoptics: Chapters 2–3 show, however, that such divergent translations are difficult to find.

[1] A.D. DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation: With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel* (LNTS 287; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), for example, argues for a very early (mid-first-century CE) Aramaic core of *Thomas*.

[2] See e.g. N. Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian: The Relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and the Diatessaron* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002).

Part II of the book aims to cut through another dichotomy which has plagued *Thomas* scholarship, namely that of scribal versus oral approaches to *Thomas*. To take an extreme example of the former, Quispel (or, "early Quispel", at least) took the Gospel in its entirety to be a combination of two literary sources (the *Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians*) and nothing else. On the other hand, it is rather more fashionable now to talk of *Thomas*'s independence from earlier literary productions and to focus on *Thomas* as essentially an oral composition.

The present book aims to avoid an overly "scribal" approach to *Thomas*'s relationship to its sources, while also raising problems with views of *Thomas*'s independence. This latter approach is fraught with difficulties. The most significant of these are discussed in Part II (in Chapter 5 in particular), where subsequently (in Chapter 6) a positive method is set out through which reliable results on "*Thomas* and the Synoptics" question might be obtained. On this matter of *Thomas*'s relationship to the Synoptics, the present book has two aims. First, the intention is to make a case which has the best chance of persuading scholars of where *Thomas* has incorporated Matthew's and Luke's redaction of Mark: this is regarded as the most reliable method for identifying influence, because we are dealing with three more or less known literary works. Second, a subsidiary aim is to establish how great a proportion of *Thomas*'s material might be influenced by the Synoptics, that is, whether the influence is trifling or significant. After this focus on the Synoptic Gospels, some additional briefer studies in Part III will touch upon possible lines of influence upon *Thomas* from the other works mentioned above. It should be noted here that Parts II and III of this book do not of course provide any sort of systematic attempt to identify all the sources of *Thomas*, as if that were possible.

2 Some incongruities in current *Thomas* scholarship and an alternative approach

As noted above, a *cadit quaestio* should not yet be pronounced on the matter of *Thomas*'s independence from the Synoptics. Similarly, the problem of *Thomas*'s original language is far from solved. Part of the impulse for the present book stems from a need to see these problems in the light of a number of tectonic shifts which have taken place in recent years not only (or even primarily) in *Thomas* research but also in scholarship on early Judaism, New Testament/early Christian studies more widely and Classics. Rather than providing a tedious

history of research into *Thomas* here, we will sketch some of the most important of these tectonic shifts, and the problems they raise for the assumptions held in some sections of *Thomas* scholarship.

2.1 The revival of Semitic theories of *Thomas*'s composition in light of recent scholarship on Semitisms

As we will see illustrated in Part I of this study, on the problem of *Thomas*'s original language, there is now a resurgence of interest in arguing for Semitic backgrounds both to *Thomas* as a whole and to individual sayings. This was already prominent in the late 1950s and into the 1960s, but since then the only scholar who consistently continued to push this agenda in any sustained manner was Gilles Quispel. (David Scholer's bibliographies list 41 articles and books by Quispel on *Thomas*, almost all of which touch in some way upon *Thomas*'s Semitic background and relationship to the *Gospel of the Hebrews*.) An emphasis on a Semitic substratum (though without any particular attachment to the *Gospel of the Hebrews*) has come to the fore again in recent times, but in two quite distinct ways. On one side, DeConick has recently begun to champion an early (Western) Aramaic core of *Thomas* (originating in Jerusalem before 50 CE). At the other end of the spectrum, arguments for *Thomas*'s Aramaic original have been advanced by Perrin's contention that *Thomas* was composed in Syriac and drew upon Tatian's *Diatessaron*. Since the original language of *Thomas* has once more become a crucial factor in identifying the place of *Thomas* in early Christianity, these two theses will be discussed in some detail in Part I.

It is notable, however, that at the same time as segments of scholarship have grown more confident in finding Semitic substrata to *Thomas*, scholarship in cognate fields has become more suspicious of parallel enterprises. One of the difficulties underlying both DeConick's and Perrin's constructions is that they treat the discovery of Semitisms and Semitic *Vorlagen* as though it were an easy task. Nearly thirty years ago now, Wilcox emphasised the fact that one must have a sufficient body of Aramaic or Syriac literature from the period to provide a grammar and a lexicon upon which to draw.[3] In her discussion of the Coptic translations of the LXX, Perttilä has discussed a number of the difficulties involved in identifying a Greek *Vorlage* through the retroversion of a Coptic text.[4]

[3] M. Wilcox, 'Semitisms in the New Testament', *ANRW* 2.25.2 (1984), 978–1029.

[4] E. Perttilä, 'How to Read the Greek Text behind the Sahidic Coptic', in A. Voitila and J. Jokiranta, eds. *Scripture in Transition: Essays on Septuagint, Hebrew Bible, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honour of Raija Sollamo* (Leiden/New York/Cologne: Brill, 2008), 367–77.

Furthermore, a recent article by Davila on Old Testament Pseudepigrapha highlights further difficulties with identifying Semitic *Vorlagen*.[5] One must identify problems in the Greek (or in our case Coptic) – something which you need to be quite good at the language to do; one must know that the surviving text has been translated literally; one must be sure that the Semitisms are not Egyptianisms or Septuagintalisms, and so on. None of these factors is sufficiently discussed by DeConick or Perrin. This particular shift in *Thomas* scholarship is in my view a misguided one, and one which needs to be re-evaluated in the light of work such as that of Davila. As has been noted already, this whole area will be the subject of discussion in Chapters 1–4 in Part I.

2.2 Continued attachment to form-critical "laws" in light of the exposure of their subjective nature and even falsification

A different kind of tectonic shift is the accumulation of suspicions which have been raised about form criticism. To be sure, form criticism is no mere twitching corpse, but it is clear that it cannot hold its head as high as it once could, now that so many of its old certainties can no longer be trusted. Bultmann had talked of recognising the 'Gesetzmäßigkeit' of the development of material and of 'the laws governing popular narrative and tradition'.[6] Jeremias in the 1950s and 1960s developed his 'laws of transformation', thus using Bultmann's weapons against him.[7] In connection with the *Gospel of Thomas*, Quispel could thus easily write in 1966 of 'a law of text-criticism, form-criticism and source criticism that short forms tend to become longer'.[8] Although few would state such things so categorically now, it is clear that many still operate whether tacitly or expressly with similar assumptions. In 2008, Plisch commented that elements of *Thomas*'s parable of the mustard seed (*GTh* 20) are 'simpler and more original' over against their Synoptic counterparts.[9] In his 2009 commentary, Pokorný similarly accepts the premise that *Thomas*'s parable of the sower is simpler than that of the Synoptics, and is therefore

[5] J.R. Davila, '(How) Can We Tell if a Greek Apocryphon or Pseudepigraphon Has Been Translated from Hebrew or Aramaic?', *JSP* 15 (2005), 3–61.

[6] R.K. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931), 7. The latter phrase is the title of Chapter 4 in R. Bultmann and K. Kundsin, *Form Criticism: Two Essays on New Testament Research* (New York: Harper, 1962).

[7] J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed, (London: SCM Press, 1963), 114.

[8] G. Quispel, 'Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of the Hebrews', *NTS* 12 (1966), 371–82 (378).

[9] U.-K. Plisch, *The Gospel of Thomas: Original Text with Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 79.

independent.[10] The influence in particular of John Dominic Crossan and Helmut Koester has been marked here.

Two contributions in the late 1960s, however, should have led to much greater caution in this area. First, in 1968, Michael Goulder's neglected article on the parables showed that there was no "graph" along which one could plot linear developments in the literary evolution of parables: for example, while Matthew's parables are more allegorical than Mark's, Luke's are less so.[11] In the following year, E.P. Sanders showed beyond reasonable doubt that in so much as there are 'tendencies in the Synoptic tradition', they are highly variable, and rules such as those expressed by Quispel sometimes apply, but sometimes do not.[12] Sanders' importance for the present study is that his conclusions show that a simplistic application of the simple/orderly/elegant → complex/disorderly/convoluted evolution is unsustainable when comparing, for example, a parable in Matthew and *Thomas*. This applies not only to those who use this criterion to show the primitivity of *Thomas*'s sayings (as the "laws" are most often used) but also to those who seek to show *Thomas*'s dependence. *Thomas* scholarship has been rather slow in catching up with these crucial developments most strikingly seen in the work of Goulder and Sanders, a point to which we return at greater length in Chapter 5.

2.3 Confident assessments of oral factors in *Thomas* in light of scepticism elsewhere about their predictability and distinctiveness

On the other hand, it seems rather anomalous that precisely at the moment in which confidence in form criticism has been on the wane, there has been a rise in confidence in *Thomas* scholarship in what characterises oral transmission and oral performance. It is all too common to find scholars remarking upon turns of phrase in *Thomas* as 'the result of oral transmission rather than literary development',[13] or as 'understandable

[10] P. Pokorný, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas: From Interpretations to the Interpreted* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 49, on the grounds of its lacking allegorical interpretation.

[11] M. Goulder, 'Characteristics of the Parables in the Several Gospels', *JTS* 19 (1968), 51–69.

[12] E.P. Sanders, in *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (SNTSMS 9; Cambridge University Press, 1969), may have been premature in his application of these literary observations to oral tradition as well, but to this we will return later.

[13] DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 129.

within an oral climate',[14] or as 'normal developments of an independent tradition in an oral environment'.[15] In his discussion of the parables, Koester operates with a sharp bifurcation of oral and literary modes of transmission: 'parables are told, sometimes with suggestive alterations; or else parables are copied and allegorized. … In the first instance, the conscious use of written sources and their redaction is highly unlikely; in the latter case, written materials are probably always utilized and deliberately edited.'[16] Two particular difficulties with such assertions have emerged, however, in the light of wider tendencies in scholarship. These will be discussed further in Chapter 9, though they can be noted here.

First, the rise in "oral factors" is anomalous not because orality and performance are elements irrelevant to the study of *Thomas* but because their effects are probably impossible to measure. We can at least *measure* literary and scribal tendencies, even if there are no consistent results. But it is in the nature of the case impossible to identify these distinctive tendencies of orality of which some scholars are so confident. As we shall see in Chapter 9, orality is itself culturally specific: not only is it impossible to distil anthropologically universal features of oral transmission, but such features have even been shown to vary according to how a particular culture treats a particular kind of material. To relate this again to our previous point about form-critical principles: if we can no longer rely on the old certainties about the 'laws of transformation' in literary settings for which we have tangible evidence, *a fortiori* how can we have any degree of confidence in what constitute "oral factors"?

Second, and just as problematically, it is very difficult to identify not only what is characteristic of oral transmission but also what is distinctive about it. That is, even if we could pinpoint tendencies in oral tradition, would these necessarily be different from the features of literary adaptation or scribal copying? Whittaker's essay on literary adaptation in Greek literature (especially the Platonic tradition) has drawn attention to the ways in which later authors, even with full access to their literary sources, can be seen to add, subtract, substitute, re-order and engage in all manner of other sorts of revision with respect to the material on which

[14] A.J. Dewey, 'Keep Speaking until You Find …: Thomas and the School of Oral Mimesis', in R. Cameron and M.P. Miller, eds. *Redescribing Christian Origins* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 109–32 (111).

[15] G.J. Riley, 'The Gospel of Thomas in Recent Scholarship', *Currents in Research* 2 (1994), 227–52 (235).

[16] H. Koester, 'Three Thomas Parables', in A. Logan and A. Wedderburn, eds. *New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honour of Robert McLaughlan Wilson* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 195–203 (195).

they are drawing.[17] In short, the way in which these authors use their sources, as we will see in Chapter 9, is remarkably difficult to distinguish from the vagaries of oral transmission.

2.4 The assumption of detailed knowledge of Q in light of recent "unfreezing of the Synoptic problem"

Another important aspect of recent scholarship is a further manifestation of what J.A.T. Robinson in 1975 called the 'unfreezing of the Synoptic problem'.[18] He was referring to the persistence of W.R. Farmer and his students in arguing that the Griesbach hypothesis provided a viable alternative to Markan priority. In our time, this defrosting is of a rather different kind from that referred to by Robinson. Markan priority probably holds at least as robust a position in Synoptic studies as it ever has, and the Griesbach hypothesis has not really had any strong support recently. On the other side, it is probably true to say that Q scepticism is stronger now than it has been at any time since the Second World War. What was in the times of Farrer and Goulder viewed as somewhat eccentric has now, in large measure through the work of Goodacre, become a more mainstream if certainly still a minority position.[19]

This has obvious implications for the study of *Thomas*, in part because of the widely heralded similarity of *Thomas* to Q, the two together evincing the importance of both the "sayings-Gospel" genre and wisdom theology, as opposed to a *theologia crucis*, in early Christianity. In the past, confident reconstructions of the contents of Q have played an important part in arguments for the independence of *Thomas* from the Synoptics. Koester, for example, has argued that certain sayings of *Thomas* preserve a more primitive form than the version in Q which is used by Matthew and Luke.[20]

[17] J. Whittaker, 'The Value of Indirect Tradition in the Establishment of Greek Philosophical Texts or the Art of Misquotation', in J.N. Grant, ed. *Editing Greek and Latin Texts: Papers Given at the Twenty-Third Annual Conference on Editorial Problems* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 63–95.

[18] J.A.T. Robinson, 'Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen: A Test of Synoptic Relationships', *NTS* 21 (1975), 443–61 (443).

[19] Most recently, Goodacre's influence is evident in e.g. F.B. Watson, 'Q as Hypothesis: A Study in Methodology', *NTS* 55 (2009), 397–415, and the survey of Q scepticism in J.C. Poirier, 'The Synoptic Problem and the Field of New Testament Introduction', *JSNT* 32 (2009), 179–90.

[20] H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), esp. 89–90.

On the other hand, Tuckett has argued that certain Matthean and Lukan redactions of Q have found their way into *Thomas*.[21] Thus *Thomas* can be shown to be dependent upon the written Gospels in so far as these have edited Q. Tuckett himself acknowledges some of the difficulty here, however: the process requires that Matthew and Luke have Q in exactly the same form.

There are thus two principal difficulties in employing reconstructions of Q to solve the problem of *Thomas*'s relationship to the Synoptics. The first is the existence of Q in the first place, which is coming increasingly into question, even though the majority view is clearly in favour of its existence. The second problem is a more serious one, however. Although recent years have seen the publication of the actual text of Q – you can now hold in your hands the critical edition! – one must be sceptical about how reliably we can reconstruct its text. It needs to be remembered that comparisons between a saying in Q and *Thomas* are usually between a reconstruction of Q on the basis of decisions about Matthew and Luke on the one hand, and a retroversion of the *Thomas* saying from the Coptic on the other. Even as certain a Q advocate as Patterson has remarked: 'The reconstruction of the text of Q is a difficult task that often produces results that are only tentative at best.'[22] Combined with parallel uncertainties in the reconstruction of the original text of *Thomas*, this is hardly great grounds for confidence. As such, it behoves scholars now, in my opinion, to eschew reliance on Q in assessments of *Thomas*, as is the case in the present book. Or at the very least in the current climate, it is probably necessary for arguments built upon Q to take a distant back seat in the process.

2.5 Persistent polarisation of "independent oral tradition" vs "literary dependence" despite some questioning within *Thomas* scholarship

Most scholars would agree that, as Riley has put it, 'The single most controversial issue facing scholars is whether or not the GTh is a genuine

[21] See e.g. C.M. Tuckett, 'Thomas and the Synoptics', *NovT* 30 (1988), 132–57; Tuckett, 'Q and Thomas: Evidence of a Primitive "Wisdom Gospel"? A Response to H. Koester', *ETL* 67 (1991), 346–60.

[22] S.J. Patterson, 'The Gospel of (Judas) Thomas and the Synoptic Problem', in P. Foster, A. Gregory, J.S. Kloppenborg and J. Verheyden, eds. *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem: Oxford Conference, April 2008. Essays in Honour of Christopher M. Tuckett* (Leuven/Paris/Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2011), 783–808 (791); cf. S.J. Patterson, 'Yes, Virginia, There Is a Q', *Bible Review* 11.5 (1995), 39–40!

witness to an independent stream of tradition reaching back to Jesus.'[23] From the very beginning of scholarship on *Thomas*, the relation between *Thomas* and the canonical (especially Synoptic) Gospels has been the most divisive issue. At that time, the division was not necessary binary: while Quispel argued vociferously for independence and McArthur for dependence, Wilson replied by saying that the matter was not black and white, but rather comprised 'several shades of grey'.[24] Despite Wilson's caution, however, much of the rhetoric was antithetical, the most egregious example being Quispel: for him, *Thomas*'s independence was simply 'established'. In response to Kasser's assertions to the contrary, Quispel questioned 'the level of his mind', just as he castigated the editorial board of *ZNW* for printing the 'biased nonsense' in Krogmann's criticisms of him.[25]

One of the interesting points of the earlier phase of debate, however, was that – unlike the majority of discussion today – the disagreement was not between "conservatives" in favour of dependence and "liberals" for independence. For Quispel, Jeremias and others, *Thomas* provided not a Gospel in competition with the Synoptics, but rather – in a context of Bultmannian scepticism – a kind of external corroboration of them. Hence Quispel's statement: 'the Gospel of Thomas confirms the trustworthiness of the Bible'.[26] At the same time, however, Sieber's dissertation, and the early work of Koester and Crossan (both by this time in the United States) began to promote *Thomas* as an alternative to the Synoptics, and as containing more primitive versions of the sayings of Jesus by comparison.

In the 1970s there emerged the beginnings of what Stephen Patterson has called a 'continental drift', a growing difference in attitude to *Thomas* between Europe on the one hand and North America on the other.[27] With Quispel's advocacy of independence gaining relatively little ground in Europe, most scholars in Britain and on the continent argued that *Thomas*

[23] Riley, 'The Gospel of Thomas in Recent Scholarship', 232.
[24] R.McL. Wilson, 'Thomas and the Synoptic Gospels', *ExpT* 72 (1960), 36–9 (36).
[25] Quispel, 'The Discussion of Judaic Christianity', 85.
[26] G. Quispel, 'The Gospel of Thomas and the New Testament', *VigChr* 11 (1957), 189–207 (207).
[27] S.J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1993), 10. Interestingly, writing in Canada, Horman felt in 1979 that he had to argue that the dependence question was not settled, feeling strongly that there was near consensus about the dependence of *Thomas* on the Synoptics. J.F. Horman, 'The Source of the Version of the Parable of the Sower in the Gospel of Thomas', *NovT* 21 (1979), 326–43. It is notable perhaps, however, that the various scholars whom he cites as evidence are (with the exceptions of Grant and Freedman) all European.