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# MEMORY, TRADITION, AND TEXT

## Uses of the Past in Early Christianity

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# Memory, Tradition, and Text

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community's reconstitution and moral repristination. For the Hutu the violence they experienced in Burundi:

> represented an end or a culmination in the mythico-history insofar as "the past" that lived in Burundi stopped at the moment of flight. In a strictly chronological sense, of course, the refugees' years of exile in Tanzania ... were also "the past," but for them, these years lay on the opposite side of a great historical divide from the premassacre years.... the flight from the homeland marked a moment of fundamental transition, a crossing of multiple borders—spatial, social, and symbolic. (Malkki: 58–59; see also Farmer: 119; Neal: 61)

The death of Jesus, through political violence, would bring about the sort of radically altered situation, dissolution of previous group frameworks, and discontinuity from all that had gone before such that if the community were to survive it would need to reconstitute its memory, and with the same stroke the coherence of its own social and moral identity, in the context of intense commemorative activities. We have seen that a crucial element of this project is supplying the violent events themselves with moral intelligibility and integrating them into the community's story. In this scenario the community takes up Jesus' ethical teachings, places them in the new framework of the postdeath situation, aligns them with the reality of Jesus' violent death, gives them fresh, stabilizing connections with Israel's cultural memory, and thereby reconstitutes itself as a moral community centered on commemoration of Jesus, a commemoration that becomes the "*Mythomotorik*" driving its historical development.

It is hardly necessary to choose between the first (later shift from communicative to cultural memory) and the second (coalescing of commemoratively focused traditions of moral exhortation hard upon Jesus' death) scenarios. In both cases cultural memory dynamics are at work. It is possible with the latter scenario to posit the emergence of Q as a coherent body of oral tradition, with the factors associated with the former scenario contributing to its ultimate emergence as written artifact. Taking this view allows us to account for Q's investment in the past—its manifest nucleation around commemoration of Jesus' death—but also for the fact that it represents a living tradition of moral exhortation with ongoing vitality in the historical development of early Christian communities.

# READING THE *GOSPEL OF THOMAS* AS A REPOSITORY OF EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNAL MEMORY

*April D. DeConick*

In cultures where literacy is minimal and an oral consciousness dominates, the dominant power of the mind is memory (Ong 1982:36). This memory includes not only individual memory, but also social or communal memory, as I prefer to call it. Communal memory is "the shared dimension of remembering" (Zelizer: 214), the group's "remembered history" (Lewis: 11–12). As such, it transcends the individual or personal sphere to include a community's literature, art, sanctuaries, ruins, placenames, holidays, relics, rituals, and so on (Schwartz 2000:9). It is literally the "repository of tradition" (Halbwachs 1980:78).

The nature of communal memory—its characteristics and tendencies—is particularly important for scholars of early Christianity to consider when reading and interpreting the literature produced by these ancient people. Most prominent is the tendency of communal memory *to depend on shared frames of references within a culture as it thrives on remaking the past into a history with contemporaneous meaning* (Zelizer: 228). Communal memory does not simply retrieve, recall, or preserve past traditions and historical experiences. Nor does it invent new traditions or history out of thin air, or offer completely distorted fabrications of it (Appadurai: 20). Rather, communal memory tends to reconfigure the past—its traditions and historical experiences—to make it conform to the present experiences and future expectations of the group (Hutton 1988:314).

*These retrospective reconstructions of the past are largely achieved by adapting old traditions and historical facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the contemporary group* (Halbwachs 1992:199). Remembrances are "pieced together like a mosaic" (Zelizer: 224), representing not the sum total of what actually happened, but fragments of the past that have been

rearranged and reconnected into a new interpretative framework, result-
ing in an "original" picture that aligns the contemporary community
with its past experiences and its future expectations. For the historian of
early Christian history and literature, therefore, issues such as historical
accuracy and authenticity are best set aside. Replacing them are other
issues like communal identity, membership, authority, experience, inter-
action, and so forth. The issue for the scholar shifts from investigating
how accurately a text depicts what actually happened to why a particular
group of Christians constructed its memories in a particular way at a par-
ticular time (Zelizer: 217; Thelen: 1125).

Although the process of re-creating the past is ongoing for a commu-
nity, *the process is particularly responsive to societal, political, cultural, and
religious pressures exerted on a group* (Bodnar 1989:1201–21). The commu-
nity's experiences of pressure cause memories of its past to "confront
each other, intermingle, fuse, or erase each other" (Wachtel: 216–17). In
such cases a "memory crisis" has ensued, threatening the present's con-
nection with its past (Terdiman: 3). In response, the community generally
will transform or shift its traditions (Shils: 213). This response is mitiga-
tive in that it is intended to relieve the pressure originally exerted on the
group while maintaining its connection with the past. The shifting of a
community's traditions is the consequence of the fact that its memory is
grounded in the past, present, and future simultaneously. Memory for-
mations are not static but dynamic, and tied into the everchanging
present. To remember is not to re-collect, but to reconstruct, to conform
constantly the presentation of the past to shifts in social morphology and
situation, to pressures exerted on a group (Namer 1987:53; Halbwachs
1992: 40). As internal and external factors change, communal memory—
the repository of a group's traditions—is continually subjected to
renovation in both gradual and sudden ways (J. Assmann 1992: 41–42).

Study of the *Gospel of Thomas*, it seems to me, would particularly
benefit from an analysis informed by theories of social memory, since so
much of previous scholarship on this text has been tied to using it to
recover the historical words and message of Jesus.[1] Since the sayings of

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1. J. Schröter is the only other scholar of whom I am aware that has applied social
memory studies to the *Gospel of Thomas* (see 1997). He limited his application to the founda-
tional work of Aleida and Jan Assmann. Schröter proposed that Mark, Quelle, and *Thomas*
should be understood as "remembrance phenomena." The Jesus traditions within these
texts, he says, represent early Christian reflection on the past, rather than the transmission of
authentic historical Jesus material. He argues that Mark, Quelle, and *Thomas* reflect three
ways of remembering Jesus, ways that steered the process of selection and interpretation of
the traditions. *Thomas*'s "remembrance" of Jesus is identified by Schröter as occurring in the
post-synoptic phase of early Christianity and as most similar to the remembrance of the

*Thomas*, according to these scholars, present us with a picture of a
proverbial Jesus uninterested in issues of eschatology, like cosmic
destruction, God's judgment, and the establishment of a new world,
some scholars questing after the historical Jesus have discovered in
*Thomas* a Jesus who is a philosophical humanist, a sage for all ages.[2]
Although some of these scholars have regarded a few of the more eso-
teric sayings as later, perhaps representing protognostic or gnostic
traditions, they generally have viewed the *Gospel of Thomas* as an early
Christian text which has not been tampered with by proponents of cross
theology or apocalyptic destruction, since the *Gospel of Thomas* is silent
when it comes to cross theology and apocalyptic Son of Man sayings (see
especially Cameron 1994; 1996; 1999).

If communal memory, however, operates as studies have shown, this
perspective on *Thomas* is wholly at fault. It would *not* mean that the say-
ings in *Thomas* represent the words or perspective of the historical Jesus,
sayings largely unadulterated by later Christian doctrines. To the con-
trary, it would mean that *they represent an accumulation and reinterpretation
of remembrances of Jesus' words which have been accommodated to the present
experiences of an early Christian community*. In this case, *Thomas* would be
read as a repository of communal memory, containing not only early and
later traditions, but also the reformulations of these traditions based on
the contemporary experience of the community. Therefore, *a reconstruc-
tion of the community and its memory can be distilled if we first examine the*

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Jesus tradition found in John, although much more ascetic and clearly on the path to Gnosti-
cism. He thinks it essential methodologically to describe the place of the composition of
*Thomas* through a comparative analysis with other early Christian texts while setting aside
tradition-historical questions (1997:462–81). Because he has made this methodological move,
separating comparative analysis from tradition-historical questions, he has not recognized
either the lengthy evolution that this Gospel underwent or the early Jesus traditions within
it—early traditions that have been overlaid with newer traditions or reinterpreted in
response to shifting communal experiences and reformulations of communal memory.

2. Proponents of this view rely heavily on the work of Robinson and H. Koester in their
pioneering volume, *Trajectories through Early Christianity*. This view is most dominant in
American scholarship, particularly among those scholars who belong to the Jesus Seminar.
For examples of this position, see Davies: 13–17; Crossan 1991:227–302; Cameron 1991; Pat-
terson: 94–112; Funk: 121–39. J. W. Marshall has provided a "moderate" critique of this
position in his article, "The Gospel of Thomas and the Cynic Jesus" (37–60). From his form-
critical analysis of the "binary *logia*" and the kingdom sayings, he concludes that, although
"the apocalyptic eschatology of Q2 and the Synoptics" is lacking in *Thomas*, some sayings
reveal a redaction of "a future orientation and the theme of reversal" in the interest of a the-
ology of unification (53). Although his analysis of *Thomas* reveals serious flaws in the picture
that some scholars have painted of the Cynic Jesus, he offers no comprehensive explanation
for how, when, or why this redactional shift was taken in *Thomas*, nor does he show aware-
ness in his article of the extent of this shift.

*issues raised in* Thomas's *sayings, and then reflect on their use and reuse of traditional ideas and materials.* This approach is markedly different from the common one which first assumes a community for *Thomas*—whether it be gnostic, encratite, Jewish-Christian, sapiential, or otherwise—and then works to interpret *Thomas* and reconstruct its tradition or traditions on this basis.

If *Thomas* were read as a repository of communal memory, what would this reading tell us about early Christianity, and the Thomasine Christians in particular? Could we recover the pressures and experiences this community faced? Could we come to understand how this community reconfigured its past and transformed the earlier traditions that it had inherited? This rereading of *Thomas* is an enormous task and can not be fully addressed in the present format.[3] But a focused investigation into *Thomas*'s connection with apocalypticism seems to me to be an excellent place to concentrate because so many of the question and dialogue units in *Thomas* appear to be concerned with apocalyptic issues.

Why are these question and answer units so significant? Because the voice of the community is most audible in the secondary questions and introductory clauses posed by the disciples to Jesus. Far from representing historical dialogues that Jesus held with his disciples, these units are reconfigurations of older traditional sayings. By elaborating these older sayings into question-and-answer units and dialogues, the Christians enriched the meaning of the traditions for their present communities, aligning them with their contemporary memory. They provided these older traditional sayings with new contexts and interpretations. In this way, perplexing questions facing a community could be answered directly by Jesus in their Gospel. Polemic for opposing views could be supported by Jesus' words. Instruction about emerging ideas and practices could be addressed with Jesus' voice. The old traditions were made contemporary and, in the process, sanctified by Jesus.

As we will see, the results of such a rereading of *Thomas* challenges the current opinions expressed by many scholars that *Thomas* provides us with either an example of an early nonapocalyptic form of Christianity, a "wisdom" Christianity more true to the teachings of a proverbial Jesus, or an example of a later gnostic one, a form of Christianity that deviates from the teachings of Jesus. When we examine *Thomas* from this new perspective, we will discover that the sayings material in *Thomas*, which has been secondarily developed, has been reworked to

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3. I undertake this task fully in my monograph, *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

reformulate older apocalyptic traditions, shifting the ideology of the traditions away from an earlier eschatological emphasis to a mystical one. Although the focus of the present article is too narrow to discuss this process at length, the present analysis is accordant with my previous work on *Thomas*, suggesting that the reformulation of apocalyptic traditions appears to be the result of the Thomasine community reconfiguring an earlier form of their Gospel, the "kernel" *Thomas*, an old speech Gospel from Jerusalem much concerned about the imminent Eschaton and its demands (see DeConick 2002).

*1. An Apocalyptic Memory Crisis*

In the *Gospel of Thomas*, the community poses the following questions on the apocalyptic front:

> Tell us how our end will be. (18.1)
> Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like. (20.1)
> Shall we then, as children, enter the kingdom? (22.3)
> When will you become revealed to us and when shall we see you? (37.1)
> When will the rest of the dead happen, and when will the new world come? (51.1)
> When will the kingdom come? (113.1)

These questions reveal substantial information about the Thomasine community. They are not simply rhetorical flourishes used to introduce some of Jesus' sayings in a collection, nor are they questions of curiosity on the part of the Thomasine Christians. They are serious mitigative questions raised by the community to confront some eschatological problem that faced the Thomasine Christians. In their Gospel, they have posed a series of questions in order to bring forward the community's resolution through Jesus' responses. What will the end be like? When is the kingdom going to come? What do we have to do to enter the kingdom? When will we see Jesus? When will the dead achieve their final rest? When will the new world, the kingdom of God, be established?

Why would a community of Christians pose these questions in their Gospel and not others? What do their questions reveal about the problems facing their community? Undoubtedly, the eschatological expectations originally held by community members had been seriously challenged. From their questions, it appears that the contemporary community members were wondering when and how God would fulfil his eschatological promises, a problem not unfamiliar to other early Christian communities in the mid-to-late first century. The Thomasine Christians were

concerned that the end of the world, the establishment of the kingdom or the new world, the final rest of the dead, and the return of Jesus had not yet happened! They were a community in the middle of a memory crisis. Their traditional expectations were threatened by the reality of their present experience, the experience of the non-Event, when the kingdom did not come.

## 2. A Reconfiguration of Apocalyptic Expectations

The fact that these mitigative questions and their answers actually have accrued in their Gospel, however, indicates that enough time had passed in the community's memory without the fulfillment of their original expectations for the older traditions to be reconfigured and aligned with the community's new expectations. They had weathered the crisis by shifting their apocalyptic expectations. What transformation did their traditions undergo in the process? The answers they provide to the very questions they had posed in their Gospel is a logical place to start this inquiry:

Have you discovered, then, the beginning that you look for the end? For where the beginning is, there the end will be. Blessed is he who will stand in the beginning. He will know the end and will not taste death. (18.2–3)

It is like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the air. (20.2–4)

When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom]. (22.4–7)

When you disrobe without being ashamed and take up your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then [you will see] the Son of the Living One, and you will not be afraid. (37.2–3)

What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it. (51.2)

It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is.' Rather, the kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it. (113.2–4)

It is clear from this handful of mitigative responses that the community appears to have reacted to the disconfirmation in the three typical ways predicted by social psychologists for close-knit groups holding certain strong beliefs (see Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter; Hardyck and Braden). Disconfirmation will often lead groups to new hermeneutical levels since they develop explanatory schemes to rationalize the disconfirmation. The hermeneutic consists of demonstrating that "the disconfirming event was not disconfirmation but actually confirmation of their expectations" (Carroll: 126). The disconfirmation had only arisen in the first place, the group may conclude, because the group had not interpreted its traditions or Scripture properly. In fact, it is a normative move for a community to say that the group did not correctly understand the original tradition, text, or prediction.

This normative move is present in the Thomasine Gospel, where we can see the development of explanatory schemas to rationalize the disconfirmation, along with arguments that the disconfirmation really was not disconfirmation but misinterpretation on the part of the community. For instance, they insist that the end of the world had not come as they had expected. The members of the early community merely had misunderstood Jesus by "waiting" for the end to come or "looking forward" to a future event (Gos. Thom. 51, 113).

New explanatory schemes often give rise to new hermeneutics that the community designs to change its original cognitive holdings. The disconfirming experience can cause the group to reinterpret their baseline traditions or, conversely, their understanding of the contemporary events (Carroll: 110). This new hermeneutic determines how the tradition will be understood or the text read from then on.

In the case of Thomas, we can see a new apocalyptic hermeneutic replacing an older one. The community members maintained in their responses to the questions which they had posed that, indeed, their expectations had not actually been disconfirmed, but had been confirmed when the now "correct" hermeneutic was applied to the old traditions. So, in the responses to the questions, they posited that the kingdom had already been established on earth but no one had noticed its coming (Gos. Thom. 20, 51, 113). Did not their Gospel tell them that Jesus, in his lifetime, had taught that the kingdom already had begun to break into the world? It was like a tiny seed that had fallen unnoticed on tilled soil and now had grown into a large plant (Gos. Thom. 20). They concluded that the kingdom had continued to grow since Jesus'

death. Now, at the present time—just as Jesus had predicted!—it had fully arrived on earth. The anticipated "rest" of the dead and the "new world" had "already come" (*Gos. Thom.* 51, 113). Since the kingdom was now spread out among them on the earth (*Gos. Thom.* 113), Jesus would be revealed to them immediately and directly (*Gos. Thom.* 37).

Such was the new apocalyptic hermeneutic that replaced the previous one. The community members, however, did not perceive this hermeneutic to be new; rather, they pereceived it as the correct hermeneutic through which Jesus' words should have been understood in the first place. The community members just had not previously recognized this fact (*Gos. Thom.* 51). This is a function of communal memory, to make the past relevant to the present experience of the group in a seamless way.

A community faced with disconfirming evidence may try to avoid references to it in the future, especially when the belief impinges on reality in a severe way. The community may attempt to create an environment or ideology that avoids the subject completely (Carroll: 93–94). Or the community may identify current events with past predictions or traditions, collapsing the expectations as it demonstrates their fulfillment in the present (114).

Such is the situation in the *Gospel of Thomas*. The community attempted to avoid further problems associated with future disconfirmation by collapsing its expectations in these question-and-answer units and dialogues, demonstrating the fulfillment of its expectations *in the present*. In this process, its hermeneutic shifted away from an eschatological interpretation of Jesus' sayings to a mystical one (DeConick 1996). The kingdom—the new world—was not a future event at all, but was realized in their community as the re-creation of the beginning of time before the fall of Adam. It was actualized by individual community members as they tried to transform their bodies into the utopian Adamic state of being through encratic performance—the immediate, rather than future, transformation of the human self into the image of God, the androgynous primordial Adam (*Gos. Thom.* 18, 22, 37). In such a paradisiacal community, visions of Jesus could be anticipated (*Gos. Thom.* 37).

Thus their interpretative revision shifted the apocalypse from an imminent cosmic event to an immanent personal mystical experience. As the new introduction to the old Gospel (*Gos. Thom.* 1) aptly states, "The person who finds the interpretation (*hermeneia*) of these sayings will not experience death." This hermeneutic was not some philosophical or intellectual explanation, but a mystical one. The believer was supposed to apprehend his or her divine Self and God by meditating on the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel and practicing the encratic ideal it honored.

This crisis in theology must have been very acute for the Thomasine Christians since the sayings tradition in *Thomas* appears to have been

drastically reshaped in order to bring the sayings in line with the community's own experience of the non-Event and its shifting communal memories. In addition to this handful of mitigative question-and-answer units (*Gos. Thom.* 18, 20, 22, 37, 51, 113), we find a series of sayings that are best understood to be later accretions in the Gospel (DeConick 2002), serving similar mitigative functions. They directly address the problem of the delayed Eschaton by developing the concept of the *fully* present kingdom on earth (*Gos. Thom.* 3.1), speculating about the primordial Adam and the encratic ideal (*Gos. Thom.* 4, 11, 16, 19, 21, 23, 27.1, 49, 75, 85, 105, 110, 114), and shifting emphasis to the mystical dimension of apocalypticism, away from the eschatological dimension (*Gos. Thom.* 1, 3.4–5, 7, 19, 24, 28, 29, 38, 50, 56, 59,61, 67, 70, 77, 80, 83, 84, 85, 108, 111.3).

So their resolution appears to be a radical hemeneutic that revised the older eschatological traditions preserved in the kernel sayings 10, 11.1, 15, 16.1–3, 23.1, 35, 40, 57, 58, 60.1–5, 61.1, 64, 65, 68.1, 71, 74, 79, 81, 82, 98, 103, 107, 111.1. These older sayings appear to have been eschatological warnings about an impending cosmic destruction. In them, Jesus gives advice about how to prepare for the final day and God's judgment. The end times are described in these sayings as chaotic, a reversal of the status quo (11.1, 16.1–3, 35, 58, 60.1–5, 64, 65, 68.1, 71, 74, 79, 81, 82, 98, 103, 111.1). The only people to find relief will be the faithful few who are able to maintain their exclusive commitment to God and Jesus (10, 15, 23.1, 40, 57, 61.1, 82, 107). So imminent is the coming of God's kingdom that it is likened to a mustard seed which will soon become a big shrub (20.2–4) or a pinch of yeast which will soon leaven fine loaves (96). When these expectations of the community were threatened by the experience of the non-Event, these traditions underwent a hermeneutical shift within the communal memory, resulting in new material accruing in the Gospel—material that reinterpreted the old.

The accumulation of these sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* suggests that the message of Jesus, which the community had retained over the years in their Gospel, experienced the type of incremental interpretative shift commonly occurring in traditions subjected to communal memory. As the eschatological coming of the kingdom of God came to be a non-Event, these Christians felt pressure to recast their original apocalyptic traditions. The future fulfillment of the eschatological promises of Jesus receded in favor of their present mystical reality. In other words, the temporal dimension of the apocalypticism of Jesus' message was collapsed, refocusing the community's apocalyptic hopes on the atemporal mystical dimension. The cumulative result of the remaking of the traditions was a shift away from understanding the apocalyptic traditions in eschatological terms.

### 3. A Hermeneutical Shift

The shift from eschatological to encratic and mystical is explicitly developed in the secondary question-and-answer unit (*Gos. Thom.* 37; see DeConick and Fossum). The question expresses concern, and perhaps even disappointment, that the imminent return of Jesus had not yet occurred. The community demands to know when this will happen:

> His disciples said, "When will you become revealed to us and when shall we see you?" Jesus said, "When you disrobe without being ashamed and take up your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then [you will see] the Son of the Living One, and you will not be afraid."

The imagery in this secondary unit suggests that, at this time, the ideal conditions necessary to "see" Jesus were not perceived by the community to include the collapse of the world and the end of history. Rather the ideal condition is the state of each individual person. This ideal state is said to be that of a "child" who has renounced his body, returning to the prefall state of Adam when Adam was not afraid or ashamed to come into God's presence. Jesus will be revealed to the disciples when they, like children, remove their clothes and tread on them without shame or fear, an idea developing out of a certain exegesis of the Genesis story, particularly verses 2:25 and 3:7–10.

Here the community is describing a situation in which the eschatological vision of Jesus is now believed to be achievable in the present, particularly when the person renounces his or her body and becomes a "child" again in the Garden. This belief is an expression of an encratic ideal which also is expressed in the dialogue unit 22, and several other sayings that accrued in the Gospel (4.1, 16.4, 21.1–4, 23.2, 75, 114). In fact, in saying 37, achieving this ideal through the practice of celibacy is perceived to be a prerequisite to the vision of God. *If* a ritual practice is alluded to in this saying, it is likely from an analysis of the imagery that the community had anointing in mind, one of the initiatory rituals that the early Christians performed at baptism (see DeConick and Fossum). The community may have believed that the performance of the initiatory rituals combined with an encratic lifestyle prepared the human being for visionary experiences of God and his Son.

The mitigative response to the non-Event is quite pronounced in saying 38.2, where a rationalization of eschatological expectations is made:

> Jesus said, "Many times you have desired to hear these words which I am saying to you, and you have no one else to hear them from. *There will be days when you will look for me and will not find me.*" (38)

In this unit, the older saying of Jesus is appended with a startling "*new*" observation: "There will be days when you will look for me and will not find me!" This accretive clause serves to alleviate the disappointment of Jesus' nonappearance eschatologically, noting that Jesus had predicted this. Further, the clause alludes to the disappointment of failed mystical practices. The saying takes on a very practical problem that faces all mystics: there would be days that they sought direct experiences of God, desiring to hear his voice or gaze on his form, only to be faced with failure. In this way, the saying seems to appeal to the preceding saying (37), reminding the believer that even though Jesus did promise the encratite Christian a beatific vision of himself, this would not happen "on demand." The believers may desire this experience, just as they desire to hear Jesus' words. But as Jesus himself says, there will be times when it will not happen no matter how intense the believers' desire.

The quest for an ecstatic vision of God, a direct experience of the divine, is quite pronounced in saying 59, an accretion that clearly delineates the vision quest as a premortem experience—something that must be achieved during the believer's lifetime, rather than after death:

> Jesus said, "Look for the Living One while you are alive, lest you die and then seek to see him and you will be unable to see (him)." (59)

Wilhelm Bousset recognized this mystical distinction in his famous work, "Die Himmelsreise der Seele." He understood the ecstatic soul journey as one that occurs during the life of the performer, rather than after the body's death. He thought that such a mystic journey could anticipate the moment of death, but it had to be performed in the *present* if it was to bear the hallmark of mysticism (see Bousset). Saying 59 bears this very hallmark. Jesus commands his believers to seek visions of God before their own deaths. In fact, if the believers wait for postmortem visions, they will have waited too long and will suffer severe consequences. They will be denied the vision and its guarantee of immortality. This saying displays the telltale signs that this community has recast its original apocalyptic dream based on their present experience.

Add to these sayings the fragment of ascent lore found in saying 50, and the magnitude of the mystical shift that has occurred in the communal memory becomes even more pronounced:

> 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 and established [itself] and became manifest through their image).

If they say to you, 'Is it you?,'
say 'We are its children, and 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.'" (50)

The context in which these questions and answers make the *most* sense is
that of the ascent of the soul through the heavenly spheres and the inter-
rogation of the soul as it journeys to God (DeConick 1996:43–96). We find
such interrogations at death to be characteristic of Egyptian, Orphic, and
some gnostic traditions. Since Logion 50 gives us no indication that the
context is death, we can assume a premortem context based on the fact
that *Thomas* advocated mystical ascent before death in sayings 37 and 59.
For this idea, there is ample evidence in Jewish sources, where we dis-
cover that the mystic could expect the angelic guards to be hostile and
question his right and worthiness to be in heaven (cf. *Ascen. Isa.* 10.28–29;
*3 En.* 2, 4 and 5; *Apoc. Ab.* 13.6; *b. Ḥag.* 15b; *b. Šabb.* 88b–89a; *Shemot Rabbah*
42.4; *Pesiq. Rab.* 96b–98a; *Gedullat Mosheh* 273; *Hekhalot Fragments* lines
28–38; *Hist. Rech.* 5.1–2). Moreover, he could anticipate life-or-death tests
to be administered by the angels. He had to memorize passwords and
hymns in order to appease the guards of heaven and insure his safe pas-
sage to the foot of God's throne (*Apoc. Abr.* 17–18; *Hekhalot Rabbati* 1.1;
2.5–5.3; 16.4–25.6; *Hekhalot Zutt.* 413–415; *b. Ḥag.* 14b; *Ma'aseh Merkavah* 9,
11, 15).

Even though the language in these sayings describes the ecstatic
experience prominently in mythic terms of a heavenly journey and
vision of the Father and the glorious Jesus, the Son of the Living One
(24.1, 37, 38.2, 50, 59), the transformation itself was understood also to
be an interior psychic experience of the soul, as can be clearly seen with
the creation of a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples in saying 24.
A *newer question* (24.1) now introduces and recontextualizes an older
saying (24.2–3):

> His disciples said to him, "Show us the place where you are, since it is necessary
> for us to seek it." He said to them, "Whoever has ears, let him hear. There
> is light within a man of light and he lights up the whole world. If he
> does not shine, he is darkness."

The disciples' question represents the voice of the community. They
ask Jesus to show them where he lives since they must "seek" this "place"
in order to be redeemed. Here, the language of mystical journey to the
"place" where Jesus is has been connected to a psychic discussion about
the interior "man of light," the soul. Here, the ecstatic "journey" is an
internal one, resulting in an immediate transformation of the soul into its
original state of luminosity. The transformative effects of this journey are

the subject of several other sayings in *Thomas*, sayings which invoke both
the Jewish story of the person's recovery, through mystical encounter, of
the original image of God in which he or she was created (*Gos. Thom.* 19,
22, 70, 84, 106) and the Hermetic story of the return, through Self-knowl-
edge, of the person's fallen soul (3.4–5, 56, 67, 80, 111.3).

All in all, these sayings represent the voice of a community whose
members are no longer waiting for death or the eschaton in order to enter
heaven and achieve immortality. Instead of waiting for heaven to come to
them, they are invading Eden, believing the eschatological promises of
God fulfilled in the present. Their apocalyptic expectations have col-
lapsed, shifting their theology away from hopes of an imminent eschaton
to achieving mystical premortem experiences of God. They developed an
encratic theology and regime, working to transform their bodies into the
prelapsarian Adam and Eve, and their church into paradise even while
they lived on earth. In a community where Eden had been regained, mys-
tical visions of Jesus and God were accessible to the practitioner. The
believer could experience all the fruits of the new world now, living like
an angel on earth, gazing on God like an angel in heaven.

## 4. Final Remarks

Reading the *Gospel of Thomas* as a repository of early Christian com-
munal memory suggests that the Gospel contains traditions and
references to hermeneutics that serve to reconfigure older traditions and
hermeneutics no longer relevant to the experience of the community.
Even this brief commentary on the traditions in *Thomas* reveals that the
community's original eschatological expectations were disconfirmed by
its contemporary experience of the non-Event. When the kingdom did
not come, rather than discarding their Gospel and closing the door of
their church, the Thomasine Christians responded by reinterpreting
Jesus' sayings, believing themselves to have previously misunderstood
Jesus' intent—to have applied the wrong hermeneutic to his words. So
they aligned their old traditions with their present experience, rationaliz-
ing the non-Event, shifting their theology to the encratic and mystical,
and creating a new hermeneutic through which the old traditions could
be viewed. This response is visible in the way in which they revised their
Gospel, adding question-and-answer units and dialogues that addressed
the subject specifically, along with a series of new sayings that worked to
instruct the believer in the new theology and guide him or her hermeneu-
tically through the Gospel.

The community had become an advocate for a fully present king-
dom—the new world of Eden—which they re-created among themselves.
Their church was Paradise. They were Adam and Eve before the fall.

Through encratic performance and mystical practice, they believed that they had achieved the eschatological promises of God in the present, including the ultimate transformation of their bodies into the original luminous image of God. The non-Event became for them the fulfillment of the event. Jesus' promise of the imminent end had been actualized within the boundaries of their community!

This reading of the *Gospel of Thomas* suggests that the scholarly consensus that this Gospel exemplifies an early Christian, nonapocalyptic Gospel preserving the message of a philosophical Jesus is highly suspect. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case. The earliest version of the *Gospel of Thomas*, which I call the kernel *Thomas*, looks to have been an apocalyptic speech Gospel emphasizing the imminent eschaton and its demands. It is only in the face of a communal memory crisis, which also was experienced by other Christian communities in the mid-to-late first century, that the text's emphasis was shifted away from the eschatological interpretation of Jesus' sayings to the mystical. The person no longer waited for the end to arrive and Jesus to return. His or her transformation or immortalization was achieved immediately through imitative performance and direct mystical apprehension of God and his Son.