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Parables in the Gospel of Thomas:

Oral Tradition or Gnostic Exegesis?

WILLIAM R. SCHOEDEL

[The author is an acknowledged authority in the field of Gnostic studies and has contributed significant articles to leading journals and edited several texts in this area. Thus his article becomes a real test of pastoral relevance. What do the scholar and the pastor have in common? Paul's answer is applicable: "Much in every way." In the first place, a high percentage of Lutheran pastors, and others also, are competent scholars who delight in such articles for stimulation and up-dating. In the second place, Dr. Schoedel provides important light on a burning contemporary question concerning the authority of the Scripture. He does this by studying the attitude of an important early group of Christians to the sayings of Jesus. He concludes that the Gnostic Christians who produced the Gospel of Thomas did not hesitate to edit and change the sayings of Jesus to suit their own theological viewpoints. Of course, our first inclination is to say, "See how the heretics treated the words of Jesus! Orthodox Christians would never do that." But this is too simple an answer. As Walter Bauer has argued, the Gnostics for a long time were not considered heretical. Furthermore, the orthodox communities manifested something of this same freedom as is evident in the hundreds of textual variants that exist. These variants were not always caused by the sleepy scribe working in the dim light of the oil lamp. Many of them were done deliberately for theological reasons, so that men of the early church are marked by a freedom toward interpreting and applying the words of Jesus by changing them to meet new prob-

lems. The criterion seems always to have been faithfulness to the person of Jesus Christ according to the best lights of the scribe.

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The sayings of Jesus contained in the *Gospel of Thomas*¹ are of such a character that at least some of them may establish themselves as variants of an authentic tradition not directly dependent on the synoptic gospels. The methods of form criticism have been put to use in this connection, and the results have convinced many that in Thomas we catch sight of an oral tradition that may well enrich our understanding of the teaching of the historical Jesus. There is wide agreement that no judgment on the gospel as a whole can be passed but that each saying must be investigated separately to establish its place in the tradition.

There are few who believe, however, that Gnostic influences are entirely absent from Thomas. Its place among the predominantly Gnostic treatises discovered at Nag Hamadi makes such a suggestion natural. More important are the Gnosticizing tendencies reflected in many of the sayings. It is possible that even the more innocent statements of the gospel were understood as conveying Gnostic truth in a veiled form. Yet to suggest a Gnostic (or

¹ A. Guillaumont et al., *The Gospel According to Thomas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959).

Gnosticizing) milieu for Thomas is not to rule out the possibility that words of Jesus from a tradition independent of the synoptic gospels were used at some stage (or stages) in its composition. Traces of different forms of Thomas circulating in the second century increase this possibility.

The purpose of this study is to raise a question: To what extent can the primitive features of sayings in Thomas noted by form critics also be explained as variants reflecting the interests of Gnostic exegesis? If we find that differences between Thomas and the synoptics can be interpreted as arising from Gnostic concerns, much greater caution will be required in employing the methods of form criticism in this connection. Here we propose to investigate only a few examples in order to suggest what further research along these lines may bring to light. A number of parables from Thomas are taken as the point of departure for this investigation since parables were regarded as especially mysterious in Gnostic circles and we know what several of them were taken to mean in such a setting. We look first at the role that sayings of Jesus played in the debate between Gnostics and the orthodox and then take up a number of examples which suggest that at least some of the parables in Thomas may be comprehensible against such a background.²

I. SAYINGS OF JESUS IN SECOND CENTURY CHRISTIANITY

Polycarp of Smyrna knew of Gnostically inclined heretics who "twist the sayings of

the Lord" (Phil. 6:1). This suggests that early in the second century the sayings of Jesus constituted a special source of authority and that they received special scrutiny. But it is generally overlooked that even later in the second century there is still significant evidence of the same special place occupied by the words of Jesus. That evidence is provided by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, in his books *Adversus Haereses*.

It appears that Irenaeus at first intended to recount Gnostic myths in one book and to refute them in a second from the standpoint of rational argument. But he was soon convinced that special attention had to be given to the exegesis of Biblical writings. In the third book of his rambling work against the heresies, he devotes special attention to the witness of apostles. Then in book four he claims to turn to the "words of the Lord" and to pay special attention to the parables (*Adv. Haer.* 3,25,7; 4 Praef. 1; 4,41,4). In book five he proceeds to "the rest of the sayings of the Lord—that is, those which he spoke not by way of parables but in simple speech concerning the Father" (*Adv. Haer.* 4,41,4; cf. 5 Praef.) as well as to especially difficult passages in Paul. It does not greatly matter that Irenaeus' reflections rove far beyond his stated intention: in book four, for example, the treatment of parables begins only in chapter thirty-six.³ The important thing is the special place that "words of the Lord" and parables still hold even after something approaching a canon of New Testament writings had been

² For earlier suggestions along the lines adopted in this study see especially G. Garitte and L. Cerfaux, "Les parables du royaume dans l'Évangile de Thomas," *Le Muséon*, 70 (1957), 307—327.

³ For *Adversus Haereses*, book four, see particularly Adelin Rousseau et al., *Irénee de Lyon: Contre les hérésies, livre IV* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1965).

achieved and the four gospels functioned as theological authorities in their totality.

There can be little doubt that this continued segregation of the "words of the Lord" owes something to the particular interest devoted to them by Gnostics. It is significant that in his second book, before he had turned to Biblical exegesis in detail, Irenaeus makes special mention of the Valentinian interpretation of the parables. He indicates that his opponents emphasize the obscurity of the parables and the need to explain them in terms of Gnostic mysteries. (*Adv. Haer.* 2,27,1)

Confirmation of the particular interest of Gnostics in parables comes to us now from the *Epistula Iacobi Apocrypha*.⁴ Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection and says: "I spoke with you before in parables, and you did not understand; now I speak with you openly, and you do not perceive" (7:1-6). Jesus complains that the disciples have held him back "another eighteen days because of the parables" (7:37-8:4). This, we are told, "sufficed for some men: They heard the teaching, and they understood 'the shepherds' and 'the sowing' and 'the house built' and 'the lamps of the virgins' and 'the wage of the laborers' and 'the double drachmas and the woman'" (8:4-10). Clearly the parables of the New Testament were regarded as particularly arcane and in need of special elucidation.

It is unfortunate, then, that we do not have extended examples of Gnostic exegesis of the words of the Lord and the parables. Nor have the fragments that we do possess been brought together and prop-

erly studied. Carola Barth's volume on the interpretation of the New Testament in Valentinian circles is of some help to us.⁵ But it must be used with caution not only because of its incompleteness but also because of a failure to distinguish clearly between materials in Clement of Alexandria's *Excerpta ex Theodoto* which are genuinely Gnostic and those which represent comments of Clement.⁶ A word about her conclusions, however, is in order.

In her discussion of the Biblical text used by the Valentinians, Barth shows that it often varies from the manuscripts used in modern editions of the New Testament. Yet neither Irenaeus nor Tertullian charge them with altering the text. The changes must have seemed insignificant when compared with the radical "higher criticism" of Marcion. A closer inspection shows, however, that the Valentinians did have readings that supported their own teachings in ways that the normal text did not. For example, Valentinians (in *Exc. ex. Theod.* 49, 1) read Rom. 8:20 as referring to the demiurge: "He was subjected to the vanity of the world, not willingly, but because of him who did the subjecting, in the hope that he too might be freed. . . ." Barth does not classify the changes that occur in Valentinian texts of the New Testament, but a perusal of the passages which she prints shows that texts were frequently shortened and simplified, that additions were sometimes made, that verses were often enriched by words drawn from other

⁵ *Die Interpretation des Neuen Testaments in der Valentinischen Gnosis*, "Texte und Untersuchungen," 37/3 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1911).

⁶ Cf. F. Sagnard, *Clément d'Alexandrie: Extraits de Théodote* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1948).

⁴ Michel Malinine *et al.*, *Epistula Iacobi Apocrypha* (Zürich und Stuttgart: Rascher Verlag, 1968).

passages in related contexts, that changes of order (occasionally significant⁷) occur, that what we may call simple variants are to be found. Considerable freedom, then, is still to be found in the quoting of New Testament materials, and not all of it was innocent. It will be well to bear this in mind when looking at the variants of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

We must be aware, however, that textual variants may mean different things in different settings. It is clear that the Valentinians were dealing with documents practically identical with our gospels. In the apostolic fathers, however, this is not necessarily so, and Helmut Köster has argued that the sayings of Jesus which appear there still reflect oral tradition.⁸ There is the even more complex possibility that a writer using a written source may alter it under the influence of oral tradition. This, in fact, is the way in which some variations in the synoptic gospels are regularly explained in contemporary New Testament scholarship. The student of Thomas must remain open to all such possibilities.

Exegesis represented a more fundamental divergence between Gnostics and the church fathers than did textual variants. Carola Barth analyzes the traces we have of Valentinian interpretation of the parables and comes to these conclusions: Valentinians treated the parables as allegories and saw in them the outlines of their own cosmological, soteriological, or eschatolog-

ical teachings; the interpretation concerned the parable as a whole or single items within it; "for the most part it fastened on a single striking word"; occasionally numbers in the parables served as a point of departure for allegorical speculation.⁹ Some enrichment of our understanding of this exegetical activity may be gained by comparing the orthodox interpretation of the parables in Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 4, 36ff.). Since this was directed against Gnosticism, we may expect to catch sight of some points at issue. Our study suggests that against this background, freedom in quoting the New Testament in Gnostic circles could become license to reformulate it for theological reasons.

Our study also suggests that such reformulation occasions changes that may be mistaken for authentic primitive features. The claim is not that the Gnostics anticipated contemporary methods of form criticism. The two movements represent fundamentally different orientations. Yet they do share a common concern to penetrate the gospel traditions and to unearth the original meaning. Both isolate the sayings of Jesus from their context in the gospels. Both attempt to get behind the ecclesiastical interpretation and to clear away misinterpretations. Carola Barth noted that Valentinian interpretations of the parables regularly neglect the "explanations" of them that appear in the New Testament.¹⁰ We should not be surprised, then, to find that Gnostic exegesis and the results of form criticism coincide in important respects.

The freedom that Gnostics felt in deal-

⁷ In Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1,8,3, the three races of men are found in Luke 9:57-62 by setting the text in a different order: Jesus addresses the hylics in Luke 9:58; the psychics in Luke 9:62; the pneumatics in Luke 9:60.

⁸ *Synoptische Überlieferungen bei den apostolischen Vätern*, "Texte und Untersuchungen," 65 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957).

⁹ Barth, *Die Interpretation des Neuen Testaments*, pp. 64-65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-62.

ing with the New Testament arises from their confidence that Jesus himself had revealed the meaning of his sayings to his disciples after the resurrection. They carried further a tendency already decisive in the gospels of the New Testament to interpret the words and deeds of Jesus in light of the events that took place at the end of His ministry. In such an atmosphere it is not difficult to imagine why words and parables of Jesus could not only be altered but even created. To take an extreme example, we find imbedded in a discourse of Jesus in the *Epistula Iacobi Apocrypha* (7:22-32) a parable in which the "Kingdom of Heaven" is likened to

a palm branch

whose fruit fell about it;
it sent forth leaves
and, when they sprouted,
they made the pith [?] dry up.
So it is with the fruit
which came forth from this single Root.
When it was planted [?],
fruits were brought forth from many.

Neither the parable nor its explanation¹¹ will commend themselves as authentic to many! Instead of a sharply focussed narrative from everyday life we have a symbol

¹¹ In 8:16-25 the "word" is likened to "a grain of wheat" which produced "many grains in the place of one." In 12:22-31 we are told that the Kingdom of Heaven is like an ear of corn which sows its own fruit and fills the field again. The parable of the palm branch reflects a similar emphasis (the many from the one) but is complicated by the immediately preceding direction not to let the Kingdom "wither" (or "perish") which seems to be in some tension with the drying up of the pith of the branch. Could the dried pith refer to Jesus who wishes to leave now that he has planted his fruit and exhausted his strength? It is immediately after this that he complains about being retained by the disciples (7:37-8:4).

pregnant with mysterious meaning. Here as elsewhere in Gnostic settings the symbol has to do not with the coming of the Kingdom but with the unfolding of the inner man; for Gnostics had learned from Luke that the kingdom of God is "within you" (Luke 17:21; cf. Gospel of Thomas 3; Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5, 7, 20).¹² We are suggesting that the tendency to create and to reformulate parables from this point of view cannot be neglected when Thomas is studied.

II. SOME PARABLES IN THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

We turn now to take a closer look at five parables selected from the Gospel of Thomas. All have parallels in the New Testament. Four contain elements generally recognized as more advanced than the corresponding forms in the synoptic gospels. The fifth has been hailed as more primitive. But the question is the same in all instances: do these parables in their present form go back to a tradition independent of the synoptic gospels? A parable felt to have features more primitive than its New Testament parallel will illustrate the possibilities of a form critical approach more fully; parables felt to have more advanced features will tend to conceal these possibilities; but, as we shall see, the study of the latter is valuable for assessing the significance of important features of the former.

A. *The Dragnet* (Gospel of Thomas 8)

1. Man is like a wise fisherman
2. who cast his net in the sea;
3. he drew it from the sea

¹² Cf. W. R. Schoedel, "Naassene Themes in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas," *Vigiliae Christianae*, 14 (1960), 225.

4. full of little fish.
5. Among them the wise fisherman found
6. a big good fish.
7. He threw all the little fish
8. down into the sea.
9. He chose the big fish without trouble.
10. He who has ears to hear let him hear.

The major differences between this and Matt. 13:47-50 (to which it seems to be related) are three: (1) it is a parable not about the Kingdom but about "man" or "The Man" (line 1) — presumably the inner man or the Primal Man; (2) the process of selection (lines 2—9) comes to concentrate on one "big good fish" (either Jesus the Primal Man or the inner man whom the Primal Man finds); (3) the lack of any parallel to Matthew's conclusion in which we are told that this is like the judgment when the angels will come and separate the evil from the good and cast the former into the "furnace of the fire." (Matt. 13:49-50)

There is little quarrel about the advanced nature of the form of this parable. Conceivably we have exaggerated its Gnostic character: we may be dealing simply with an allegory of man finding Christ. One is reminded of the "great fish"—Christ—mentioned in the Abercius Inscription and elsewhere (cf. Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, 1). In any event, the interpretation emphasizes the symbolic significance of elements in the parable and cannot be regarded as primitive. The parable shows how reinterpretation leads to the creation of something quite new.

Yet it is always possible that such reinterpretation is based on a primitive tradition not dependent on the New Testament gospels. Is there any evidence in this case? The neglect of the Matthean expla-

nation in terms of judgment (Matt. 13:49-50) could be taken as pointing to an oral tradition which as yet did not know this "artificial" explanation. The lack throughout Thomas of explanations like those given in the New Testament support this impression. We may be in touch with a tradition independent of the gospels in spite of the advanced character of the interpretation.

We have already indicated, however, that the Valentinian exegesis of the parables also regularly neglects the explanations of parables provided in the New Testament. As we shall see shortly, such explanations were apparently regarded not only as inadequate but often as totally unsatisfactory. The same may be true of the parable of the dragnet. For the explanation has to do with judgment, and judgment was not a welcome theme in Gnosticizing theology. The framer of Thomas' parable may well have consciously rejected the conclusion to the parable in Matthew. This possibility is increased when we see what Irenaeus does with similar elements in other parables. He understands the theme of judgment in the parable of the sheep and the goats and in the parable of the tares to prove that it is *one* God who both confers salvation and casts into fire—not *two* gods as the Gnostics argued in their desire to distinguish the God of justice from the God of perfect goodness (*Adv. Haer.* 4, 40, 2). Against this background Thomas' lack of interest in Matt. 13:49-50 becomes intelligible.

Definitive proof that Thomas used the Gospel of Matthew in this instance is not possible. But the peculiar features of the parable seem to be readily understandable against the background of developments in the second century.

B. *The Weeds* (Gospel of Thomas 57)

1. The Kingdom of the Father is like a man
2. who had good seed.
3. His enemy came at night
4. (and) sowed a weed among the good seed.
5. The man did not allow them
6. to pull up the weed.
7. He said to them:
8. Lest by chance you go to pull up the weed
9. (and) you pull up the wheat with it.
10. For on the day of the harvest
11. the weeds will appear
12. (and) they will be pulled up and burned.

Differences between this and Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43 include the following: (1) the neglect of the explanation in Matt. 13:36-43; (2) general simplification and shortening of the parable (e.g., the whole of Matt. 13:26-28 has no parallel in Thomas); (3) in particular, the failure to mention the "servants" (Matt. 13:26) or the "harvesters" and the charge given them. (Matt. 13:30)

It is generally conceded that the form of the parable is inferior to that found in Matthew. "The man did not allow *them*" (line 5) refers to the servants mentioned in Matthew; the reference is unintelligible in Thomas. The simplification and shortening has been carried out to the point of absurdity. Again, however, it need not be conceded that this restatement of the parable necessarily depends on Matthew simply because its form is inferior.

Yet the changes correspond so well with what may be expected against the background of the second century that one may

well remain sceptical of the possibility of oral tradition in instances of this kind. We have already discussed the omission of the explanation given in the New Testament and shown how the theme of judgment would be an embarrassment in a Gnosticizing theology. The lack of interest in the "servants" and the "harvesters" may be significant in this connection. For in Irenaeus' interpretation of the parable (*Adv. Haer.* 4, 40, 2) they are the angels who obeyed the summons of the Son of Man (and hence also of his Father) to do both good and ill; the parable proves, then, that it is impossible to distinguish between the God who redeems and the God who condemns.¹³

The brief interpretation of the parable in the Valentinian *Excerpta ex Theodoto* (53, 1: "this [the fleshly element] is named 'weed' which grows with the soul — the 'good seed'") emphasizes the same main points as does Thomas: (a) the "weed" and (b) the "good seed." And Thomas' continued interest in (c) the burning up of the weeds on the day of harvest is also compatible with Gnostic interests as the preceding remarks of the *Excerpta* (52, 2) show: the fleshly element, we are told, cannot maintain its strength "in the passage through the fire." The binding of the weeds, on the other hand, was probably too reminiscent of orthodox views of the judgment and was neglected by Thomas. This explanation of the parable in psychological terms may ex-

¹³ The close relation between Irenaeus' explanation and the Valentinian interest in the parable is shown by the fact that Irenaeus links his exegesis with Gen. 3:15 (the serpent) and that this same connection is also found in *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 53, 1 where the parable is alluded to.

plain a number of subtle changes in Thomas' form of the parable: (1) The Kingdom is like "a man who had good seed" (lines 1—2) not "a man sowing good seed." Perhaps this refers to the Gnostic who has the spiritual seed within him. Every feature of the story is suppressed which would suggest that the man sows the seed. (2) Thomas emphasizes the role of the good seed: whereas Matthew has the enemy sow the weed "among the wheat," Thomas (line 4) has him sow it "among the good seed" (with Matthew he speaks of "wheat" only in line 9 near the end of the parable). As the *Excerpta* put it, the weed grows with the soul—the good seed. (3) Thomas has the enemy come "at night" (line 3), not "when men slept," possibly to keep our attention focussed on the psychological significance of the seed by eliminating a reminder of the everyday world of the parable. (4) It is also interesting that three out of four times (in lines 4, 6, and 8) Thomas replaces the plural "weeds" with the singular "weed" (again, only in line 11 at the end does he agree with Matthew in using the plural; it is almost as though the writer became inattentive as he rewrote the text). The *Excerpta*, as we have seen, have the same singular form. And Irenaeus also uses the singular (*Adv. Haer.* 4, 40, 3, in the Greek though not the Latin) in his interpretation of the term as "transgression" introduced by the devil when Adam fell. Irenaeus seems to be moving along parallel lines with the Valentinians: like them he goes beyond the New Testament in allegorizing the parable in general anthropological terms; he simply substitutes orthodox categories. (5) Thomas has no mention of the "field" in which the seed is

sown. In view of the fact that the field is interpreted as the world in Matt. 13:38, the omission may be significant: a Gnostic would not be inclined to say that the good seed was sown in the world; the good seed is alien to the world, and its unfortunate immersion in matter is normally expressed in psychological terms.

Finally the Gnostic predilection for the term "Father" to refer to the unknown God may well have something to do with the expression "Kingdom of the Father" in the first line.¹⁴ The cumulative effect of these observations suggests that we are dealing with a Gnostic revision of the parable, and there seems little reason to think that this revision was carried out on the basis of a form of it independent of the New Testament.

C. *The Lost Sheep* (Gospel of Thomas 107)

1. The Kingdom is like a shepherd
2. who had a hundred sheep.
3. One of them went astray
4. which was the biggest.
5. He left the ninety-nine,
6. he sought the one
7. until he found it.
8. When he had labored,
9. he said to the sheep:
10. I love you more than the ninety-nine.

This parable has features in common with Luke 15:4-7 and with Matt. 18:12-14. "Until he found it" (line 7) is clearly related to Luke. "Went astray" (line 3) and "sought" (line 6) are related to Mat-

¹⁴ For "Father" in Valentinianism see F.-M.-M. Sagnard, *La gnose Valentinienne* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1947), pp. 325—333.

thew.¹⁵ Peculiar to Thomas are the following: "the Kingdom is like" (line 1); "which was the biggest" (line 4); "when he had labored" (line 8); and "I love you more than the ninety-nine" (line 10). Thomas also has no conclusion to the parable like that of Luke (15:5-7) or Matthew (18:13-14) in which the parable is explained.

Again it is generally acknowledged that this form of the parable contradicts what must have been its original point. The emphasis on the great size of the sheep makes the sheep a matter for admiration in itself rather than a wretched creature to whom mercy is shown. It is obvious that the explanations provided by Matthew and Luke are incompatible with this emphasis. The likelihood is that they were consciously neglected because they seemed to deal inadequately with the deep symbolism of the shepherd and the sheep.

We are fortunate to have a reasonably full interpretation of this parable from a Valentinian source preserved by Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses* 1, 8, 4. Here too, though the source is dependent on Luke (there follows, as in Luke, the parable of the lost coin), there is no concern for the explanation of the parable provided by the evangelist (Luke 15:6-7) in which the lost sheep is the sinner. Indeed, the Valentinians "explain the wandering sheep to mean their Mother"—that is, Achamoth, the lower Sophia, who has fallen from the heavenly Fullness, yet "by whom they represent the Church as having been sown." The lost sheep, then, is both the Gnostic

and his heavenly prototype. With some such exegesis in the background it is understandable that the sheep in Thomas is "big" (line 4) and especially beloved (line 10).¹⁶ We may recall that in the parable of the dragnet the fish, too, is "big" (so also the "branches" in the Gospel of Thomas 20, and the "loaves" in the Gospel of Thomas 96).

According to the Valentinian source, Achamoth (the sheep) "was sought by the Savior." The shepherd, in other words, clearly emerges as a symbol for the Savior. Matthew and Luke, however, still refer only to a "man," not a shepherd. Since Thomas explicitly says that the Kingdom is like a "shepherd," the symbolic possibilities of the parable are being developed, and we find ourselves in an atmosphere not unlike that of our Valentinian source.

It is interesting to note that although the Valentinian source is following Luke, its reference to the sheep as having "gone astray" reflects Matt. 18:12-13 rather than Luke (who speaks only of the "lost" sheep). The Matthean term was apparently attractive to the Valentinians since *plane* was a popular Gnostic word to describe the evil condition of this world. The

¹⁵ Codex D of Luke 15:4, however, also reads "sought." Conflation of texts was as popular in the church fathers as it was among the Gnostics.

¹⁶ The emphasis on the one against the 99 may have some connection with the interpretation of the parable in the Gospel of Truth (31:35—32:16). In antiquity one counted to 99 on the left hand and turned to the right hand beginning with 100. The Gospel of Truth teaches that it is "the same way with the person who lacks the single one, that is, the entire right hand, who draws to himself what he lacks and takes it from the left side, and causes it to go over to his right hand, and thus the number becomes a hundred." The same interpretation of the parable is regarded as Gnostic in Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 2, 24, 6. Cf. Bertil Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel According to Thomas* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), pp. 235—236.

striking thing is that a similar mixing of Matthew and Luke occurs in Thomas and our Valentinian source.

Our use of the Valentinian parallel is not meant to suggest that the parable in Thomas is necessarily Valentinian. It is intended to illustrate how a Gnostic could find in the going astray, seeking, and finding of the parable an allegory of the destiny of the spiritual substance that had fallen into this world.

D. *The Leaven* (Gospel of Thomas 96)

1. The Kingdom of the Father is like a woman
2. who took a little leaven.
3. She hid it in dough.
4. She made of it big loaves.
5. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

This parable goes beyond Matt. 13:33 and Luke 13:20-21 in several ways: we hear of the Kingdom "of the Father" (line 1); the Kingdom is like a woman (line 1) rather than like the leaven which the woman took; no mention of the three measures is made; big loaves (line 4) are made of the leavened dough.

It is probably significant that the Kingdom is likened to a woman. Irenaeus' Valentinian source (*Adv. Haer.* 1, 8, 3) equates the woman with Sophia. The leaven is the spiritual principle or the Savior himself. On the basis of some such interpretation, we can well understand why the parable in Thomas has to do again with the Kingdom of the "Father" and why the loaves are again identified as "big." Sophia has hidden the spiritual principle in the elect and seen it grow until the Kingdom of the Father has been realized.

The absence of any reference to the three measures is something of a mystery.

For Irenaeus also says that they were identified by his Valentinian source as the three races of men (hylic, psychic, pneumatic). Carola Barth, however, already noticed some tension in Irenaeus' account.¹⁷ For is it not difficult to associate the Savior (the leaven) so closely with all three classes of men? It seems possible, then, that the "three measures" were not always relevant in the Gnostic interpretation of the parable and may have become a positive embarrassment. It is interesting to note that Clement of Alexandria in a Gnosticizing comment on Valentinian teaching equates the "leaven" with the "elect seed" (*Excerpta ex Theodoto*, 1, 3). In the same context, we learn that Valentinians closely associated "the Savior" with the "spiritual seed" (*Excerpta ex Theodoto*, 1, 1—2). This complex of ideas would provide a better background for understanding the parable in Thomas which seems to have to do only with the leaven as representative of the spiritual principle rather than with the three classes of men.

Our final example is a parable in Thomas that has seemed to many to be more authentic than that contained in the synoptic gospels. Here the issue that divides opinions on the Gospel of Thomas can be drawn more sharply.

E. *The Wicked Husbandmen* (Gospel of Thomas 65)

1. A good man had a vineyard.
2. He gave it to some husbandmen
3. so that they might work it
4. and that he might receive its fruit from them.
5. He sent his servant

¹⁷ *Die Interpretation des Neuen Testaments*, pp. 62—63.

6. so that the husbandmen might give him fruit from the vineyard.
7. They seized his servant,
8. they beat him,
9. a short time and they would have slain him.
10. The servant came,
11. he told his master.
12. His master said:
13. Perhaps [they did not know him] ¹⁸
14. He sent another servant;
15. the husbandmen beat this other one.
16. Then the master sent his son.
17. He said:
18. Perhaps they will respect my son.
19. Since those husbandmen knew
20. that he was the heir of the vineyard,
21. they seized him.
22. they killed him.
23. He who has ears, let him hear.

The most persuasive arguments in favor of viewing this as a form of the parable more primitive than that in the New Testament (Matt. 21:33-41; Mark 12:1-8; Luke 20:9-16) have been presented by J. D. Crossan in a recent article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*.¹⁹ We cannot do justice here to all the complexities of his treatment of the problem. The major points are these: the form of the parable in Thomas is much more like what form critics have imagined must have been the primitive form if it was not an allegory from the beginning. It ignores the quotation from Is. 5:1-2 in the introductory verses; it reduces the role of the servants and dispenses with the allegory that turns them into Old Testament prophets; it ob-

serves the usual preference for three (two servants and the son) in oral forms; it sets up a striking parallelism between the first servant and the son and so avoids the suggestion of an allegory about God's Son; in particular it prepares for the statement "perhaps they will respect my son" by having the master say of the first servant "perhaps they did not know him;" statements about the son as "heir" and the "respect" to be paid him no longer strain the allegory but function as natural components in a lively realistic narrative; the allegorical conclusion mentioning the punishment of the tenants is omitted. Crossan thinks that in its original form the parable worked like the parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8). "The parable of the historical Jesus stands as a deliberately shocking story . . . of some people who recognized their situation, saw their opportunity and acted resolutely on it." It is recognized that the citation of Ps. 118:22 (about the stone which the builders rejected) in the following saying of Thomas already presupposes the same linking of parable and psalm that we have in the New Testament; and it is granted that a Christological point has already been given to the parable in that way; but, it is argued, this was so early in the development of the tradition that the parable has not yet been materially affected. These are powerful arguments which may succeed in establishing the authenticity of the parable in Thomas. But we also think that some of the important features of Thomas' text can be explained in other ways.

A few elements in the parable are peculiar to Thomas: the "good man" (line 1); "so that they might work it" (line 3);

¹⁸ The manuscript reads: "perhaps he did not know them." The emendation seems reasonable.

¹⁹ "The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen," *JBL*, 40 (1971), 451-465.

and more than half of the account concerning the first servant. (Lines 9—13)

Of the synoptic gospels, Thomas is closest to Luke. Luke retains only traces of the quotation from Isaiah; Thomas eliminates it completely. Luke eliminates the reference to many servants and contents himself with three servants and the son; Thomas has two servants and the son. Three statements of detail are closer to Luke than to Matthew or Mark: "so that the husbandmen might give him fruit from the vineyard" (line 6), "the husbandmen beat this other one" (line 15), and "perhaps they will respect my son" (line 18).

Some details have parallels in all three of the synoptic gospels (lines 2, 8, 14, 19 to 20). Others sound more like Mark or Mark/Matthew (lines 4, 7, 16—17, 21 to 22).

Is Thomas' parable a mixture of New Testament texts of the type we have noted above? Or do the variations in the New Testament represent choices from a more primitive form such as that in Thomas? One feature of the text in particular suggests that this may be a pastiche of New Testament passages. Twice (lines 4 and 6) the intended role of the husbandmen is referred to—once in a form close to Mark 12:2 ("that he might receive of the fruits of the vineyard from the husbandmen"), once in a form close to Luke 20:10 ("that they might give him of the fruit from the vineyard"). The first of these has been set in a different context in Thomas. It seems more likely that this emphasis on the role of the husbandmen has been gained by piecing different texts together rather than as a result of the influence of a more primitive form. The double statement of purpose seems too

heavy for an authentic parable of Jesus. The importance of the symbol "fruit" in Gnosticism²⁰ may account for the emphasis.

That parts of the allegory should be suppressed is not surprising from our point of view. (1) The elimination of the Scriptural reference and the related "vineyard" theme at the end of the parable harmonizes with the Gnostic rejection of the Old Testament and the claims of Israel. The Gentile mission could hardly have been understood by them (as it is in the New Testament form of the parable) as an extension and redirection of the prerogatives of Israel. (2) The reduction in the role of the prophets is similarly understandable—especially in view of the strong emphasis of Irenaeus on this element of the allegory in Matthew. (*Adv. Haer.* 4, 36, 1)

It is important also to emphasize the fact that Thomas carries out tendencies already discernible in Luke. Although Luke himself conceivably allowed a more primitive oral form of the parable to influence his writing, that does not seem very likely.²¹ Perhaps it was simply a matter of literary sobriety. In any event, Luke's form recommended itself to Thomas precisely because it allowed for a reduced emphasis on the role of the prophets and Israel. That he went even further can hardly be taken as evidence of the influence of oral tradition.

The elimination of the allegory at the end of the parable (the destruction of the husbandmen) also eliminates the judgmental activity of the master. We have

²⁰ Sagnard, *La gnose Valentinienne*, pp. 432 to 436.

²¹ This is granted by Crossan (p. 451, n. 4).

seen how in other parables the orthodox Irenaeus had made much of just such features of the text. It is in this connection, I believe, that we may understand the remarkable description in Thomas of the master as "a good man" (line 1). He represents the God of perfect goodness, not of judgment. This strikes me as more convincing than Crossan's suggestion that the term goes back to the original parable and motivates the story more adequately: "the master's goodness prevents him from understanding the lethal seriousness of the situation."²²

The strongest point in Crossan's argument has to do with the expanded comments in Thomas on the first servant. They do seem to improve the story. Yet that may simply indicate that Thomas went further than Luke in his attempt to rectify the narrative. Moreover, the improvement is not so great that we are forced to conclude that it represents the sort of realistic narrative that we think is to be found in the parables of the historical Jesus. One still wonders about the good sense of the master. And why was not the son sent immediately after the first servant almost lost his life?

The appearance of the quotation of Ps. 118:22 after the parable indicates that allegory is intended. The husbandmen are the Jews; the servants probably still represent the prophets; the son is the Savior. Some Gnostics saw strands of true revelation running through the Old Testament prophets (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1, 7, 3—4); thus their significance is reduced, but they are

not entirely without importance. The rejection of the son by the "husbandmen" of the parable or the "builders" of the quotation seems a point likely to have been of sufficient interest to Gnostics to call for a restatement of the parable along the lines which we have suggested. The religion of Christ is not an extension of Judaism but a contradiction of it.

The parable deserves more attention than it has received here. But in this and the other examples studied the possibility of an alternative to the form-critical treatment of the text seems strong enough that we should now move forward to all the sayings of Jesus in Thomas with the exegetical issues of the second century more clearly in mind. It should not be objected that this study has concentrated on parables with forms clearly inferior to those of the New Testament, for in principle the problems are the same; and it seems reasonable to pay attention to examples in which we can discern most clearly the tendencies at work and then to see whether similar tendencies are also discernible in more critical instances such as the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen. The one most significant tendency observed has been the rejection of the ecclesiastical explanations and allegories which begin to appear already in the New Testament. Since this tendency characterizes both Gnosticism and form criticism, we should not be surprised that there can be reasonable doubt about the forces at work in the formation of the parables in the Gospel of Thomas.

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²² Crossan, p. 460, n. 24.