

The Gospels of John and Thomas: Background & Questions
Hum 110, Reed College
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The Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas is part of a canon of texts called the "Gnostic Gospels" discovered in 1945/46 at Nag Hammadi, Egypt. To understand what the difference is between the Gnostic gospels and the Synoptic gospels, you will want to look up "Gnosticism" in a bible dictionary. (This will take a minute or two and will provide you with a much clearer understanding of the text.) How is Gnosticism at work here? How does the Gospel of Thomas differ from the Gospel of Matthew in content and style? What is the relationship between Jesus, Thomas, the people, and God? What is the role of language in this relationship? What does Jesus mean by "knowledge" or "knowing"? What does it mean to "know" God? Compare Jesus' discussion of secret and "invisible" things to Plato's (and Philo's) discussion of forms. What is the significance of "light" and "darkness" here? How does this compare to light in Genesis? Compare the use of dialogue here to dialogue (or dialogism) in Plato and the Tractate Avot.

The Gospel of John

Theology/Biblical History: The Gospel of John is substantially different from the three Synoptic Gospels (Luke, Mark, Matthew). There have been many attempts to account for these differences. Biblical Scholar Frank Kermode notes that "earlier in the present century there were those who strongly believed John to have been related to a particular form of Gnosticism, the Mandaean. This belief was abandoned after the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, which were the work of Jewish writers before the time of John, and which anticipated some of his characteristic imagery and habits of thought" (*The Literary Guide to the Bible* 440). How does John differ in style and content from the Synoptic Gospels? Why might earlier critics have thought that John was part of a Gnostic tradition? In other words, what similarities do you find between the Gospels of John and Thomas? What parallels do you find between John and the Hebrew texts we have read in this class?

Literary Questions: How is the character of Jesus different from the Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels? What role do miracles play in this characterization of Jesus? Who is the narrator of this gospel? How does he present himself? How does this influence our reading of the text? What sorts of images and symbols does this narrator favor? How would you characterize the God of this story? Who does he favor?

Bibliography

- Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987.
Turner, John. *Book of Thomas the Contender*. Miissoula: Scholars Press, 1975.