

What about the Gospel of Thomas?

Glenn M. Miller

The issue of the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* comes up in different ways and in different places. For example, this question that came into the Tank...

Recently, and quite by accident, I stumbled across a version of the Apocryphal(sp?) Gospel of Thomas. After reading it, and being quite amazed by the similarities to the Synoptic Gospels and John, I have the following question:

What is the great "theological argument" against this Gospel? At least 60% of it has direct correlations in Scripture and some rather inspiring extra sayings. I understand there is a good deal, I estimate 40%, of the Gospel that is clearly Gnostic, but does that discredit a valuable (in my mind) resource of early Christianity?

GTh also is important to discussions of the "Jesus Seminar" and those dependent upon that stream of argument (e.g. [James Stills' web-writings](#)). Some of the claims are quite exorbitant--that it represents the oldest Jesus material available, much older than our canonical gospels. This material needs careful analysis, since so much is made of it.

1. *What is the Gospel of Thomas?*

The GTh is "an anthology of 114 'obscure sayings' of Jesus, which according to its prologue, were collected and transmitted by St. Didymus Jude Thomas. The sayings do not appear within a biological narrative about Jesus, although some of them individually contain elements of dialogue or an abbreviated setting. Instead, Jesus' sayings in Gth are unconnected and in no particular order." [[GS:376](#)] It is part of a collection of Gnostic writings known as the Nag Hammadi Library.

The Nag Hammadi Library is a collection of Coptic documents, found in Upper Egypt in 1945, dated late fourth century AD:

The most important collection of Gnostic writings are the Nag Hammadi Codices (NHC). Thirteen codices, containing fifty-two tractates, were discovered in upper Egypt in 1945. Six of these tractates were duplicates. Six others were already extant. The remaining forty represented wholly new finds. [Evans, in [NWNTI:164](#)]

All [texts] were found together in a large jar sealed by a bowl and buried beneath a boulder at the base of cliffs on the right bank of the Nile, some six miles northeast of the town of Nag Hammadi and within sight of the ruins of the Pachomian monastery at Phbow. [[BREC:171](#)]

The texts are a varied lot: some are Christian, some are gnostic, some are Christian-gnostic, some are Hermetic, and two are philosophical--the *Sentences of Sextus* and a fragment of Plato's *Republic*. [[BREC:171](#)]

[TankNote: When Egyptian was written in the Greek alphabet, it was called "Coptic". The NHC was written in TWO different Coptic dialects, and reflect the handwriting styles of several different scribes ([NHL:13ff](#))]

2. ***How old is this library (including the GTh)?***

The manuscripts are dated to the late 4th century, on several grounds, the two strongest are ([NHL:16](#)):

First, there is a reference in Codex VI (containing *The Concept of our Great Power*) to the heresy of the Anomoeans--which briefly flourished in the region in the late 350's.

Second, some of the 'packing materials' in the jar are literary pieces themselves (like we might use newspaper to pack a box of delicate objects). There are three dates that show up in these packing materials of Codex VII: 341, 346, 348 ad. "*This indicates that the cover of Codex VII was manufactured no earlier than the latest date [348ad], but perhaps as much as a generation after these dates.*"

This, of course, describes only the age of the manuscripts themselves--NOT the literary content of those mss.

3. ***What does the GTh contain?***

The Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* was translated from the Greek. Fragments of this gospel in the original Greek version are extant in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri 1, 654 and 655, which had been discovered and published at the beginning of this century, but were identified as parts of *The Gospel of Thomas* only after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library. The first of these Greek papyri contains sayings 26-30, 77, 31-33 (in this order!), the other two the sayings 1-7 and 36-40, respectively. At least one of these Greek fragments comes from a manuscript that was written before 200 C.E.; thus the Greek version of this gospel was used in Egypt as early as the second century. [Koester, in [NHL:124](#)]

A large number of the sayings of *The Gospel of Thomas* have parallels in the gospels of the New Testament, in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), as well as the Gospel of John (parallels with the latter are especially striking: cf., e.g., sayings 13, 19, 24, 38, 49, 92). Some of the sayings are known to occur also in noncanonical gospels, especially in the *Gospel According to the Hebrews* (cf. saying 2) and the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (cf. saying 22), which are both attested for the second century by Clement of Alexandria (floruit 180-200).[Koester, in [NHL:124-125](#)]

4. ***How old IS the GTh itself?***

If we have Greek mss with fragments of Gth that can be dated to pre-200 AD, then clearly the GTh must be at least that old. But some highly visible minority (i.e. the Jesus Seminar) have claimed that it can be dated to 50-60ad, BEFORE the canonical gospels, so we need to see exactly what evidence exists by which to date the Gth.

In other words, do we have any HARD evidence by which to date GTh so early?

1. "The only firm evidence for dating this document is its earliest Greek fragments (P. Oxy. 1), which was written no later than about A.D. 200." ([TJQ:49](#))
2. "The first reference to the document by name occurs no earlier than Hippolytus, who was writing between A.D. 222 and 235." ([TJQ:49](#))
3. The author of Gth shows a decided dependence on the canonical Gospels (see below for the evidence), demonstrating a later date for its composition than they.

The scholarly community is generally (apart from the Jesus Seminar minority) in agreement as to a mid-2nd century date:

But how early that Gospel was composed is debated. Although some seek to place its origins in the first century, the view that it was actually composed near the middle of the second century (ca. A.D. 140) is more commonly held. [[RNC:11](#)]

Hultgren (op.cit.) lists the "early-daters" as Koester, S. Davies, Cameron; and for the majority view Guillaumont, Puech, Cullmann, Quispel, R. McL. Wilson, Gartner, Friend, Fieger, Hengel.

The early-daters are all closely associated with two schools: Claremont and Harvard (homes of Koester and Robinson). All of these early daters are either colleagues or students of these (with the exception of Crossan).

Richard Hayes, a non-evangelical teaching at Duke, wrote an article demonstrating how the Jesus Seminar did NOT represent a cross-section or consensus view of non-evangelical scholarship in "The Corrected Jesus", *First Things* 43 (1994). He called the seminar's dating of GTh "an extraordinarily early dating, " a highly controversial claim," and a "shaky element in their methodological foundation." (cited by Bock, in [JUF:90](#)).

And Blomberg sums it up thus: "In other words, the document may have first been written as early as about A.D. 150, but *no actual evidence permits us to push that date a century earlier* as the Jesus Seminar does." [[JUF:23](#)]

[It should be mentioned that an important, specialist work on the Syrian area, where GTh was possibly written, argues that GTh is dependent on Tatian's *Diatessaron*, which would date it after 180ad--see H.J.W. Drijvers, in "Facts and Problems in Early Syriac-Speaking Christianity", *The Second Century*, 2 (1982), pp.157-175.]

So, we get a range of 150-180ad for its composition. The implication of this, obviously, is that at such a date it CANNOT be chronologically prior to the canonical gospels--all of which were in their final form LONG BEFORE this date.

5. ***THE BIG QUESTION: Was GTh dependent on the Gospels?*** [arguments summarized in [MJ:1.128](#)]

This is the major question. If the GTh was dependent on the canonical gospels, then its value for research into the origins of Christian literature is limited (its value for research into early Gnosticism is already significant).

- The main "arguments FOR" the *chronological priority of the GTh material* over the canonical gospels:
 1. Some of these sayings, when translated back into Aramaic, reflect a rhythm and rhetoric scholars associate with the authentic sayings of Jesus;
 2. If the Synoptics WERE being followed, we would expect to find such an order in GTh. We do NOT find such an order. Therefore, it is unlikely that GTh WAS dependent on the Synoptics.
 3. The stories that are paralleled in GTh and the Gospels, generally reveal that GTh has a more streamlined or less elaborate version. The Jesus Seminar believes that these simpler forms indicate an earlier form of the tradition, and that the canonical gospels elaborated and developed upon these.

- The main arguments AGAINST the "arguments FOR" the *chronological priority of the GTh material* over the canonical gospels.

These arguments FOR are easily shown to be irrelevant, questionable, or simply wrong.

1. The one, about being re-translated into Aramaic is, of course true, but, if the GTh was written in Syria (as most scholars believe) this point is totally irrelevant [MJ:1.158n99]
2. The one about the order of the sayings is simply an assumption, that runs counter to the author's 'right to redact' as well as the mss. witness itself.
 - Gnostic writers of the 2nd-century customarily arranged material around themes/catchwords:

Grant (*Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, 185) notes that one of the striking features of the *Gospel of Thomas* is its tendency to combine sayings found separately in the Synoptic Gospels and to change the order of the sayings: "Such combinations and alterations were common among Christian writers of the second century, but they were especially characteristic of Gnostics." [cited in MJ1.161n.116]

- For example, we know of one place where the Coptic redactor CHANGED the order from the "older" Greek version (POxy.1) for usage in his Coptic version, so as to organize it around catch-words. The saying on "spitting the wood" which in POxy1 is at the end of saying 30, becomes part of the 2nd half of saying 77 in the Coptic version. This creates a link-word between 77a+b; both halves of the spliced verse contain the Coptic verb meaning "attain" or "split" [Tucker, cited in MJ:1.161n.117]
- "According to Jean-Marie Sevrin, *GThom* 63, 64, and 65 have been clustered as part of the writer's polemic against wealth and materialism." [SHJ:499]
- But even with this license and pattern, the Synoptic order DOES SEEM to "show through" sometimes.

Some sayings in *Thomas* seem to follow each other for no reason other than that is their sequence in the Synoptic Gospels. For example, Saying 65 gives a version of the parable of the wicked tenants (cf. Mark 12.1-8 pars.), which Saying 66 follows up with a version of Jesus' teaching about the 'cornerstone' (cf. Mark 12.10-11). But without anything corresponding to Mark 12.9 to connect the two sayings, no one would guess they were related. It is more probable, therefore, that *Thomas* knew the Synoptics but omitted the connection (as this work does throughout in listing sayings in isolation from each other) than that Mark or someone else created a connected narrative out of two originally independent thoughts.[JUF:24]

The survival of the Synoptic order in a few places is especially striking since--as we have seen--Thomas reorders the Synoptic sayings around clusters of similar motifs and catchwords. For example, the order of Luke 10:8-9 peeks through in part of saying 14: "If you fast you will acquire sin...And when you go into any land, when they receive you, eat whatever they will set before you (= Luke 10:8). Heal those among them who are sick (= Luke 10:9). For nothing that enters your mouth will defile you..." Thomas has gathered these diverse sayings around the leitmotif of eating (fasting, eating what is set before you, what

enters yours mouth). The reference to healing is completely intrusive in Thomas' context; it plays no function, comes from nowhere, and goes nowhere. Or rather, it comes clearly from Luke 10:9, where it makes sense within Luke's missionary discourse, following Luke 10:8 and introducing the proclamation of the coming of the kingdom in Luke 10:9b. Indeed, so closely does Luke 10:9 follow upon Luke 10:8 that it has followed it straight into the *Gospel of Thomas*, even though it makes no sense there, given the leitmotif Thomas has chosen for his cluster. [MJ:1.137-138// Meier also adduces sayings 65 and 66 as an example.]

- The NET: The authors of the 2nd century routinely re-arranged material, explaining much of the groupings in GTh, and, in spite of this, sometimes the Synoptic order DOES show through. The 'argument for' turns out to be an assumption that is inappropriate to the situation.
3. The MAIN one--that of 'simpler is earlier; more elaborate is later' is HIGHLY questionable--esp. in written literary productions.
- For example, even within the Synoptics this is not true--irrespective of Markan or Matthean priority positions!

Assuming the majority view of Markan priority, Meier can say:

It is no means invariably true in the Gospel tradition that the shorter text is earlier than and independent of the longer text containing the same material. Matthew usually shortens and streamlines Mark's miracle stories, but he is no less dependent on Mark for all the brevity. In fact, it is quite possible that a tradition may not develop along a straight line of shorter to longer or longer to shorter, but may meander back and forth. [MJ.1.132]

Meier cites a Matthean abbreviation example (non-miracle): the divorce passage in Mark 10.11-12--containing a two-part clause relevant to Mark's Greco-Roman setting--is shortened to a one-part clause in Matthew (19.9), relevant to HIS Jewish-Christian setting.

Charlesworth and Evans can point out the problem in the argument as well, using examples of Luke's abbreviation [SHJ:501]:

Advocates of *Thomas'* independence of the intracanonial Gospels often point to the abbreviated form that many of the parables and sayings have in the former. One of the best known examples is the Parable of the Wicked Tenant Farmers (Matt 21:33-41 = Mark 12:1-9 = Luke 20:9-16 = *GThom* 65). In the opening verse of the Marcan version approximately eleven words are drawn from Isa 5:1-7 to form the backdrop of the parable. Most of these words do not appear in *Thomas*. For Crossan this is a telling indication that the older form of the parable has been preserved in *Thomas*, not in Mark. However, in Luke's opening verse only two words (*ephuteusen ampelona*) remain. Assuming Marcan priority, we have here a clear example of abbreviation of the tradition. Other scholars have concluded that the version in *Thomas* is an edited and abridged form of the Lukan version.

The same possibly applies to the rejected stone saying (Matt 21:42 = Mark 12:10-11 = Luke 20:17 = *GThom* 66). Mark's longer version quotes Ps 118:22-23. But Luke only quotes Ps 118:22. Once again Luke, who is further removed from the original form of the tradition, has abbreviated the tradition. The shorter form also appears in *Thomas*. Thus, it is risky to draw firm conclusions relating to priority on the basis of which form of the tradition is the shortest.

And, if one does NOT assume Markan priority (but rather Matthean), then much of Mark is an obvious abbreviation of Matthew (as some of the Church Fathers held).

- In the case of GTh, we see also one tendency of the redactor to *deliberately* make clear traditions into 'hidden' or 'secret' sayings--in keeping with his theology stated at the beginning of his work. So Meier [MJ.1.133]:

The upshot of this hermeneutic is that the redactor of the *Gospel of Thomas* will purposely drop from the tradition anything that makes Jesus' sayings too clear or univocal, or anything that employs the general saying to highlight one specific (often moral or ecclesial) application. Thus, the redactor naturally undoes what the four canonical evangelists have struggled so hard to do: for, by allegory or other redactional additions and reformulations, the four evangelists often explain the meaning of Jesus' statements or apply them to concrete issues in the church.

It is these clarifying additions that Thomas systematically drops, thus creating a shorter, tighter version of a saying or a parable. The whole gnostic approach of Thomas makes him favor a laconic, "collapsed," streamlined form of the tradition. This form may indeed, at times, approximate by coincidence what form critics imagine the primitive tradition to have looked like.

- *Thomas* ALSO tends to shorten the traditions for theological reasons. The gnostic system as a whole had no place for the deeds of Jesus', nor generally of His words that spoke of revelation and salvation in history. Salvation for the gnostic was through self-knowledge. I want to quote Meier here on this, for even though the quote is long, it not only shows the basic motive behind much of the GTh redaction, but also illustrates the basic structures of gnosticism (for readers perhaps less familiar with the system of thought) [MJ:1.134]

Thomas' gnostic vision has no room for a multi-stage history of salvation, with its early phase in the OT (replete with prophecies), its midpoint in Jesus' earthly ministry, death, and resurrection, its continuation in a Church settling down in the world and proclaiming the gospel equally to all men and women, and its climax in a glorious coming of Jesus the Son of Man to close out the old world and create a new one--in other words, so much of what the Four Gospels teach as they related the words and deeds of Jesus. Thomas' rejection of the material world as evil also means a rejection of salvation history, of a privileged place in that history for Israel, of the significance of OT prophecies, of any real importance given to the "enfleshed" earthly ministry of Jesus leading to his saving death and bodily resurrection, of

a universal mission of the Church to all people (instead of only to a spiritual elite), and of a future coming of Jesus to inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth.

In other words, Thomas' view of salvation is ahistorical, atemporal, amaterial, and so he regularly removes from the Four Gospels anything that contradicts his view. Severin, for instance, demonstrates convincingly how Thomas pulls together three diverse parables in sayings 63, 64, and 65 (the parables of the rich man who dies suddenly, of the great supper, and of the murderous tenants of the vineyard) to develop his own gnostic polemic against "capitalism," while rigorously censoring out of the parables any allegory, any reference to salvation history, and any eschatological perspective. The result is a dehistoricized, timeless message of self-salvation through self-knowledge and ascetic detachment from this material world. At times, Thomas will introduce amplification into the tradition, but they always serve his theological program.

- The NET: the argument from 'simple to early; elaborate to late' is just too simplistic, and doesn't even hold up among the Synoptics (where there is STRONG evidence of inter-dependence).

SUMMARY: the "arguments FOR" the chronological priority of GTh over the canonical gospels just don't work. They either are irrelevant, inappropriate, or simply contradicted by the textual data of the GTh and canonical gospels.

- The "argument FOR" the *dependence of GTh on the canonical gospels*.

It is one thing to shoot down the opposition's arguments; it is also important to give some affirmative data for your own position. What I would like to do here is to summarize the main lines of evidence that show the dependence of GTh on the canonical gospels *as we have them today*.

How could we determine if the GTh was dependent on the "final editions" of the gospels as opposed to some more ancient traditions BEHIND those gospels?

There are a couple of 'places to look':

1. You would check to see if parallels in GTh match material UNIQUE in a specific gospel (other than Mark). This would indicate close familiarity with either (1) a stream of oral tradition associated with a specific community; or (2) the literary product (i.e. gospel) from that community. If this type of material surfaces for MORE THAN ONE gospel (reducing the probability that the redactor was in touch with the ORAL traditions of multiple communities), then the claim of the GTh to be an 'independent stream of tradition' is weakened considerably, and the assurance of dependence on these final-form written gospels (as opposed to oral traditions BEHIND those gospels) is confirmed.
2. Further, if GTh included elements that were *redactional* elements by the gospel authors, then the conclusion is much more certain. In other words, if GTh includes references to elements that were 'last minute changes' of the evangelists (e.g. word substitutions, omissions) that would ONLY exist in the final literary

product, then it will be obvious that the GTh redactor was working from those final documents.

3. The more of these (presumably) disparate traditions that are used by GTh, the greater the likelihood that he drew from a "consolidated source" of these multiple-streams. The only such sources available were a collection of the documents themselves (i.e. written gospels, all generally available) or documents based on them (e.g. Tatian's *Diatessaron*).
4. Further, if GTh included elements that showed up in the post-canonical literary transmission process (e.g. textual elements in 2nd century writings, compilations, and Coptic translations), this would show its dependence on the *literary* products--not just the oral tradition.

So, let's see what we can find of these...

5. Usage of passages (traditions) UNIQUE to an individual gospel. [data from [SHJ:498](#)]
 - The material unique to Matthew is called "special M" in the literature. It refers to material available to Matthew (and used by him) that does NOT show up in Mark, Luke, or John. There are many passages in GTh that cite/refer to this Special M:
 1. Matt 5.10--GTh 69a
 2. Matt 5.14--GTh 32 (=POxy1.7)
 3. Matt 6.2-4--GTh 6,14 (= POxy654.6)
 4. Matt 6.3--GTh 62
 5. Matt 7.6--GTh 93
 6. Matt 10.16--GTh 39
 7. Matt 11.30--GTh 90
 8. Matt 13.24-30--GTh 57
 9. Matt 13.44--GTh 109
 10. Matt 13.45-46--GTh 76
 11. Matt 13.47-50--GTh 8
 12. Matt 15.13--GTh 40
 13. Matt 18.20--GTh 30 (= POxy1.5)
 14. Matt 23.13--GTh 39, 102 (= POxy655.2)

This represents a close familiarity with Matthean tradition--either oral or written!

- The material unique to Luke is called "special L" in the literature. It refers to material available to Luke (and used by him) that does NOT show up in Mark, Matthew, or John. There are several passages in GTh that cite/refer to this Special L:
 1. Luke 11.27-28 + 23:29--GTh 79
 2. Luke 12.13-14--GTh 72
 3. Luke 12.16-21--GTh 63
 4. Luke 12.49--GTh 10
 5. Luke 17.20-21--GTh 3 (= POxy654.2), 113

This represents close familiarity with Lukan tradition--either oral or written.

- There are also several passages in GTh that cite/refer to material in John :
 1. John 1.9--GTh 24 (= POxy655.24)
 2. John 1.14--GTh 28 (= POxy1.28)
 3. John 4.13-15--GTh 13
 4. John 7.32-36--GTh 38 (= POxy655.38)
 5. John 8.12; 9.5--GTh 77

This represents close familiarity with Johannine tradition--probably written [so R. E. Brown and Meier, [MJ](#):1.136-137].

- *"A major problem with viewing the Gospel of Thomas as independent of the intracanonical Gospels is the presence of a significant amount of material that is distinctive to Matthew ("M"), Luke ("L"), and John...If Thomas really does represent an early, independent collection of material, then how is one to explain the presence of so much M, L, and Johannine material?...It is much more likely that the presence of M, L, and Johannine elements in Thomas indicates that the latter, at least in its extant Coptic form, has been influenced by the New Testament Gospels."* [[SHJ](#):498-499].
- THE NET: the presence of M, L, and Johannine elements is strong evidence for literary dependence on the canonical gospel writings!

6. The use of the gospel authors' *redactional* elements by the GTh. [data: [SHJ](#).499ff; [MJ](#):1.135f]

These elements look like idiosyncrasies of the individual authors in how that 'modified' the sources they used. Word changes, omissions, etc. illustrate this redactional process.

- GTh's use of Matthean redactional elements.
 1. Matt 15.13--GTh 40 (may be a redaction; listed above as well)
 2. Matt 13.24-30--GTh 57 (may be a redaction; listed above as well)
 3. (Similarly, Mt 11.28-30 and 7.6 above)
 4. GTh 34b uses Matthew's wording in Matt 15.11 (instead of Mark's) in the Triple-Tradition passage.
 5. GTh 99 uses Matthew's wording in Matt 12.50 (instead of Mark's) in the Triple-Tradition passage.
 6. Matthew's unique juxtaposition of alms, prayer, fasting (6.1-8) appears to be echoed in GTh 6 (= POxy654.6), 14.
 7. GTh 33 uses Matthew's precise wording of a Marcan or Q tradition (on preaching from housetops)

This argues that GTh was familiar with the FINAL literary form of Matthew's gospel!

- GTh's use of Lukan redactional elements.
 1. Luke 8.17 "redacts" Mark 4.22, and this final form shows up in GTh 5-6, with the Greek parallel in POxy654.5 matching Luke's exactly.
 2. GTh 10 influenced by Luke 12.49
 3. GTh 14 influenced by Luke 10.8-9
 4. GTh 16 influenced by Luke 12.51-53
 5. GTh 55 and 101 influenced by Luke 14.26-27
 6. GTh 73-75 influenced by Luke 10.2

This argues that GTh was familiar with the FINAL literary form of Luke's gospel!

Together, this data argues quite powerfully that GTh drew heavily and widely from the final literary products of Matthew and Luke.

7. The WIDE and VARIED usage of all the sources.

Thus, the GTh cites/refers to/is influenced by the following sources/traditions:

1. Q (obviously)
2. special M
3. special L
4. written John
5. Matthean redactional elements
6. Lukan redactional elements
7. Triple-Tradition (material shared in all three Synoptics)
 - parable of the sower (Saying 9)
 - parable of the mustard seed (Saying 20)
 - parable of the murderous tenants of the vineyard (Saying 65)

The force of this wide a range of reference is staggering. Meier states it pointedly [[MJ:1. 137](#)]:

We arrive, then, at an intriguing picture: the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* that resemble sayings found in the canonical Gospels are not simply parallels to the Q material. Besides many Q sayings, there is a good deal of special M material, a fair representation of special L material, indications of Matthean and Lukan redactional traits, some pericopes from the triple tradition (though not necessarily in the specific Marcan form), some possible redactional traits from Mk, and a few parallels to statements in John's Gospel. This broad "spread" of Jesus' sayings over so many different streams of canonical Gospel tradition (and redaction!) forces us to face a fundamental question: Is it likely that the very early source of Jesus' sayings that the *Gospel of Thomas* supposedly drew upon contained within itself material belonging to such diverse branches of 1st-century Christian tradition as Q, special M, special L, Matthean and Lukan redaction, the triple tradition, and possibly the Johannine tradition? What were

the source, locus, and composition of this incredibly broad yet very early tradition? Who were its bearers? Is it really conceivable that there was some early Christian source that embraced within itself all these different strands of what became the canonical Gospels? Or is it more likely that the *Gospel of Thomas* has conflated material from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, with possible use of Mark and John as well? Of the two hypotheses I find the second much more probable, especially given all we have seen of such conflating tendencies in other 2d-century Christian documents. Indeed, it may even be that the *Gospel of Thomas* is directly dependent not on the four canonical Gospels, but on some conflation of them that had already been composed in Greek.

Blomberg is more succinct, but no less forceful in drawing the implications of this [JUF:23]:

Parallels emerged in *Thomas* to every one of the four Gospels and to every "layer" of the Gospel tradition--that is, to material common to all three Synoptic Gospels, information from "Q"..., and traditions unique to each of the four Gospels. It seems unlikely that every Gospel and every Gospel source would independently use *Thomas* at an early date; rather, it is far more probable that *Thomas* knew and relied upon the later fourfold Gospel collection.

This WIDE and VARIED use of the Gospel sources argues powerfully for literary dependence on the ENTIRE collection of canonical gospel writings.

8. Finally, it should be pointed out that the Coptic version of GTh SEEMS to reflect the 2nd-century milieu in many ways (arguing that it was a post-canon phenomenon).
 - The distinctives of the Coptic version parallels alterations of the Gospel tradition found in later 2nd- through 4th-century documents, including Coptic translations of the Gospels. [JUF:24]
 - Other distinctives parallel the development of the *Diatessaron* in the late 2nd century [JUF:24]
 - The freedom of citation and interpretation fits the 2nd-century tendency to produce the Christian equivalent to Jewish targum and midrashim (MJ:1.131)
 - *"Indeed, if the Gospel of Thomas used all Four Gospels, the frequency with which each Gospel is used would roughly mirror what we see throughout the rest of 2d-century Christian literature: of the Synoptics, Matthew is used most often, then Luke, and least of all Mark. Before the time of Irenaeus, John stands to one side, and in some writings we have at best weak echoes rather than clear citations or allusions. The tendency to conflate, reorder, and paraphrase Gospel sayings is likewise common to the 2d century. Thus, rather than diverging from the common pattern of 2d-century Christian literature, Thomas by and large conforms to it."* [MJ:1.139]
 - The NET: the GTh looks like a 2nd-century document--in content, provenance, usage of sources.

The cumulative weight of the above is formidable! The evidence for GTh's dependence on the finished literary works (and maybe even subsequent derivative works like the *Diatessaron*) of the Gospels is so strong as to render all speculation to the contrary rather vacuous.

Just to finish this off, let me cite a few summary statements of modern scholars who hold this mainstream position...

- Summary statements by scholars/reviewers:

The standard assessment until recently has been that GosThom is essentially dependent upon the canonical Gospels and thus does not represent a significant independent source for new knowledge about Jesus (Boyd in [CSSG:53](#))

No doubt there is independent tradition in *Thomas* as well, but the bulk of the material seems to have its origin in the canonical Gospels. (Snodgrass, cited in [CSSG:134](#))

...ever since the 1964 landmark study of Wolfgang Schrage, much of German scholarship has been convinced that Thomas is largely dependent upon the canonical gospels. ([CSSG:134](#))

Since I think that the Synoptic-like sayings of the *Gospel of Thomas* are in fact dependent on the Synoptic Gospels and that the other sayings stem from 2nd-century Christian gnosticism, the *Gospel of Thomas* will not be used in our quest as an independent source for the historical Jesus. [Meier, in *A Marginal Jew*, MJ1:139.

...it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the author of the *Gospel of Thomas* knew the New Testament gospels as they now stand, even though he may have quoted them fairly loosely. [[BLOM:211](#)]

To these may be added the impressive names of Chilton, Craig Evans, Charlesworth, Dehandshutter, Menard, Neiryneck, Tuckett [for biblio, see [CSSG:333n19](#)] and Grant, Gartner, Haenchen, Lindemann [for biblio, see [SHJ:501n.53](#)].

Conclusions:

- The GTh is late (150-200ad), not early (50-75ad). It dates from AFTER the completion and collation of the FourFold gospel.
- The GTh *may* contain an authentic extra-biblical tradition or two (a subject we did NOT discuss here--for discussion, see [JUF:217ff](#), Hofius in [GAG:336-360](#)), but by and large is dependent on ALL the canonical gospels in their finished form.
- Since it appears in history 100-150 years later than the alleged Sayings Document called "Q", its value to demonstrate the existence of such a genre as "Sayings Document" is negligible. As a late document, it looks more like popular theme books of today--"The Parables of Jesus" or "The Gaililean Miracles"--subsets of the Gospel data for specific purposes, as opposed to a comprehensive statement of the "gospel". (The use of "gospel" at the end of the document carries precious little weight in this regard, since by this time the gospel genre had been so stretched by the flood of apocryphal gospels as to be meaningless.)
- The fact that this single document can witness to the general availability of the Fourfold gospel in the mid-late 2nd century has implications for canonical studies. It demonstrates that the Fourfold gospel was accepted as the ONLY authoritative source for teaching--by the very fact that its citations were predominantly from those gospels! And the fact that the four gospels were available to a single redactor at that time confirms the rather rapid and frequent distribution and exchange of Christian literature in the period (cf. [BREC:82ff](#)).
- To the Christian, this bare-bones gnostic "How to work your way to heaven" document should remind us vividly of the completeness of God's provision for our salvation in Christ. He broke into

history, joined our "matter" in solidarity, and MADE a way--not just SHOWED a way! He "shrank not back from death" and did MORE than just reveal truth; He also unleashed grace (John 1!).

Glenn Miller, 8/24/96