

Two Faces Have I: The Inconvenient Truth About the *Gospel of Thomas*

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Not many students and teachers of the *Gospel of Thomas* are yet aware of what might be called the “puzzle-text” theory. Those who are seem not to know what to make of it, or how it impacts the 70 years of interpretation which have followed the first publication of Gos.Thom. Perhaps they downplay the theory because it involves methodological techniques with which they're uncomfortable. That can't be helped. I wish it were otherwise, but it isn't. The inconvenient truth is that the Gospel of Thomas is of a genre unfamiliar to us, and has to be dealt with as such – including the use of simple methodological tools (e.g., counting and numbering) which have been used sparingly, if at all, on other texts.

The best overview of the theory, and the textual evidence for it, that I've so far been able to produce is in the Academia piece “Why the Gospel of Thomas Had To Be Imperfect”¹. Herein, I'll try to sketch out the basics of the theory, starting from the data. What can be said with absolute certainty at the outset is that *Thomas* is *not* just a “sayings collection”. Nor was the Coptic version haphazardly or ineptly composed. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Data from the Coptic manuscript (NHC II,2):

1. Three different counts prove that this ms. was carefully designed: (a) the number of *nomina sacra* for IHSOUS is 105, tied to the numeric values of $\text{I}\overline{\text{C}}$ (210) and $\Theta\overline{\text{O}}\overline{\text{M}}\overline{\text{A}}\overline{\text{C}}$ (1050). (b) There are 500 instances of Greek loan words and names, containing 2400 letters. (c) The total number of letters in the main body of the text (sans prologue) is 16800 = 80*210 and 7*2400.
2. In at least one case (Th74) a pair of apparent errors can plausibly be seen as *deliberate imperfections* which the reader was intended to “heal” as it were. (See “The Sickness in Th74”)
3. There are multiple cases (painstakingly documented in my Academia papers) of sayings or parts thereof clearly intended to be changed and/or rearranged according to specific clues and pointers within the text, with the evident goal of creating sayings whose letter-size is divisible by 10 and/or have a letter-count-based chiasmic (e.g., 26-24-24-26) or equilinear structure.
4. Since these results were obtained from the Coptic manuscript exactly as it is, it must be regarded as a line-by-line copy of a carefully-designed prototype. Each letter and line must be assumed to be exactly what was intended by its designers, unless soundly shown otherwise.

A theory that explains the data:

1. The Coptic version of *Thomas* is a text-based puzzle with the serious purpose of aiding and illustrating the process of *transformation* by being itself an imperfect “world” in need of such.
2. Since the Greek version of *Thomas* also has a prologue with a letter-count-based chiasmic structure, it's more likely than not that its genre was the same as the Coptic version.
3. Going back to what Hippolytus wrote about the Naassenes in the first known reference to *Thomas* by name, we see a reference to things being of a nature “which is both hidden and revealed at the same time”. Furthermore, there's a reference to “the Egyptians”. From these threads, it seems plausible that *Thomas* was used in Yeshuine mystery schools or sects, including the Barbeloites, the most likely composers of Coptic *Thomas*. The text would have had to have been different in each language – a straight translation couldn't preserve its nature.
4. Can one conclude otherwise than that *Thomas* had two “faces” or sides to it – one public and open, the other private and hidden? The one intended for “outsiders”, the other for “insiders”? But why should we care enough to go to the trouble (and it *is* tough work) to unravel the private side? It's probably a thing of great compositional beauty, but beyond that, it's where the private sayings (hence real beliefs) of its composers reside. In that world of “compositionally-perfect” logia, Th100 *doesn't* have IHSOUS saying “give me what's mine” and the buyer of the field in Th109 *doesn't* give money “at interest”. The soundness of all our interpretational work to date is thus put into question until the matter of “secret *Thomas*” is resolved.

1 All my writings available at <https://wayne.academia.edu/MichaelGrondin>