

2023 Foreword: Additional “Reflections”

It’s been over five years now since I wrote this little piece, but in recently mulling it over when someone asked about it, I see that it has two major shortcomings: (1) I failed to notice that both L13.4 and L108 contain the word ‘mouth’ and (2) I failed to include a display of the text in question – which is now standard procedure with me. Herewith, the fix.

35:02 (089) 13.4>	ΠΕΧΑ·Q	ΝΑ·Q	Ν̄ΘΙ·ΘΩΜΑΣ	
	> Said-he	to-him,	viz-Thomas,	
			ΩΑΠ·Q	
35:03 (090)	ΧΕ Π·CΑΖ	ΖΟΛΩC	ΤΑ·ΤΑΠΡΟ	·ΝΑ·ΩΑΠ·Q’
	this: "Master,	wholly	my-mouth	will-accept()-
				not
35:04 (091) 13.5>	ΕΤΡΑ·ΧΟ·ΟC	ΧΕ	ΕΚ·ΕΙΝΕ	Ν̄·ΝΙΜ’
	that-I-speak	that	Usg-resemble	whom."
				> Said-IHS/
35:05 (092)	ΧΕ	ΑΝΟ·Κ’	ΠΕΚ·’·CΑΖ	ΑΝ
	this: " I (am)	Urs \ master	not;	becuz
			ΑΚ·CΩ	ΑΚ·†ΖΕ
			U-drank,	U-got-drunk
35:06 (093)	ΕΒΟΛ	Ζ̄Ν·Τ·ΠΗΓΗ	ΕΤ·Β̄ΡΒΡΕ	ΤΑΕΙ
	out	of-the-spring	which-bubbles,	the-one
				I
35:07 (094) 13.6>	Ν̄ΤΑΕΙ·ΩΙΤ·C̄	ΑΥΩ	ΑQ·ΧΙΤ·Q̄	ΑQ·ΑΝΑΧΩΡΕΙ
	have()measured-her;"	> And	he-took-him,	he-withdrew,
			ΩΟΜΤ	
35:08 (095)	ΑQ·ΧΩ	ΝΑ·Q	Ν̄·ΩΟΜΤ’	Ν̄·ΩΑΧΕ
	he-spoke	to-him	three	words.
50:28 (635) 108.1:	ΠΕΧΕ·IC̄	ΧΕ	ΠΕΤΑ·CΩ	ΕΒΟΛ
	Said-IS96	this:	Whoever-drinks	out
				of-my-mouth,
50:29 (636) 108.2>	Q·ΝΑ·ΩΩΠΕ	Ν̄·ΤΑ·ΖΕ	ΑΝΟ·Κ	ΖΩ·
	he-will-CTbe	in-my-way;	> I	also(),
				()will-CTbe
			Τ·2	
50:30 (637) 108.3>	Ε·ΝΤΟ·Q	ΠΕ	ΑΥΩ	ΝΕΘΗΠ’
	as-he	is,	> and	TWA-hidden
				will-appear
				to-him.

As I wrote on my Facebook page yesterday:

I've had occasion recently to look back at my little Academia piece on the "three words" referred to in Gospel of Thomas logion 13.6. The mystery of what those words are has spawned a host of speculative guesses, almost all of them consisting of three single words not in Gos.Thom. That's all hooey. It's reasonably likely that anything said or implied to be "hidden" is hidden within Thomas itself, and that the three "words" are the three clauses of L108. (The Greek word in question can also mean an entire thought.) The linkage is so obvious: "drink from my mouth" in L108 linked to 'mouth' and 'drink' in L13.4-5. "I'm not your master" in L13.5 linked to "he becomes like me and I become like him" in L108. All of a piece reflected also in the numeric value of their names - 'Thomas' (1050) and 'IC' (210), and in the number of times IHSOUS is mentioned in the text (105). This elevation of the Thomas-type disciple to the spiritual level of IHSOUS, as well as the promise that Thomas disciples would come to know "hidden things" that other disciples didn't know would have been considered blasphemy by orthodox disciples, as per L14. What could be clearer?

Reflections on the “Three Words” of the Gospel of Thomas

And he took him and withdrew, and spoke three words to him. (Gathercole tr. of L 13.6)

What are the “three words” that Gos.Thom. tells us that Jesus spoke to Thomas? In Simon Gathercole’s list of eight suggestions¹ put forward by Thomas scholars, seven contain literally three “words”, which is surprising given that both the Coptic word involved and its Greek equivalent can also mean ‘saying’ or ‘statement’. The exception among the eight suggestions – both in terms of its being statements instead of single words and in terms of its locating the “three words” *inside* Gos.Thom. rather than outside it – is that of Charles Hedrick². Gathercole observes that “Hedrick floats the possibility of the three elements which the ascending soul needs to declare in GTh 50.” Indeed, there are several groups of three statements within Gos.Thom. that could qualify as the “three words” and I am going to suggest one that stands out, but first we need to be clear about what conditions candidates for the “three words” should meet. I would propose two:

Condition 1: Each and every one of the “three words” must be “blasphemous”. As opposed to reading L13.8 (“If I tell you one of the words he said to me ...”) as “One of the words is such that if I tell you *that one* ...”, which seems an unlikely interpretation.

Condition 2: The best candidate for “three words” constitutes a follow-up to L13.5. That is to say, the successful candidate should in some way connect up with “I am not your teacher. For you have drunk, (and) you have become [intoxicated] from the bubbling spring that I have measured out.” As far as I can tell, this factor is universally ignored, but to me L13.5 is a pointer to the contents of the “three words”. Or is it just a coincidence that L108 – the saying directly connected with L13.5 – happens to contain exactly three “words” that elevate Thomas above the other disciples?

L108.1 “Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me,
L108.2 I myself will become as he is,
L108.3 and the hidden things will be revealed to him”

While it’s true that the mere possession of the “three words” sets Thomas above the other disciples, here it’s stated that not only he, but anyone else who “drinks from my mouth” (i.e., internalizes the words of Jesus) will become like Jesus and Jesus will become like him. The first would have been an anathema to the hierarchy of “orthodoxy” then as the later Reformation would be to their successors. The second would surely have been considered even more blasphemous. Metaphorical stoning-worthy also would have been any claim that such folks would become privy to “hidden things” not in the approved gospels. So I would identify the “friends/companions” of Thomas mentioned in L13.7 as “orthodox disciples” – disciples, that is, of Jesus, and by extension the authorized authorities of the emerging church, not disciples of anyone who got their authority from L108. This must be the case, I think, since it seems very likely that the backdrop against which L13 was constructed was the view of its authors that they were outsiders.

Michael W. Grondin, 7 December 2017

¹ Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary* (Brill, 2014, 264-265). All translations are Gathercole’s, except bracketed changes to L13.5 and L108.2.

² C.W. Hedrick, *Unlocking the Secrets of the Gospel according to Thomas* (Wipf & Stock, 2010)

Gathercole on the “Three Words”

(from The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary, Brill, 2014, 264-265)

13.6 And he took him and withdrew, and spoke three words to him.

This recalls the Prologue, with its reference to private revelation to Thomas, which is the basis for Thomas’s distinction from the other disciples (cf. Mary in *Gos. Mary*, Judas in *Gos. Jud.*, etc.). What the three words are is unknown, though various suggestions have been made. (a) Grant & Freedman, and Ménard, propose ‘Kaulakau, Saulasau, Zesar’, the three explosive words according to the Naassenes (Hippolytus, *Ref.* 5.8.4; cf. Isa. 28.10, 13);²⁵ (b) Puech proposed ‘Father, Son, Spirit’ in common with the similar motif in the Coptic fragment of the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, but the connection is tenuous.²⁶ (c) Cullmann suggested, rather arbitrarily though only as a possibility, ‘Way, Truth, Life’, which in the absence of other strongly Johannine language is improbable.²⁷ (d) Frenschkowski and Nordsieck suggest a three-word phrase expressive of the identity between Jesus and Thomas, such as ἐγὼ σὺ εἰμι.²⁸ Gunther also thinks the three words have to do with Thomas and his special status.²⁹ (e) Arai suggests ἐγὼ ἴσος πατρὶ or something like it.³⁰ (f) Trevijano Etcheverría suggests that, in common with other Nag Hammadi texts, the words are speculations on the ineffable name of Jesus,³¹ and DeConick insists that the words must be ‘*hyh ašr ‘hyh*’;³² (g) Hedrick floats the possibility of the three elements which the ascending soul needs to declare in GTh 50;³³ (h) Nordsieck mentions the option of ‘Yao, Yao, Yao’, as declared by Jesus in *Pistis Sophia* 136.³⁴ (i) Plisch is probably correct, however, that the three words are not identified here in the text, and that their secrecy is deliberate.³⁵ Their function here is to ensure that Thomas is, in contrast to his previous inebriation and to the other disciples, now fully initiated.

25 Grant & Freedman, 134; Menard, 99; cf. Irenaeus, *AH* 1.24, where the Basilideans are said to have thought that Jesus descended and ascended in the name of Kaulakau

26 Puech, ‘Collection de Paroles de Jésus récemment retrouvée’, 156. See E.A.W. Budge, *Coptic Apocrypha in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London: British Museum, 1913), 214.

27 O. Cullmann, ‘Das Thomasevangelium und die Frage nach dem Alter der in ihm enthaltenen Tradition’, *TLZ* 85 (1960), 320–334 (327).

28 Frenschkowski, ‘The Enigma of the Three Words’, 82; Nordsieck, 70.

29 Gunther, ‘Judas Thomas’, 114.

30 Arai, ‘Zu “Drei Worte” Jesu’, 64–66.

31 Trevijano Etcheverría, ‘Santiago el Justo y Tomás el Mellizo’, 111. For a survey of older views, see Walls, ‘References to Apostles’, 267–268.

32 DeConick, 85.

33 Hedrick, 40.

34 Nordsieck, 71.

35 Plisch, 65. Nor are they identified in *Ac. Thom.* 47, which mentions this incident.