

## Le Livre de Thomas (NH II,7)

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The disciple Thomas is not a prominent figure in the New Testament. However, in the centuries that followed a literary tradition grew up in his name, one that saw him as the twin brother of Jesus (cf. John 11:16) and that ascribed unusual powers and the knowledge of hidden things to him. The *Book of Thomas* belongs to this tradition, and portrays Thomas, by reason of his kinship with Jesus, as the recipient of secret teachings. As is also characteristic of works in this tradition, many of these teachings have to do with the justification or exaltation of an extreme asceticism, with Thomas being chosen by Jesus to lead his followers away from the temptations of a sinful world.

The manuscript of the *Book of Thomas* is preserved as the seventh and last text in Codex II, one of the 13 codices found near Nag Hammadi in 1945. The other six texts in Codex II are the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Gospel of Thomas* (another work in the Thomas tradition mentioned above), the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, the *Writing without Title* on the origin of the world, and the *Exegesis on the Soul*. The language of our text is Sahidic, a dialect of Coptic, but the original version would have been composed in Greek. The text is fairly well preserved, with some minor lacunae that do not significantly impair its sense. Professor Kuntzmann, the editor of the text, dates its final redaction to approximately 275 CE, which would thus be when it received its definitive form: individual sections of the text predate the text as a whole.

The text begins with an assertion of identity: it claims to be the record of discussions held between the Saviour and Thomas, as recorded by Mathaias, another of the apostles, and one whom lists of the apostles frequently link with Thomas. The Saviour tells Thomas that, because of their unique relationship, it is not fitting that he be ignorant of the truth about himself. It is important to note that the subjective and the objective are linked in this text, so that one who knows himself also obtains "la connaissance au sujet de la profondeur du tout" (138,18). Both for his own sake, and to enable him to teach others, Thomas requests this instruction from the Saviour. It is given to him during the course of seven interchanges (138,22-143,7) between the Saviour and himself. The first three of these interchanges use a variety of images and metaphors to contrast the state of the ascetic with the state of those who let themselves be seduced by the allure of pleasures of the body. The description of the state of spiritual bondage of these latter becomes quite shockingly aggressive (i.e. 140.25-36): evidently these speeches represent a deeply-held sentiment.

The latter four exchanges (141,2-143:7) are concerned with social issues, such as the need for the ascetic to form or join a community of like-minded individuals, and the fates of those who neither join nor respect those communities. Again, the language is at times quite violent (141,25-34, 142,26-143,7), but its repeated condemnations of the non-elect do not seem to be motivated by persecution in the sense of martyrdom, nor do they concern only pagans: Christians too are utterly lost, if they do not embrace asceticism. The text ends with the Saviour uttering 13 maledictions (143,8-145,1) against outsiders and three benedictions (145,1-7) directed at those who have kept themselves pure and separate.

In his analysis, Professor Kuntzmann discusses the links that the *Book of Thomas* has with many other texts found at Nag Hammadi, both in terms of its relations with individual texts (such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, with whom it shares a literary tradition, as mentioned above), and in terms of its possible membership in a group of texts (including the *Exegesis of the Soul*, the *Teachings of Silvanus*, and the *Authoritative Teaching*) that are unified both by common themes and common

metaphors. However, the *Book of Thomas* distinguishes itself from these other texts by its extreme asceticism and its reduction of all humans to two classes, the elect and the lost (that is, everyone else). In his explanation of these two obsessions, Professor Kuntzmann argues that the text was produced by a group of monks who had held true to their original commitment to asceticism, while the rest of their brethren had fallen away and become to some degree lax. In defence of his thesis, he argues that while the text's tone clearly presupposes an alienation and a need for self-justification on the part of the author, there is no mention of active persecution on the part of outside authorities. It is stated that the "perfect," to whom the text is addressed, are being mocked for their renunciation of the world, they are scorned, but there is no suggestion that they are being killed or officially persecuted.

Professor Kuntzmann also argues that, while the text owes little if anything to Judaism, it has been greatly influenced both by Plato and by the Hermetic writings. It is also indebted to the writings of the *New Testament*: Professor Kuntzmann, however, nuances this assertion by pointing out that while the influence of the *New Testament* is undeniable, it shows itself more by references to themes or forms than by direct quotations. One example of this can be found in the maledictions and benedictions of Jesus' final monologue (143,8-145,7), which are inspired by the benedictions found in the canonical *Gospels of Matthew and Luke*. The ability to combine a sophisticated use of *New Testament* forms with an evident familiarity with the Platonic corpus and Hermetism shows that, despite the furious desire for renunciation that the text displays, "[il] ne saurait être réduit au livret de la piété populaire d'une secte" (p. 9). And despite scholarly tendencies to view the work as a relatively maladroit compilation of two other texts, Professor Kuntzmann demonstrates that the *Book of Thomas* is both coherent and homogenous.