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The Apocryphal Acts Of Thomas

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II. Thomas Christianity: Scholars in Quest of a Community

PHILIP SELLEW

Some recent scholarship suggests that standing behind the literature composed by the ancient church in connection with Judas Thomas was a particular sort of Christianity or even an identifiable school of thought'. This supposed community is given the label 'Thomas Christianity,' a term that suggests an identifiable and distinct social group, presumably with some level of organizational structure as well as a corporate history and a characteristic ideology. According to one leading advocate of this view, Gregory J. Riley, there existed a 'Thomas community which looked to this apostle for inspiration and spiritual legitimacy and created the Thomas tradition... It produced the Gospel of Thomas and the Book of Thomas (the Contender)....'. Riley goes on to say that 'The Acts of Thomas are in conscious continuity with this tradition'². In what follows I want to examine this proposal of a 'Thomas tradition' that looks to an apostolic figure and forms a 'Thomas community' still visible in those three books: the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Book of Thomas (the Contender)*, and the *ATh*. Riley's thesis is the most provocative and far-reaching version of this construct being offered to scholars today.

¹ See e.g. B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, 1983) 359-64 ('The School of St. Thomas'); S.J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, 1993) 121-57 ('Thomas Christianity: A Social-Historical Description'); and most recently G.J. Riley, 'Thomas Tradition and the Acts of Thomas', *SBL Seminar Papers* 30 (Atlanta, 1991) 533-42 and *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis, 1995), as well as the 'Thomasine Christianity' research group within the North American Society of Biblical Literature.

Riley, 'Thomas Tradition and the Acts of Thomas', 533.

1. *Thomas hooks and Thomas Christianity in recent scholarship*

Scholars have of course been drawing attention to the possible relationship of these three Thomas books for quite some time. Ever since the study of Codex II of the Nag Hammadi corpus first began in the 1950s, and even more since the Coptic text of the entire collection became available to the world late in the 1970s, researchers have noted some intriguing links. Henri-Charles Puech drew attention to the interesting double form of the apostle's name as given in both the *Gospel* and the *ATh*, as well as the apostle's 'privilege... of being the confidant of the most secret teachings of Jesus' at various points in the *ATh* (10, 39, 47, 78), as well as in the prologue and statement 13 of the *Gospel of Thomas*³. From this and other observations about themes shared between the two books Puech drew the widely accepted conclusion that the *ATh* show both a knowledge and a deliberate use of the *Gospel of Thomas* (though some other scholars, like Giinther Bornkamm writing in the Hennecke-Schneemelcher collection, did not find all the proposed thematic links quite so convincing)" Puech made only a tantalizingly brief mention of the *Book of Thomas* (still unpublished when he was writing) that was included in the same Nag Hammadi codex as the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*.

In his dissertation written at Duke University and published in 1975, John D. Turner made a more explicit linkage of the *Gospel*, *Book*, and *ATh*. Turner's main concern was to argue that the *Book of Thomas* from Codex II was composed by combining two originally separate documents, the first (Section A) being a dialogue between the risen Savior and his twin brother Thomas. But in the conclusion of his book Turner pointed out that 'all three [Thomas books] contain the ascetic theme, possess a dualistic anthropology, and regard Judas

³ H.-C. Puech, 'Une collection de paroles de Jésus récemment retrouvée: l'Évangile selon Thomas', reprinted in his *En quête de la Gnose*, vol. 2: *Sur l'Évangile selon Thomas* (Paris, 1978) 43-4; 'Doctrines ésotériques et thèmes gnostiques dans l'Évangile selon Thomas', *ibid.*, 210-6, 242, and 'Gnostic Gospels and Related Documents', 286f.

⁴ G. Bomkamm, 'The Acts of Thomas,' in *NTA* II, 427; cf. also B. Ehlers (later Aland), 'Kann das Thomasevangelium aus Edessa Stammen?', *NovT* 12 (1970) 284-317; A.F.J. Klijn, 'Christianity in Edessa and the Gospel of Thomas', *Novum Testamentum* 14 (1972) 70-7.

Thomas as the twin (*didymos*) of the Savior and recipient of his most secret revelations.... In view of these common themes and particularly of the Thomas-tradition central to all three works, section A of *Thomas the Contender* occupies a median position in the stream of the ascetic Syrian Thomas-tradition as we move from the *Gospel of Thomas* to the *ATh*'. His analysis led Turner to 'postulate the existence of a tradition centered on the apostle Thomas, the twin of Jesus and recipient of his secret words, which increasingly regards Thomas as champion and contender in the cause of abstinence from all that is worldly, especially sex'⁵.

Both Puech and Turner made connections between documents that they saw as dating from the second and third centuries, and traced the origins of these connections to Syrian Christianity. The location of the Thomas tradition in eastern Syria had also been emphasized as early as 1965, in agreement with Puech, by Helmut Koester in his article on the diversification of ancient Christian belief and practice, which was a deliberate effort to update and refine Walter Bauer's thesis about the 'non-orthodox' character of Syrian Christianity before the third century, especially in the east⁶. Though Koester was most interested in the *Gospel of Thomas*, he also considered the other factors pointed to by Puech as indicating not only that the *ATh* was 'the direct continuation of the eastern Syrian Thomas tradition as it is represented in the second century by the *Gospel of Thomas*,' but that 'the Thomas tradition was the oldest form of Christianity in Edessa, antedating the beginnings of both Marcionite and orthodox Christianity in that area'. 'Thomas was the authority for an indigenous Syrian Christianity...'⁷. In later publications Koester would push the possible composition date of the *Gospel of Thomas* back into the first century⁸.

⁵ J.D. Turner, *The Book of Thomas the Contender from Codex II of the Cairo Gnostic Library from Nag Hammadi* (Missoula, 1975) 232-7, 233, 235, respectively.

⁶ H. Koester, 'GNOMAI DIAPHOROI: On the Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity', *HTR* (1965), reprinted in *idem* & J.M. Robinson, *Trajectories through Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971) 114-57 at 128-41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 129, 133.

⁸ Koester, 'Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels,' *HTR* 73 (1980) 105-30; 'Introduction [to Tractate Two: The Gospel According to Thomas]', in

In his commentary published on the *Ath* in 1962, which quickly became the standard resource on the book, A.F.J. Klijn confirmed the location of the *Acts* within Syrian Christianity with a wealth of philological and thematic evidence⁹. Though he considered the question of the relations of the *Ath* with other apocryphal apostolic acts and with such authors of Syriac Christianity as Tatian, Bardaisan, and Ephrem, Klijn spent little time in his commentary on possible connections of the *Acts* with other Thomasine literature¹⁰. Layton has also accepted the general association of these three Thomas books with eastern Syria, and although he titled a section of his anthology of Gnostic scripture 'The School of St. Thomas,' he acknowledged both that the Thomas literature is not especially Gnostic, and furthermore that it shares many of its central values and themes with other early Christian texts typically associated with other apostolic figures. In Layton's careful phrasing, he says that:

'the Thomas works were composed and transmitted in one or more Christian communities of the Mesopotamian region. Edessa was one of the main centers for the diffusion of Christian literature composed in this region; this fact, together with its claim to possess the bones of St. Thomas, makes it the most obvious home for a 'school' of writers who honored St. Thomas as their patron saint. Since there is nothing especially sectarian about the Thomas scripture, it must have been a part of the normal canon of scripture read by Mesopotamian Christians in the second and early third centuries. It would have been read along with works such as the *Odes of Solomon* and Tatian's *Harmony (Diatessaron)*...' ¹¹.

B. Layton (ed), *Nag Hamntadi Codex II*, 2–7, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1989) 39 (possibly even in the first century AD). Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 120, cautiously suggests a composition date for the *Gospel of Thomas* sometime around the decade of AD 70–80 based on such factors as genre, appeal to personal (not corporate) apostolic authority, and (less persuasively) the book's 'primitive' christology. I. Dunderberg suggests a slightly later period based on structural and ideological analogies between *Thomas* and the *Gospel of John* (see n. 26).

⁹ A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden, 1962) 30-3, 38-53; see also Klijn, this volume, Ch. I.

¹⁰ Klijn confirmed the connection of the name Judas Thomas with eastern Syria in his article 'John XIV 22 and the Name Judas Thomas,' in *Studies in John* (Leiden, 1977) 88-96.

¹¹ Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 361.

These judgments would accord in many respects with those expressed by H.J.W. Drijvers. In addition to his extensive treatment of the *ATh* for the fifth edition of Schneemelcher's *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, in which he has made important advances in explaining both the literary structure and the ideological basis of the *ATh*, Drijvers has published some trenchant remarks about the 'romantic and nostalgic picture' that he judges has overly influenced scholars like Koester and Gilles Quispel in their reconstructions of early Syrian Christianity, especially in their suppositions about the antiquity of the Thomas traditions there¹². Drijvers explains the similarities of theme and content in the *Gospel* and *ATh* as arising from the characteristic elements of Syrian Christian theology (both east and west) as exemplified by Tatian and the *Odes of Solomon*, and not as the remnant of any real connection of the origins of the church in eastern Syria with either an historical apostle Thomas or any first-century movement attached to his name. Indeed Drijvers has identified the origin of the Judas 'the Twin' symbol itself in second-century Syria in the person of Tatian and his *Diatessaron*¹³.

In his recent essay on Thomas writings and the Thomas tradition, presented at a symposium in Philadelphia marking the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices, Paul-Hubert Poirier, well known for his work on the *Hymn of the Pearl*, provides a succinct and helpful summary of recent Thomasine research. Poirier begins, however, by repeating the more conventional view, in contrast to Drijvers, that the entire Thomasine tradition can ultimately be derived from the ascription (which he considers original) in the *Gospel of John* of the phrase 'the one called Twin' (*John* 11.16, 20.24, 21.2)¹⁴. Poirier says, 'It is clear that the

¹² H.J.W. Drijvers, 'East of Antioch: Forces and Structures in the Development of Early Syriac Theology', reprinted as chapter I of his collected essays: *East of Antioch: Studies in Early Syriac Christianity* (London, 1984).

¹³ Drijvers, 'East of Antioch,' 16; he is a bit more cautious in his contribution 'The Acts of Thomas,' in *NTA* II, 324, where he gives much of the evidence but withholds the inference that Tatian was the first to call Judas the twin (of Jesus?).

¹⁴ P.-H. Poirier, 'The Writings Ascribed to Thomas and the Thomas Tradition', in J.D. Turner and A. McGuire (eds), *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration* (Leiden, 1997) 295-307 at 295-6.

Johannine double name is one of the main sources of the Thomasian apocryphal traditions, all of which portray Thomas as Christ's double, or twin, and, consequently, as Christ's privileged spokesperson'¹⁵. After stating this assumption about the names of Thomas and their import, which he acknowledges requires 'fresh examination', Poirier in effect reverses Riley's argument that the *Gospel of John* is engaged in polemics against the claims of Thomas Christians who were already in existence and posed a threat to the Johannine style of Christianity (see further below).

Poirier's main point in his essay, however, is to draw into question the supposed homogeneity of the Thomasine tradition, a task which he accomplishes effectively, and also to make some suggestions about the relationships and relative chronology of the Thomas literature. In particular, Poirier argues that John Turner's thesis that the *Book of Thomas* stands in a mediating relationship between the incipient Thomasine Christianity of the *Gospel* and the fully realized portrait of the apostle in the *ATh* is faulty.

Hans-Martin Schenke had already pointed out in his own edition and commentary of *Das Thomas-Buch* that, though the wording of the opening lines of the *Book of Thomas* shows a clear literary borrowing from the prologue of the *Gospel of Thomas*, the rest of the book gives no clear indication of any significant influence from that text: 'Mit anderen Worten, der Verfasser wurde hier Zitate benutzen, ohne sie literarisch einwandfrei in sein Werk zu integrieren. Das wurde ubrigens zugleich bedeuten, daß der Verfasser (vergleichbar dem Verfasser des neutestamentlichen Judasbriefes) die Judas Thomas-Tradition zwar kennt, sehr gut kennt, aber nicht selbst in ihr steht. Er scheint die Gestalt des Judas Thomas nur literarisch zu benutzen'¹⁶. Schenke's judgment that the *Book of Thomas* is not truly representative of Thomasine Christianity in the same way or as

¹⁵ Ibid., 296. A bit later in his essay Poirier (ibid., 302) concedes the possibility that John received the double name from non-Johannine sources: 'In this creative process [viz., the production of the Thomas Didymus figure], the *Acts Thom.* are indebted to a tradition of which the *Gos. Thom.* is the earliest witness, but which ultimately goes back to John, or the tradition echoed by John'.

¹⁶ H.-M. Schenke, *Das Thomas-Buch (Nag-Hammadi Codex II,7)* (Berlin, 1989) 65.

thoroughly as are the *Gospel* and *ATh*, though not shared completely by Poirier, does support the latter's position that the literary and historical relationship between the *Book of Thomas* and the *ATh* needs to be reconsidered. In Poirier's opinion, the *Book of Thomas* borrowed the motif of the twinship of Thomas with Jesus the Savior from the *ATh* rather than the other way around. Poirier points out that the use of the twin symbolism, so thoroughly integrated into both the story and ideology of the *ATh*, is employed in the *Book of Thomas* merely to emphasize and exploit the authority of Thomas as the recipient of the Savior's hidden words".

To sum up this review of scholarship, Riley's thesis about the existence of a specific brand of ancient Christianity that could be labeled 'Thomasine' is in effect a sharpening and extension of Turner's proposal, with the differences that Riley, largely in accord with Koester, sees the genesis of the Thomas traditions as beginning already in the first century, as not necessarily originating within or restricted to Syrian Christianity, and as displaying a special interest in the issue of the physical resurrection of Jesus and thus of the faithful. Far from seeing the literary figure of Thomas as created from a second- or third-century reading of the 'Doubting Thomas' pericope in the *Gospel of John*, as Poirier still presupposes, or as expressing a typically Syrian Christian view of soteriology, as Drijvers proposes, Riley suggests that the power of Thomas as an apostolic figure of major importance already predated John's narrative, and indeed that it was this first-century version of Thomasine Christianity that provoked John's unflattering and polemical image of Thomas in an attempt to undermine his authority and possibly his appeal to the Johannine Christians.

Whether Turner is correct that the *Book of Thomas* provided the intermediate step between the relatively sparse development of the character of the apostle in the *Gospel* and its full development in the *ATh*, or Poirier is right instead that the *ATh* suggested the twin brother motif as a vehicle for authority to the otherwise only lightly Thomasine *Book of Thomas*, in either case Riley would assert the existence and importance of a Thomasine brand of Christianity that produced and preserved this literature. So now my task is to query what more precisely would be meant by this 'Thomas Christianity.'

¹⁷ Poirier, 'The Writings Ascribed to Thomas,' 303-5.

2. *Poinr of Comparisorz: Gospels and Their 'Communities'*

To make progress on this issue we must first try to determine what is meant by an early Christian 'community.' Students of the New Testament and Patristic literature are familiar with the notion of a 'school' model to explain the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline churches, to begin with, and Paul's letters and those of his imitators do reveal an actual set of historical people organized as a cult of Jesus Christ who looked to Paul as their founder and guide¹⁸. Some reasonable analogies might be drawn with the various schools of Hellenistic philosophy that Justin Martyr tells us, in the biographical introduction to his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, that he has sampled before he came upon the perfect philosophy, Christianity¹⁹. And of course ancient heresy fighters like Irenaeus, Tertullian, or Epiphanius felt quite justified in claiming that the varieties of Christian, Jewish, Gnostic, Encratite, or Manichaean belief and practice that they were attacking could be traced, somewhat like the virus of modern day medical epidemiology, to schools gone bad, often inspired or led by ambitious or even demented individuals of shocking morality.

As is well known, Flavius Josephus makes a conscious effort to present the major parties of Palestinian Judaism, namely the Sadducees, Pharisees, and the Essenes, within the framework of philosophical schools or *haireseis*, especially in his account of the Jewish-Roman War²⁰. Josephus also claims to have sampled the schools of thought in his youth²¹. And indeed the scrolls found near Qumran, whether they should be identified as Zadokite or as Essene in origin and theology, do reflect a highly developed group consciousness and ethos that few would dispute have the flavor of a school of thought or distinct community. The archaeological information found at Qumran provides the historian another sort of data entirely outside the texts that can help us to understand the group's way of life: the

¹⁸ See for example D.R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia, 1983), and W.S. Babcock (ed), *Paul and the Legacies of Paul* (Dallas, 1990).

¹⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 2.

²⁰ Josephus, *Bellum* 2. 8 (119-66), with brief notices elsewhere, e.g., *Antiq.* 13. 5 (171-3).

²¹ Josephus, *Vita* 2.10-2.

settlement's size; its eating, bathing, and sleeping arrangements; burial practices; and much of the other 'stuff' of lives actually lived. Only some small portion of that material picture could be adequately inferred from a reading of the literary productions of the group, which are often symbolic and always self-conscious.

We often hear mention of specific 'communities' that are thought to lie behind the writing and the reading of the various gospels of the New Testament. But the contrast with the Dead Sea Scrolls should help make my point: we have far fewer texts, and little or no material remains to connect with any of the surviving literature. The corpora that we do have are nearly all the secondary products of collectors, editors, and forgers. The people who collected, edited, and published Paul's letters sometime in the second century, by point of comparison, created a specific character and theological outlook for that apostle that, as an entirety, offers only a poor or at best distorted portrait of the historical person⁷⁷. Those who selected, combined, and harmonized the gospels of the emerging New Testament canon by that very process have also repositioned and thus redirected our readings of the *Gospel of Mark* vis-a-vis *Matthew* or *Luke* vis-à-vis *John*.

Nor do we have the words of contemporary observers, like those of Josephus on the Essenes or Philo on the Therapeutae, to explain who the authors of these gospels were and what they were like. There are hints of competing sorts of Christians or Jesus believers in Paul, the New Testament *Acts*, Ignatius, and even the *Apocalypse of John*, to be sure, but little to go on beyond those tantalizing bits, which are often cloaked in the strained rhetoric of invective or condemnation. Therefore the work of 'constructing a community' behind any particular early Christian narrative like the biblical or apocryphal gospels and acts will primarily involve the task of reading and drawing sensible inferences with a disciplined imagination.

Of those gospels within the canon of scripture it is easiest to imagine an actual, living sect involved with the generation and redaction of the *Gospel of John*, especially when it is read alongside at least two of the Johannine letters. But before I discuss *John* it may be instructive to consider the less promising circumstances of the Synoptic Gospels, whose origins and literary relationships make the issue of a generative 'community' rather more complicated.

⁷⁷ See e.g. the essays in Babcock. *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*.

The oldest surviving gospel, that ascribed to Mark, certainly has many aspects of sectarian consciousness: questions of who really belongs inside and outside the group are frequently discussed, for example, and there is also a sense of a community history, largely marked by disappointment and even failure²³. Furthermore there is a very clear sense of hope for divine intervention and vindication in a time of stress. Thus it makes sense for us to imagine a group of Christians in a time of trouble who represent both the bearers of the Marcan traditions of Jesus and those for whom the *Gospel of Mark* was first composed and recited. Presumably these were Gentile believers, given the explanations of Jewish customs and cavalier attitudes toward the Law of Moses displayed in chapter 7. But more than this is difficult to say with any clarity or hope of achieving consensus: guesses about the place of writing (Rome, Antioch, even Galilee) or the social location of the audience (urban or rural?) range far and wide.

Estimates also vary widely about the size and social-status profile of most early Christian congregations in the first three centuries. Keith Hopkins, who writes Roman historical studies using sociological and statistical models, and who has recently turned to examining early Christianity, prefers to use the term 'house-church' rather than 'community,' on the grounds that the term 'community' misleadingly suggests a larger, more highly developed organization! Thus the group that produced or first heard the *Gospel of Mark* might have consisted merely of a few families and their close associates, meeting in the domestic quarters of whichever member of the group (like the Chloe or Philemon visible in the Pauline correspondence) might have space.

It is difficult enough to reach even a low level of confidence in what is admittedly a very sketchy and abstract portrait of a 'community' of believers for Mark's gospel: the task is just as difficult for either *Matthew* or *Luke*. In the case of *Luke*, in fact, specialists are still divided on the question of whether the author is fundamentally

²³ See e.g. H.C. Kee. *Community of the New Age* (Philadelphia. 1977) and J. Marcus. *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (Chico, 1986); further P. Sellw, 'Oral and Written Tradition in Mark 4. 1-34'. NTS 36 (1990) 234-67, and the literature cited there.

²⁴ K. Hopkins, 'Christian Number and Its Implications', *J ECS* 6 (1998) 185-226.

opposed to Judaism, as some see the case, or else, on the other side, so thoroughly a Jew as to be identified as a member of the Pharisaic party? But no doubt in both *Matthew* and *Luke* we still find considerable evidence of group formation: the church order rules of *Matthew* chapters 16 and 18, for example, or the community ethics preached through Jesus' parables of the last judgment in *Matthew* 24 and 25.

Luke's gospel displays various themes that might relate to a community behind the text. His famous interest in the disadvantaged members of society is prominent, though probably too generalized to construct the specifics of his group. Though no doubt an idealized narrative, the Lucan *Acts of the Apostles* is chock-full of vivid sketches of community origins — programmatic aims, leaders chosen by divine lot, instructions offered them through visions and dreams, and leadership councils that pass legislation that is then communicated by letter. This *hairesis* (*Acts* 24.14) even has two new names for itself: their own or 'insider' name, the 'Way' (ἡ ὁδός), used especially in the context of conflict or persecution (*Acts* 9.2; 19.9, 23; 22.4; 24.14, 22), and the name given them by outsiders, the 'Christians' (11.26). The big problem is that we have little or no proof that either the author of *Luke-Acts* or whomever we can imagine reading his text (including the enigmatic Theophilus, the addressee mentioned in the prefatory sentence) had any direct connection with the groups pictured in Jerusalem or Antioch, and even the more specifically Pauline churches are shown mostly in a set of anecdotes and sketches without much detail. The author displays a marvelous verisimilitude, of course, and clearly was a resident of the Aegean who quite likely had a personal acquaintance with some of the congregations founded by Paul: but that acquaintance does not make a community.

The *Gospel of John*, to now move more closely to the spirit and thought-world of the Thomas literature²⁵ betrays its in-group orientation with its use of 'we' language in both the prologue ('We have

²⁵ Contrast e.g. the views of J.T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia, 1987) with those of J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis, 1972) and D.L. Tiede, *Luke: Augsburg Commentary* (Minneapolis, 1988).

²⁶ S. Davies, G. Riley, A. DeConnick and others have discussed the possible relationship or connections between the 'communities' of John and Thomas in different ways; for a good review see I. Dunderberg, 'John and Thomas in Conflict?'. in Turner and McGuire, *The Nag Hammadi Library*

beheld his glory,' 1.14) and the epilogue ('We know that his testimony is true,' 21.24). Many other specific features of the text have suggested to scholars a sectarian group identity for the writers and audience of this gospel. I need mention only a few items: there is the insistence on an ethos of love for one's fellow group members, with a corresponding suspicion or even demonization of opponents; there is the sense of exclusion from the ordinary arenas of Jewish life, especially the synagogue; or the use of a set of pictorial and symbolic vocabulary. The Johannine epistles provide further evidence of this apparent community in their continued stress on group cohesion and cooperation''.

One further symbol of import in the narrative of the *Gospel of John* might also signal its place in a closed, sectarian group, namely the enigmatic figure of the 'Beloved Disciple'. Whoever or whatever that cipher may be, the presentation of the character within the gospel story constructs a special and idealized authority figure for the group writing and reading this literature. The rather close analogies offered by the Socrates of Plato or, better, the Teacher of Righteousness of Qumran underline my point. In a way this unexplained, even teasing use of the anonymous Beloved Disciple as the linchpin of the authoritative Johannine memory and meaning of Jesus provides us a key as to the function of apostolic witnesses in other early Christian literary circles. Most of those other authorities will be named, to be sure, such as James, Peter, or our own Thomas, but their historical reality may be no more or less tangible than that of John's Beloved Disciple²⁸.

after Fifty Years, 361-80: *idem*, 'Thomas' I-sayings and the Gospel of John', in R. Uro (ed.) *Thomas at the Crossroads: Essays on the Gospel of Thomas* (Edinburgh, 1998) 33-64. In the latter article Dunderberg (p. 64) concludes that 'the coincidences between the Gospel of John and the I-sayings of the *Gospel of Thomas* do not betray any especially intimate relationship between these writings or the communities behind them' but rather point 'to a common setting in early Christianity from 70 CE to the turn of the first century'.

²⁷ There are good discussions in R.A. Culpepper, *The Johannine School* (Missoula, 1975); R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York, 1979) or Brown's Anchor Bible commentary on *The Epistles of John* (Garden City, 1982).

²⁸ J.H. Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple: Whose Witness Validates the Gospel of John?* (Valley Forge, PA, 1995), has made the unlikely suggestion that the Beloved Disciple in John's Gospel is none other than Thomas.

Yet to make progress from the general recognition that a narrative reveals a sense of group identity among its tradents, composers, and audience, to a more specific understanding of the flesh and bones of some specific human group called conveniently a 'community' or 'congregation' or 'Gemeinde' is more problematic than is usually acknowledged. There are both epistemological and literary difficulties of major consequence in reading these texts as the historically legible scripts of specific Christian congregations. Hopkins has this 'word of caution,' as he calls it:

'Community', like the term 'Christian', is a persuasive and porous category. In modern histories of the early church, *community* is often used as a category of expansion and idealism. For example, when we have a text, it is understandably tempting to assume that the author and his immediate audience constituted a 'community'. Hence the commonly touted concept of Pauline communities, Johannine communities, Gnostic communities; each text is assumed to have had a matching set of the faithful, who formed solidary communities, and these communities putatively used particular texts as their foundation or charter myths²⁹.

A recent collection edited by Richard Bauckham also raises the issue of 'communities' in gospel scholarship at length and with some acuity". Though I do not share much of the ideological agenda of some of the authors in Bauckham's collection who question the reality of specific 'communities' behind specific Biblical texts, especially their quite unabashed theological intent to rescue the gospels from any limited historical significance to help them regain their exalted status as Holy Scripture that may speak to all believers in all places, and grant us once again a direct or at least an uncomplicated 'unity' between the gospel literature and the historical Jesus", the essays in

Dunderberg, in Uro. *Thomas at the Crossroads*, 65-88, offers sensible criticism of Charlesworth's proposal and discusses the analogies between the figure of Thomas in the *Gospel of Thomas* and that of the Beloved Disciple in *John* in his article 'Thomas and the Beloved Disciple'.

²⁹ Hopkins. 'Christian Number', 198-9 (emphasis in original).

³⁰ R. Bauckham (ed), *The Gospels for All Christians* (Grand Rapids, 1998).

³¹ F. Watson. 'Toward a Literal Reading of the Gospels'. in Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*, 195-217. Watson argues most strenuously against Bultmann and Marxsen, claiming that their form-critical and redaction-critical work is essentially a modern form of allegorical interpretation.

Bauckham's book do raise pertinent and telling criticisms of the standard model of supposing that 'behind every Gospel stands a particular community.'

We must first of all be attentive to issues of literary type and function. As Bauckham remarks³², we sometimes jump from the rather well-attested communal concerns visible to us in Pauline letters like *1st Corinthians* to the assumption that similar issues must be in view in the gospels and acts. Though even the letters have narrative elements and can be read as stories with profit³³ we can presume that at least the authentic letters are addressing actual, living people who have real, pressing concerns like sexual ethics, the conduct and import of rituals such as baptism and the Lord's Supper, or the promised *parousia* of the Lord.

When narratives like the *ATh* display through the device of story-telling similar concerns with sexuality or sacraments, on the other hand, does this necessarily mean that the story's author and first readers needed immediate advice on these issues, or was another goal being addressed? When the disciples of Jesus ask him anxiously who will lead them after his departure, as we read in *Gos. Thom.* 12, and he tells them to 'go to James the Just, wherever you are, for heaven and earth came into being for him!' is this to be read as evidence for an actual connection and feeling of respect for some type of 'James Christianity,' as is most often suggested, or is it instead an ironic comment on the limitations of these all-too-human authority figures, stranded in this material world bounded by 'heaven and earth'?'³⁴

One of the key questions of method to ponder, therefore, is whether or how we can use a literary narrative as a transparent 'window' through which to gaze on some other world, or, less optimistically perhaps, as a reflective 'mirror' by which we at least

³² Bauckham. 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?'. in *The Gospels for All Christians*, 26-30.

³³ An excellent example is N.R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Minneapolis, 1985).

³⁴ Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 116-117, 151 (as others), still takes the reference to James in *Gos. Thom.* 12 as indicating an interest in or even a possible connection with Christians who appealed to that apostle's authority. For my suggestion cf. *Gos. Thom.* 86, which situates humanity between above (the realm of the birds) and below (the dens of the foxes).

get glimpses, admittedly distorted, of that other world³⁵. The assumption of much discussion of the 'communities' lying behind early Christian texts seems often to be that the narratives can indeed function as one of these types of glass. For example, scholars like Krister Stendahl or, more recently, J. Andrew Overman have moved beyond the general abstractions to read the Gospel of *Matthew* persuasively as telling the story of a Jewish-Christian congregation (*ekklesiá*) engaged in active competition with a prosperous group of Pharisees or proto-Rabbis³⁶. This reading depends on understanding the furious invective hurled by Jesus in the text against the hypocritical Pharisees (esp. Matthew 23) as having more to do with the situation of Matthew's day and the circumstances of his original audience than that of the days of Jesus. Of course this historical judgment is in itself presumably correct: the issue is to determine more precisely just *how* the gospels function as primary evidence for their authors' situations. Another example is how Theodore J. Weeden and others have seen the strongly negative portraits of the disciples of Jesus drawn in the Gospel of *Mark* to have a historical basis in the distrust of Mark's community in the leadership offered by Jerusalem-centered individuals who claimed connection with Jesus' family or original followers³⁷. Yet scholars of a rather more literary inclination have explained the treatment of the disciples as models (both positive and negative) for Mark's readers, or as part of the author's narrative strategy for implicating the audience in the value systems, actions, and thus also the challenges and failures of Jesus' first followers³⁸.

³⁵ S. Barton addresses this issue in his essay 'Can We Identify the Gospel Audiences?', in Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*, 173-94 at 176-9. Patterson acknowledges the hermeneutical difficulties in determining 'why one should expect that a particular text might be able to inform the historian about the social context in which it was written and used, and how such information is to be wrung from the text in question' (*Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 121-5. emphasis in original).

³⁶ K. Stendahl. *The School of St. Matthew*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, 1968); J. A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis, 1990); *idem*, *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Valley Forge, 1996).

³⁷ T.J. Weeden, *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia, 1971).

³⁸ See e.g. R.C. Tannehill, 'The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role,' *J. Rel.* 57 (1977) 386-405, followed in part by P. Sellew, 'Composition of Didactic Scenes in Mark's Gospel,' *J. Bibl. Lit.* 108 (1989) 613-34.

Halvor Moxnes has recently raised this very point of method in connection with interpreting the *Gospel of Luke* and the New Testament *Acts*:

How can we move from the text of Luke's Gospel to the social situation of his first readers? This problem in Gospel research has not yet been solved....The Lukan text creates a narrative world, and it is this world we examine as we analyze the social relations, ethos, and symbolic universe of Luke. Still, this does not mean that we now have a 'window' that opens onto the social situation of Luke's historical community³⁹.

It is quite possible, then, that the function and significance of characters and events within a narrative, such as the stereotyped 'hypocritical Pharisees' in *Matthew*, or the blundering and half-blind disciples of Jesus in *Mark*, are as much symbol or token as they are meant to represent the socio-historical reality of a particular congregation or set of churches in second- or third-generation Mediterranean Christianity.

Baukhham's own suggestion is that the gospels were intended to be read more broadly, by a network of churches, and figure in a larger literary, historical and theological conversation than the focus on some single generative community might suggest. The comparisons that Baukhham makes with *1st Clement* and the Ignatian epistles (to which one might add the letters addressed to the seven churches of Asia in *Revelation 2-3*) are suggestive of the notion of a network of congregations that are in frequent communication. Nonetheless Baukhham's approach to this literature seems uninformed by the insights of Walter Bauer's work on the highly diversified and non-centralized nature of Christian groups in the first two centuries. Baukhham calls his book 'The Gospels for *All Christians*', but his vision of early Christianity is anything but all-inclusive: he seems to have forgotten the readers of 'Q' and the *Gospel of Thionias* and the *Acts of Paul*, and has adopted the perspective of Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea wholesale.

³⁹ H. Moxnes, 'The Social Context of Luke's Community'. *Interpretation* 48 (1994) 379 (quotation taken from Barton, 'Can We Identify the Gospel Audiences?', 188).

The important point to carry from this methodological consideration that I have given to the canonical gospels and their possible origins in specific Christian communities is as follows. What we can be most sure about is the theological outlook (and possibly the sociological profile) of the group that generated a particular narrative; perhaps we may sketch out a bit of the character and expectations of their early audiences. But we must be very cautious about constructing a detailed history of such a postulated group from a symbolic reading of the story's people and events. General notions of such things as the group's stance toward possessions, or the acceptability of remarriage, or of circumcision, can be safely inferred; but constructing a more tangible and detailed portrait of this community may be risky. While we can glean quite a bit about the 'contours' of the groups portrayed within the text, and then move on to identify more precisely and vividly 'the social location of the beliefs and behaviors of the characters and groups presented in the [...] narratives', moving further away from that narrative world by using the text as a window into the life of a particular set of people is a hazardous step difficult to control⁴⁰.

3. Evidence for a 'Thomas Community'?

With these perspectives in mind, we can return to the question of the 'Thomas community' or 'Thomas Christianity' that Riley claims was not only responsible for creating the tradition still visible in Syrian Christian literature, but in fact was active from the first century as a major strand within the varieties of early Christian ideology. This 'community' produced the three texts the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Book of Thomas*, and the *Acts of Thomas*, though in this last case with considerable influence from the emergent 'orthodox' Christianity.

Riley constructs his case for a 'Thomasine Christianity' using familiar blocks⁴¹. He apparently takes the notion of 'community' for granted (following the general tradition of gospel scholarship in this

⁴⁰ On this point I am in general agreement with Barton.

⁴¹ Riley's essay 'Thomas Tradition and the *Acts of Thomas*' provides a convenient summary of his views.

regard) since he never explains or seeks to justify his presumption that such a group existed. Many of Riley's indicators are philological and literary: the use of the name 'Judas' alongside the name 'Thomas' in the *Gospel*, *Book*, and *Acts of Thomas*; the apostle's status as the recipient of Jesus' hidden words in all three works; the designation of the apostle as Jesus' twin brother in the *Book* and *Acts of Thomas*. All of these observations go back as far as Puech, Klijn, and Turner. Unfortunately this sort of evidence need not point to anything beyond the existence of a literary influence (and presumably also an ideological influence) of one or two of these books on the others. Readers and authors can recognize and encourage these similarities and allusions without such features necessarily requiring a distinct community of Thomas faithful to be understood.

Riley builds more of his case for 'Thomas Christianity' on the basis of the encratite attitude toward the body so visible in these three books, and especially on their denial of the physical resurrection. Riley's book on these traditions, entitled *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy*, develops this theme in the Thomas literature with clarity and conviction. No doubt the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Book of Thomas*, and the *ATh* do share a strongly negative attitude toward the physical world, and, in the latter two books, a special hatred of sexuality. Turner was right on target when he argued that over the course of the writing of these three books, the figure of the apostle becomes more and more active as the hero of encratism. In fact Thomas plays no such rôle at all in the *Gospel of Thomas*, though Jesus does make a few disparaging if indirect remarks about sex and especially its consequences (birth) that would be read by an encratite Christian with pleasure⁴¹.

Nonetheless it is clear that distrust of the material world, denigration of the body of flesh, and even this horror of the doctrine of the physical resurrection are not at all distinct to the Thomas books. Similar attitudes are promoted by much of early Christian literature, including the other AAA, and are notably visible in Syrian Christianity. Paul already dealt at Corinth with new believers who shared precisely these values: they were unsure or suspicious of sexuality (1 Cor. 7); they denied the (physical) resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15). Many Christian Gnostic texts adopt a similar ideology.

⁴² See e.g. *Gos. Thom.* 29; 55; 79; possibly also 15: 87; 114.

Another thematic similarity that Riley and other scholars point to as shared across these three Thomas texts is their symbolic vocabulary of paired opposites: and we may agree that all three do insist on the fundamental ethical and existential contrasts between such categories as below and above, the visible and invisible, what is perishable and what is eternal, the illusory and the real. and the fundamental contrast among humans, the ignorant vis-à-vis the wise or intelligent or perfect. Klijn's discussion in his commentary of these systematic polarities in the *ATh* would apply with very few changes to their similar use in the *Gospel of Thomas* or, perhaps less obviously, in the *Book of Thomas*⁴³. Yet once again this discourse of opposites does not define the Thomas literature over against other important streams within early Christianity: as we all know, both Paul and the *Gospel of John* also deployed these contrasts to great effect, as indeed did many Platonist, Hermetic, and Gnostic writings.

Though scholars have had difficulty identifying concrete evidence of specific community concerns in the *Gospel of Thomas*, its generic character as a sayings collection leads us to expect an active and involved readership*. Some limited signs of group consciousness are visible, as might be the case with questions posed in the text about the correct attitude to adopt toward fasting, prayer, and almsgiving in *Gos. Thom.* 6, 14, and 104⁴⁴. But it may be easier to reconstruct plausible ancient readings of the text than its generative community⁴⁵? Karen King has identified an ethos of community embedded in the language of the 'kingdom' in many of the

⁴³ Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 34-7.

⁴⁴ To this point I agree with Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 122, though I find the work too enigmatic to sense the 'air of utility' that he ascribes to it.

⁴⁵ See P. Sellew, 'Pious Practice and Social Formation in the Gospel of Thomas', *Forum* 10 (1994) 47-56; and now also A. Marjanen, 'Thomas and Jewish Religious Practices', in Uro, *Thomas at the Crossroads*, 163-82. I do not agree with Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 147-8 n. 111, that *Gos. Thom.* 104 contradicts the earlier statements to the extent that one must reckon on a 'late secondary influence from the synoptic text' in this instance.

⁴⁶ One example is B. Lincoln's reading of the *Gospel of Thomas* as a handbook for mystical initiates: 'Thomas-Book and Thomas-Community: A New Approach to a Familiar Text', *Novum Testamentum* 19 (1977) 65-76.

statements made by Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas*⁴⁷. She interprets the symbolic function of the frequent references to 'kingdom' as fostering the self-definition of a community of Thomas Christians in such key areas as social boundaries, community ethics, and conflict with outsiders; she understands the theme of searching and finding as conveying a strong sense of the 'salvific sense of belonging' to the group. King's close reading of the 'kingdom' theme is suggestive of how a group of ascetical readers of the *Gospel of Thomas* might well have understood its message. Nonetheless, the dominant theme of the text is not community rules but rather an intense focus on individual identity, on one's 'solitary' salvation''. Entrance into the group ('finding the kingdom') would thus involve salvation, but the mechanisms of how the group managed its affairs remain vague''.

Such a conclusion is actually supported even by the observations of Stephen J. Patterson, who has made the most sustained attempt to date at defining a 'Thomas community' that might have produced the gospel or otherwise explain its origins⁵⁰. The social description that Patterson offers in his thoughtful book is an extension of Gerd Theissen's thesis about the formative rôle played by itinerants or 'wandering charismatics' in the early generations of the Syro-Palestinian Jesus movement⁵¹. But while Theissen used primarily the

⁴⁷ K. King, 'Kingdom in the Gospel of Thomas', *Forum* 3 (1987) 48-97.

⁴⁸ It is intriguing however that the insistence on salvation offered to the $\overline{\text{M}}\text{MON}\overline{\text{A}}\text{XOC}$ or single ones running throughout the text (as in *Gos. Thom.* 16, 49, 75) typically uses the plural term. *Gos. Thom.* 49, e.g., reads: 'Blessed are those who are alone ($\overline{\text{N}}\text{MON}\overline{\text{A}}\text{XOC}$) and chosen.' It is debated whether the Coptic terms OYA or $\text{OYA OY}\overline{\text{O}}\overline{\text{T}}$ ('one.' 'single one': *Gos. Thom.* 4, 11, 22, 23, 106) are synonymous with the transliterated MON-axoc . Patterson has a good discussion along with earlier literature in *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 152-153. OYA *simplex* seems used specifically when paired with $\text{CNA}\overline{\text{Y}}$ ('two').

⁴⁹ King agrees with S. Davies and J.Z. Smith that such sayings as *Gos. Thom.* 22 refer to a baptismal rite which functioned to create 'children of the living Father.' i.e., members of the Thomas group.

⁵⁰ Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, esp. chap. 5. 'Thomas Christianity: A Social-Historical Description.' 121-57, and chap. 6, ''Thomas Christianity and Itinerant Radicalism: Be Passers-By,' 158-70.

⁵¹ G. Theissen, 'Wanderradikalismus: Literatursoziologische Aspekte der Überlieferung von Worten Jesu im Urchristentum', *ZThK* 70 (1973) 245-71, and *Soziologie der Jesusbewegung* (München, 1977).

Synoptic Gospels and especially the 'Q' traditions to build his reconstruction of itinerants like Jesus and his first followers moving among settled base communities of 'sympathizers,' Patterson shows that Theissen's insights fit the *Gospel of Thomas* better than they do the redacted forms of the Q materials as we now see them deployed in the *Gospel of Matthew* or the *Gospel of Luke*⁵².

Patterson takes the enigmatic statement of *Gos. Thom.* 42 'Be passers-by' (ὤψπε ετετῆρῖ παραγε) in a programmatic fashion⁵³: Thomas Christians are itinerant radicals, indeed 'homeless beggars' who are urged to despise ordinary life and the values of the commercial world. Patterson sees further evidence of Thomas Christianity's itinerant identity in *Gos. Thom.* 14, with its behavioral instructions to readers when they 'go into any district and walk from place to place' (though he also admits the statement's composite nature), and scattered calls to cut family ties and adopt an attitude of disdain for material wealth⁵⁴. Patterson argues that these and other statements in the *Gospel of Thomas*, which do of course fit an attitude of denial of the world, reflect or even support a group (?!) of alienated, homeless, wandering loners. Patterson in effect constructs his 'Thomas Christians' by reifying the implied audience of Jesus' commands within the text (adapting Bultmann's formal categories of 'legal sayings' and 'community rules'). But when it comes to describing his 'Thomas Christianity' in any detail beyond this rather straightforward historicization of admittedly enigmatic and at times contradictory commands and exhortations, even Patterson has to grant that there is 'precious little material with which to work', and that 'there is little in Thomas that provides for community organization or structure: there is no Thomas community *per se*, but rather a loosely structured movement of wanderers'⁵⁵. Instead Patterson demonstrates how smoothly the 'Thomasine' ethos of ascetic individualism fits with emergent forms of Syrian Christianity⁵⁶.

⁵² See in particular Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 163-70.

⁵³ The translation 'Become (*or* Come into Being) as you pass by' is also possible. No parallel survives among the Greek fragments.

⁵⁴ E.g., *Gos. Thom.* 27, 54; the parables 63-65, 95; possibly 8, 55, 76, 86, 107.

⁵⁵ Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 151.

⁵⁶ Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 166-8, drawing on the work of A. Baker, A. Voobus, G. Kretschmar, and J. M. Robinson.

In view of all these difficulties in describing the socio-historical 'community' in which the *Gospel of Thomas* was (first) written, a more promising task would be to construct a probable *readership* for the *Gospel of Thomas*. As I have suggested in two recent articles⁵⁷, it is not difficult to understand the appeal of the late-second and early third-century Oxyrhynchos *Thomas* fragments in ascetical circles of Greek-reading Egyptian Christianity, or to imagine fourth-century monks puzzling over the esoteric and contradictory statements of the Coptic translation of the *Gospel of Thomas* (and *Book of Thomas*) in Nag Hammadi Codex II. This approach could then exploit King's suggestions about how reading the symbolics of 'kingdom' and other themes in the *Gospel of Thomas* could serve the process of (individual and) group formation⁵⁸.

Once we pose the question of readership rather than of the identity of some generative community, we can begin to open up the dynamics of this literature as a conversation among authors, iconic characters, scribes, translators, and readers. A fruitful manner of sketching out the relationship and special character of the literature associated with Thomas is to analyze the way the figure of the apostle himself develops in and across these books—from the mere attachment of his name as the putative narrator or author, which could well be incidental (as in the so-called *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*) toward the development of a special Thomasine persona and rôle. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, he is named the confidant of Jesus and is shown to be reluctant to serve as spokesperson for the One Who Lives; he is in no way a representative or replacement for Jesus (in contrast to the polymorphism on display in the *ATh*)⁵⁹. Within the

⁵⁷ Sellew, 'Death, the Body and the World in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas', *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997) 530-4, and 'The Gospel of Thomas: Prospects for Future Research', in Turner and McGuire, *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years*, 33-7-46.

⁵⁸ King, 'Kingdom in the Gospel of Thomas.' King observes that nearly all the parables of the kingdom in *Thomas* mention an individual person, which she understands as referring to actual or idealized members of the Thomas community. The metaphoric language is likely rather more fluid than this approach allows.

⁵⁹ Riley has a fascinating and convincing discussion of the theme of polymorphism and docetism in the *ATh*: 'Thomas Tradition and the *Acts of Thomas*', 538-41: see now also P. J. Lalleman, 'Polymorphy of Christ,' in Bremmer, *Acts of John*, 97-118.

gospel text itself, Thomas figures only at statement 13; it may be that the prologue (and also the subscript) were derived secondarily from this scene of private and secret conversation, an idea which I unfortunately cannot develop here for reasons of space⁶⁰ ('.

In the Book of *Thomas*, the apostle plays the rôle of Jesus' special interlocutor, the one who poses the questions that he (and presumably his readership) want the Savior to address. So in that book, though Thomas is still not Christ's spokesperson, he does an effective job of eliciting his teaching. The apostle is more prominent in the dialogue there than in the *Gospel of Thomas*: indeed he is the only conversation partner that Jesus addresses by name (though others seem present beyond the Mathaias of the prologue).

In the lengthy narrative of the missionary career of Judas Thomas (the *ATH*) we at last get a full and quite interesting characterization of the apostle. A much more powerful sense of an author's voice emerges on reading the *ATH*, produced by a talented creator of narrative. The author constructs the character in part through description, when he shows us Thomas's actions, in part by what other individuals in the story say to and about him. In other words, the author of the *ATH*, an otherwise unknown writer resident in early third-century Syria⁶¹, has composed a work that exemplifies the Christian sector of popular literature in Late Antiquity, the 'early Christian fiction' compared so aptly in recent years to the Greek novels of the Roman Imperial period⁶¹. The more successfully the narrative art of fiction is

⁶⁰ Patterson. *Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, 117, argues that *Gos. Thom.* 13 has 'a secondary status'. and that 'the basic Thomas collection was already in existence when the Prologue. Thom 13, and Thoni 114 were added...'. I treat this topic at length in my book on the *Gospel of Thomas*, currently in preparation for the Polebridge series *The Scholars Bible*.

⁶¹ Beyond these two items (locating the *ATH* in third-century Syria, possibly Edessa) little is known about the historical circumstances behind the text, but see also Brenimer, this volume. Ch. VI. On the relative anonymity of the authors of the *AAA*, see Bremmer. this volume, Ch. XI.1.

M.A. Tolbert and others use the term 'popular literature' to describe early Christian prose in close comparison with the Greco-Roman novels (in Tolbert's case, particularly Xenophon of Ephesus and the *Gospel of Mark*: *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, 1989) 48-79; see also R.F. Hock, J.B. Chance and J. Perkins (eds). *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (Atlanta, 1998). R. I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles*

employed, of course, the ever more dangerous it becomes to read too much between the lines to find something 'historical' behind or beyond the story.

The character in the *ATh* that seems to know the most about the apostle is the talking colt of an ass in *Praxis* 4 who invites him to ride back into the city on its back after Thomas has revived a youth. The colt addresses him as 'twin brother of Christ, apostle of the Most High, initiate into the hidden word of Christ, who receives his secret utterances, fellow worker of the Son of God' (39). Thomas gives glory to God for the wonders of his creation and then ponders how this animal came to know what he calls things 'hidden from many' (40). These details of the Thomasine persona are of course available to the Thomas aficionado in the *Gospel* and *Book* that carry his name: maybe the colt can read as well as it can talk! It turns out that the colt is descended from the prophetic race of asses that trace their ancestry to the stable of Balaam himself, and it seeks the special spiritual reward that will come if it can persuade Thomas to mount and ride it. After some hesitation, the apostle does ride the colt, and the animal does appear to receive its reward—when Thomas dismounts at the city gate, the colt promptly dies on the spot (41)⁶³.

Should we read the prophetic beast as a symbol of scholars in search of Thomas and his hard-to-find 'community' of Thomasine Christians? There is no doubt that in Syria many early Christians revered the person of this apostle. But the profile of Thomasine literature and theology that we have been offered is shared also by the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Pistis Sophia*, and many other ancient Christian and even some not-so-Christian writings. We cannot simply confine the varieties of Syrian Christianity to a 'Thomasine' church. The *ATh* may reveal nothing more than the deployment of this beloved and available apostolic figure for the author's own literary and

(Philadelphia, 1987) 122-31, classified the *AAA* as novels, particularly 'historical novels'; the comparison with 'romantic fiction' is driven home more fully by him in *idem*, 'The Ancient Novel Becomes Christian', in G. Schmeling (ed), *The Novel in the Ancient World* (Leiden, 1996) 685-711, overlooked by J. N. Bremmer, 'The Novel and the Apocryphal Acts: Place, Time and Readership,' in H. Hofmann and M. Zimmermann (eds), *Groningen Colloquia on the Novel IX* (Groningen, 1998) 157-80 at 158.

⁶³ The fate of the colt who carried Jesus into Jerusalem in the canonical gospels is unrecorded.

theological ends. The learned and witty writer of the *ATh* had read the *Gospel* and probably also the dialogue book bearing his name and had drunk deeply from that well (that 'bubbling spring,' *Gos. Thom.* 13) and taken those lessons to heart. The legendary follower of Jesus who may have doubted his resurrection was able to become – via his literary career – first his Savior's scribe, then his interlocutor and spokesman, and finally, through the divine mysteries of twinship and polymorphism, his earthly representative to the faithful. But this journey and transformation were not the result of impersonal forces at work on an anonymous Thomasine community. Rather than reduce the achievement of the artist behind this masterly romance of the saint to the archival level of community records, we should be grateful for his inspiration and applaud his creative genius.