

The Gospel of Thomas
A Catholic Understanding

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Also by the author:

“Jesus, a novel”

“A Maximum Understanding of the Body of Christ”

“A Catholic Understanding of the
Near Death Experience”

The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings or teachings attributed to Jesus, as recorded by the apostle Thomas. Half are identically or substantially alike to those of the canonical gospels. The remaining sayings are in dispute as to their origin.

The worst case estimation of the gospel of Thomas is that some of its sayings were not made by Jesus. There are only two possibilities as to the authenticity of the sayings of the Gospel of Thomas: (1) it is entirely the authentic sayings of Jesus; (2) only some of the sayings are the authentic sayings of Jesus — because so many are identical.

The author believes that all the sayings of Jesus are within the bounds of Catholic theology, and are authentic sayings of Jesus. It must be noted that not all the sayings of the Gospel of Thomas are made by Jesus; Peter and the other apostles and disciples have shared authorship in at least 25 of the sayings.

The Gospel of Thomas is self described as being the “obscure”, “hidden”, or “secret” sayings of Jesus, (depending on the translation). Because nearly all of the sayings of Jesus are said to two or more disciples, we must eliminate the translated word “secret”. Only one saying has Jesus specifically speaking to Thomas. The prologue of the manuscript itself says that Thomas simply recorded the sayings, not that he was its directed audience. By far the most common recipients of the sayings are “disciples”.

Even those readers believing that only some sayings are authentic, will gain deeper insight into the gospel based on those sayings he believes to be authentic. The gospel of Thomas is well worth the time spent studying it.

The first three manuscripts of the Gospel of Thomas were each fragments found in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. Oxyrhynchus was a major city of Egypt and was mostly Christian (not Gnostic), until its conquest by Islam in the seventh century.¹

These fragments would have been parts of three previously complete Gospel of Thomas manuscripts. A complete manuscript was found at Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945. It was written in the ancient Egyptian Coptic language. The Nag Hammadi find was of fifty-two religious texts, mostly Gnostic.

Gnosticism was a heretical movement peaking in the second, third and fourth centuries. Gnosticism has a Supreme God, who is remote from our existence. The world was created and ruled by a lesser and antagonistic divinity, the demiurge. Christ was an emissary of the Supreme God, and speaks against the corrupt demiurge god. Knowledge (gnosis) of the Supreme God (as preached by Jesus), and our potential to rejoin the Supreme God enables humanity to make this reunion. There are many variations of Gnosticism, and the role of Christ within it.

Early Gnosticism was not entirely at odds with Christianity. A common belief, was that our world is flawed and

¹ Records of all sorts: death, business, religious and more, which are preserved on papyrus in the dry climate indicate that names underwent a transition from traditional Egyptian form to Christian form, with Coptic language equivalents of Peter, Mary, John, etc. becoming predominant or significant (depending on the area) by the fourth century. The Islamic conquest of Egypt in the seventh century brought on a new set of names.

humanity had lost its knowledge of its true origin (God), and its true destiny (God). Gnosticism places the blame on lesser gods, who are themselves corrupt and created our corrupt world. Christianity of course, places this blame on ourselves. There are many variations within what we call Gnosticism.

The author believes that the Gnostics attached themselves (and their interpretation) to the genuine gospel of Jesus, which we now call “the Gospel of Thomas”, rather than writing it. The Gospel of Thomas was also widely used within the mainstream Christian Church, and most manuscripts have been found in these Christian churches. It is still used today; Pope Benedict XVI used a teaching from the Gospel of Thomas in his 2012 Easter vigil (eve) Mass.

The date of origin of the Gospel of Thomas is unknown and disputed. Many estimates of its recording as a manuscript place it as early as the canonical gospels. Many of the sayings are virtually identical to those in the canonical gospels, and must have their origin in Jesus.

It does appear that the Gospel of Thomas is an independent and parallel gospel. Its teachings do not appear to be copied from the canonical gospels. The evidence for this is that some teachings are worded the same, while others are the same in substance but with a different wording. If the canonical gospels were simply copied into Thomas, all the wording would be the same.

Different wording for the same teaching also occurs between the four canonical gospels. Like the canonical gospels, the Gospel of Thomas has existed in Greek, Coptic, and Syrian languages. The only known complete manuscript is in the Egyptian Coptic language.

The following is the Gospel of Thomas, (combined Greek and Coptic translations) with relevant explanations of the sayings according to Catholic theology.

These are the obscure sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded.

This prologue has several interpretations, with the word "obscure" sometimes translated into: "hidden", or "secret". "Secret" is an unlikely meaning since the sayings usually have Jesus speaking to two or more disciples, or a crowd of listeners. The fact that more than twenty of the sayings have disciple's speaking to Jesus (with Thomas recording them) indicates that the Gospel of Thomas is not a collection of "secret" sayings of Jesus, see footnote 3.

The following Gospel of Thomas sayings (logoi) are primarily from the English translations of the Egyptian Coptic language manuscript. Where brackets [] occur, it indicates a word that is missing due to manuscript damage [...], or damaged but estimated by scholars, [word].

1. And he said, "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death."

This is similar to Jn 8:51, "Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.". The original manuscripts do not number the sayings.

This saying in no way challenges Christian dogma, but the word "interpretation", would appeal to the Gnostics, as some sort of secret knowledge. The Christian would "interpret" the words of Jesus into personal actions.

2. Jesus said, "Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will reign over all."

Catholic teaching is that we become members of the body of Christ, we literally become Christ (CCC 1213, 790, 795), who is now: Jesus, Eucharist and the faithful. The first reaction to this idea is disturbance or disbelief, then marvel, then a sharing in the very life and reign of God. See the appendix for details of the Catholic understanding of the body of Christ, and our inclusion into it.

3. Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the Father's kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Father's kingdom is within you and it is outside you."

"When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty."

The first half is similar to Lk 17:20-21, "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!'; for, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

The second paragraph calls us to realize that we are children of God; such knowledge is implied belief in God, which even alone can lead to our salvation by Christ. *If we fail to know, hope and ask, then we remain in and as poverty, rather than in our intended fulfilled state.*

In Mt 7:23 Jesus says, "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness!'"² St. Thomas Aquinas spoke of knowledge as

² In both the canonical gospels and the Gospel of Thomas, several teachings link knowledge of Christ to salvation, this idea may have been the core around which Gnosticism was formed. We observe however that knowledge of Christ was not enough to attain salvation

a sort of participation in the object known. When we think of a tree, we become in part, the tree. We share in the idea of a tree. We do not have the ability to fully become the tree, because of our God given limitations.

Any teaching of Jesus which referenced knowledge would have appealed to the Gnostics, but Jesus made several such canonical teachings, but this does not relegate such teachings to the category of Gnosticism.

By God's grace we may fully become Christ, who is now the entire body of Christ. Christ's act of knowledge or participation in us, includes us into his person. There is more to it than knowledge of course, but this specific teaching in Thomas is contained within the bounds of Catholic theology.

4. Jesus said, "The person old in days won't hesitate to ask a little child seven days old about the place of life, and that person will live."

"For many of the first will be last, and will become a single one."

The child is among the least of persons, yet he may end up as the first. This is because of the child's depth of participation in Christ. If not by his limited understanding, then by his action. The "person old in days", does well to consult the child.

The second paragraph stresses that the first (having pride) is self contained and therefore has a limited sharing in Christ, and may end up as the least in Heaven. But in the end all members of the body of Christ will constitute the single person of Christ. There does seem to be some literary exaggeration in this teaching, and Jesus often made such rhetorical exaggeration.

for the fallen angels (for example). Inclination of the will toward Christ, or at least toward virtue is required.

The Gnostics strayed more significantly in that they did not subscribe to the sacraments, they believed Christ to be simply a higher order semi-god, and they saw the material world as inherently evil.

5. Jesus said, "Know what is in front of your face, and what is hidden from you will be disclosed to you."

"For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed. And there is nothing buried that will not be raised."

What is in front of the listener's face is Jesus. When we know or participate in Jesus, the larger world of Christ is disclosed to us. We could translate the word "know" into the word "believe", and arrive at the same meaning. The last sentence of the teaching appears in the Greek manuscript, but not in the Coptic. The Coptic Thomas is far more complete and forms the bulk of the English translation.

6. His disciples asked him and said to him, "Do you want us to fast? How should we pray? Should we give to charity? What diet should we observe?"³

Jesus said, "Don't lie, and don't do what you hate, because all things are disclosed before heaven. After all, there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed, and there is nothing covered up that will remain undisclosed."

The first paragraph has the disciples asking about religious protocol, which is secondary to moral substance.

In the second paragraph, Jesus then explains the more vital elements of religion, "Don't do what you hate.", which translates to "Don't do what you hate in your moral conscious."

The rest of this saying is similar to Lk 8:17, "For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing

³ Strictly speaking, the first half of saying 6 is spoken by the disciples, not Jesus. Sayings of shared authorship are: 6, 12, 13, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 37, 43, 51, 52, 53, 60, 61, 72, 74, 79, 91, 99, 100, 104, 111,113, 114.

concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open."

7. Jesus said, "Lucky is the lion that the human will eat, so that the lion becomes human. And foul is the human that the lion will eat, and the lion still will become human."

Because a teaching is mystical and abstruse does not make it inauthentic or erroneous. A possible explanation is as follows: the lion is consumed and becomes the man who has the good fortune of being a member of Christ, (the body of Christ). The foul human is someone distant from Christ, and the lion that is consumed enjoys no real increase in stature. Jesus is using figurative language to promote one's inclusion into the body of Christ.

8. And he said, "The person is like a wise fisherman who casts his net into the sea and drew it up from the sea full of little fish. Among them the wise fisherman discovered a fine large fish. He threw all the little fish back into the sea, and easily chose the large fish. Anyone here with two good ears had better listen!"

This is identical in meaning to Mt 13:47-48, and similar to the pearl of great price (Mt 13:45-46), or the field of treasure, (Mt 13:44).

9. Jesus said, "Look, the sower went out, took a handful of seeds, and scattered them. Some fell on the road, and the birds came and gathered them. Others fell on rock, and they didn't take root in the soil and didn't produce heads of grain. Others fell on thorns, and they choked the seeds and worms ate them. And others fell on good soil, and it produced a good crop: it yielded sixty per measure and one hundred twenty per measure."

This is virtually identical in wording to the parable of the sower, (Mt 13:1-9). This is an example of a Gospel of Thomas saying that could only have its origin with Jesus. Many such sayings in the Gospel of Thomas are identical in word or meaning to the canonical gospels, and can only have Jesus as the author. ⁴

10. Jesus said, "I have cast fire upon the world, and look, I'm guarding it until it blazes."

This is similar to Lk 12:49. The fire is usually thought to be the Holy Spirit.

11. Jesus said, "This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will pass away."

"The dead are not alive, and the living will not die. During the days when you ate what is dead, you made it come alive. When you are in the light, what will you do? On the day when you were one, you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?"

From Mt 24:35, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."; see also Mk 13:31, Lk 16:17, 21:33; 2 Pet 3:10.

As to the second part, the only real new teaching is "On the day when you were one, you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?". We have our origin in Christ, we were once an idea internal to Christ, we were then

⁴ The canonical gospels are guaranteed to be free of moral or theological error. At least two non-canonical teaching documents of the early Church, the Didache and the Shepard of Hermas, are used in the Catechism as official teaching. Pope Benedict XVI quoted from the Gospel of Thomas in his Easter vigil Mass of 2012. Non-canonical documents may or may not be free of error, they are simply not guaranteed. Within the canonical gospels a person may make both morally correct and incorrect acts, this occurred with both Judas and Peter, and any human for that matter.

incarnated as persons distinct from Christ, and our intended destiny is to rejoin Christ as members of the body of Christ, (CCC 398). Our creation involves one becoming two (Christ creates us; there then exists two — Christ and the individual). What then shall we do after our creation, (“but when you became two, what will you do?”). The answer is, follow Christ to our intended reunion.

12. The disciples said to Jesus, "We know that you are going to leave us. Who will be our leader?"

Jesus said to them, "No matter where you are, you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being."

This is a sound bite, of which we do not know the surrounding facts. It is sometimes seen as a denial of Peter as the first leader. Several valid scenarios are possible which retain Peter as Pope, and James as a leader in the early Church, (as is recorded in the Bible).

(1) The time is post resurrection and Jesus appears to some disciples, as he does in the canonical gospels. These disciples are within the jurisdiction of the bishop of Jerusalem (who is historically James the Just), and are simply told to obey their bishop, to who Jesus has delegated authority.

(2) Post resurrection again, Peter has been arrested and incommunicado. By prior decision of Peter, leadership reverts to James if Peter is unable to lead.

(3) Again, post resurrection Jesus is talking to some unknown number of disciples, who may or may not be apostles. He may be talking to half of the apostles and telling them to place themselves under the leadership of James, because Peter has split Christendom into the area west of Jerusalem, (lead by Peter), and the area east of Jerusalem (lead by James), with both areas under the ultimate leadership of Peter. This scenario meshes exactly with the gospel account in Acts 15, where James, the bishop of Jerusalem, takes local command.

It is possible that Peter tasked the capable James with development of doctrine (this is James' function in Acts 15), with Peter as the ultimate overseer. Peter seems to have delegated such authority to James at the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15.

This saying in Thomas does seem to have Jesus in a post resurrection appearance. It is unlikely that Peter or James made large scale leading while Jesus was alive.

The Acts of the Apostles does show Peter delegating much authority to James at the council of Jerusalem, (Acts 15). Two things are known of Peter's papacy: (1) he was the first Pope; (2) at some point his papacy was terminated because of death, health or decision. It is possible that James was Pope at some point after Peter, although the three scenarios proposed here retain James as bishop of Jerusalem, and any other areas or responsibilities designated by Peter.

There is much more unknown about the structure of the early church than is known.

13. Jesus said to his disciples, "Compare me to something and tell me what I am like."

Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a just messenger."

Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher."

Thomas said to him, "Teacher, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like."

Jesus said, "I am not your teacher. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended."

"And he took him, and withdrew, and spoke three sayings to him. When Thomas came back to his friends they asked him, "What did Jesus say to you?"

“Thomas said to them, "If I tell you one of the sayings he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me, and fire will come from the rocks and devour you.”

In the fifth paragraph, Jesus teaches that his disciples must deny themselves (deny their self interest). The disciples do not follow this teaching, but rather become spiritually intoxicated, or disciples only of the joyful parts of Christianity, (therefore Jesus is not really their teacher).

Regarding the seventh paragraph, many people wanted to stone Jesus or his disciples during his career, his teachings were radical and interpreted to be in opposition to the Jewish faith. Perhaps Jesus told Thomas that he will “participate in the divine nature of God”, (2Pet 1:4).

14. Jesus said to them, "If you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give to charity, you will harm your spirits.”

“When you go into any region and walk about in the countryside, when people take you in, eat what they serve you and heal the sick among them.”

“After all, what goes into your mouth will not defile you; rather, it's what comes out of your mouth that will defile you.”

Regarding the first astounding paragraph, there is only one person who could speak it with authority...Jesus. This is the same Jesus who said, “You must hate your father, your mother, and even your own life”, (Lk 14:26). This is the same Jesus who said, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...”, (Jn 6:54). This is the same Jesus who said, “Woe to you who are filled or happy, for you will be hungry and weeping.”, (Lk 6:25).

If these canonical teachings appeared only in the Gospel of Thomas, they would be declared fraudulent, but Jesus did say them. Jesus is also the author of this strange teaching in the Gospel of Thomas, and it has the same sound foundation

as his canonical demand that we hate father, mother and our own lives.

Our salvation is to become Christ, who is now the entire body of Christ. We may not become Christ (see appendix, "body of Christ") if we remain self (hence, we must hate our lives). We may not ascend to God if we remain attached to: father, mother, riches, status, pleasure or misery, or even the Law of Moses.

Strictly speaking, to make these things (fasting, prayer, almsgiving) our end, is failure to achieve our true end, which is a sharing in Christ, who is now the entire body of Christ. The Pharisees were famous for concentrating on religious ritual at the expense of religious substance. The Law of Moses was their end, rather than the Messiah among them.

In the first paragraph, Jesus may be speaking to some Pharisees who see prayer, fasting and alms giving in the Law of Moses as the final end of religion. Jesus uses the fist of rhetorical exaggeration to demolish this error, then rebuild. Again in the second and third paragraphs we see teachings that are identical to canonical verses.

15. Jesus said, "When you see one who was not born of woman, fall on your faces and worship. That one is your Father."

Self explanatory: when we see the Father (in Heaven presumably), we give worship.

16. Jesus said, "Perhaps people think that I have come to cast peace upon the world. They do not know that I have come to cast conflicts upon the earth: fire, sword, war."

"For there will be five in a house: there'll be three against two and two against three, father against son and son against father, and they will stand alone."

From Mt 10:34-36, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but

a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household."

17. Jesus said, "I will give you what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand has touched, what has not arisen in the human heart."

Jesus is retelling Isaiah 64:4.

18. The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us, how will our end come?"

Jesus said, "Have you found the beginning then, that you are looking for the end? You see, the end will be where the beginning is."

"Congratulations to the one who stands at the beginning: that one will know the end and will not taste death."

Rev 22:13, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." Jesus says that the one who stands at the beginning knows the end, and will not taste death. We have our beginning as an idea within Christ, we are created as humans and our intended destiny or end is to rejoin Christ as part of his larger body of Christ.

One idea as to why Christ creates us, is that we increase our ability to love by the challenges of a fallen world. We then bring our spiritual advancement to the body of Christ. God, who cannot increase in love, has found a way to do just that.

19. Jesus said, "Congratulations to the one who came into being before coming into being."

"If you become my disciples and pay attention to my sayings, these stones will serve you."

“For there are five trees in Paradise for you; they do not change, summer or winter, and their leaves do not fall. Whoever knows them will not taste death.”

The one who came into being before coming into being is Jesus Christ, (and mystically, all who share in Jesus, in the body of Christ).

Jesus is not really congratulating himself, but those who will join him in the body of Christ. Some translators replace “Congratulations to”, with “Blessed is”; it makes more sense that Jesus would bless his disciples, rather than congratulate himself.

The second paragraph simply observes that Christ, who is now the entire body of Christ, even has the stones of the earth at his service. This paragraph explains that our entry into the body of Christ is in substantial part by following the teachings of Christ.

The five trees of Heaven are not mentioned anywhere in the bible or Jewish or Christian tradition, but such mysticism is not at odds with any dogma. It is difficult to see how this saying promotes the specific cause of Gnosticism, and it is likely from Jesus, and not the Gnostics.

20. The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what Heaven's kingdom is like."

He said to them, "It's like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, but when it falls on prepared soil, it produces a large plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky."

This is another saying identical in meaning to the canonical gospel; Mt 13:31-32, Mk 4:30-32, Lk 13:18-19.

21. Mary said to Jesus, "What are your disciples like?"

He said, "They are like little children living in a field that is not theirs. When the owners of the field come, they will say, 'Give us back our field.' They take off their

clothes in front of them in order to give it back to them, and they return their field to them.”

“For this reason I say, if the owners of a house know that a thief is coming, they will be on guard before the thief arrives and will not let the thief break into their house and steal their possessions.”

“As for you, then, be on guard against the world. Prepare yourselves with great strength, so the robbers can't find a way to get to you, for the trouble you expect will come.”

“Let there be among you a person who understands.”

“When the crop ripened, he came quickly carrying a sickle and harvested it. Anyone here with two good ears had better listen!”

The second paragraph has the disciples returning this world (which is the field mentioned) back to “the ruler of this world”, who is the Devil, (Jn 12:31). The theology is not to cling to the things of this world or life, since it is not really part of the kingdom of God. The disciples (termed children), withhold nothing (of this world), and even return their clothing.

The third and fourth paragraphs have the robber-devils and even an unwitting world attempting to steal what really belongs to us, one's soul. Jesus advises the listener to be aware of this, and be on guard.

22. Jesus saw some babies nursing. He said to his disciples, "These nursing babies are like those who enter the Father's kingdom."

They said to him, "Then shall we enter the Father's kingdom as babies?"

Jesus said to them, "When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so

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