

Academia Session Notes for "The Inconvenient Truth About the Gospel of Thomas"

Michael W. Grondin

I'm pleased to see that at least half the participants are scholars. No offense to others, but this is my primary audience, and particularly those with more than a smidgen of familiarity with Thomas. I think one can tell from the paper that the puzzle-theory isn't just another crackpot idea in need of evidence; rather, it derives from (and explains) the textual evidence to be found in the one and only complete manuscript that we have.

There are many things that could be said which aren't in the paper explicitly, but I wanted a one-page summary, so those had to be left out. One important matter that I think is implied, however, is that of the likely audience for Thomas. It was, I believe, basically a text used by a network of "gnostic" mystery sects for training and indoctrination purposes. Such sects were perhaps comparable to the Rosicrucians, e.g.. Mystery sects need their secret mysteries (usually proceeding through a series of steps), and Thomas was a doozy. But mystery sects also need to appeal to wannabe members who aren't of their mind-set yet. So it is that we find Thomas about half and half between orthodoxy and gnosticism, but with fundamental differences with both. (9/20, 2pm EDT)

Since no one has posted a comment today, I'll do so. I was mulling over several possibilities earlier today, but then as I was checking over my Academia pieces to see who my new "readers" were, I happened to glance at what I had written in "Numbers Associated with the Gospel of Thomas" about the number 16800. To my surprise, what I had written there was that it was equal to 700×24 and 800×21 . Of course, both that and what I wrote in the current paper are true, but while the latter emphasizes the connection to 210 and 2400, the former emphasizes the connection to 700 and 800. Why is that important? Because 700 and 800 are the values of the two two-letter nomina sacra for XRISTOS - XR (700) and XS (800). I think this is pretty much proof positive of the veneration of the designers for the title XRISTOS, despite not using it in the text.

By the way, the numbers used in the paper are precise, not approximate. Close attention has been paid to the lacunae. (12:30am EDT, 9/22/21)

Postscript: I just worked out that the prime factors of 16800 are the set $\langle 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 \rangle$, the sum of which is 18 (= the number IH), and the product of which is 210 (the value of IS). IH and IS are the two two-letter abbreviations used for IHSOUS in Xian writings. I'm constantly amazed by this stuff, but given their reverence for the holy name, I don't think there's any question but that this feature of 16800 would have been known to the designers of Gos. Thom. (3pm EDT, 9/22/21)

Thoughts of the day: The Gospel of Thomas is an intellectual puzzle that any fairly bright person can at least understand. Although there are matters that require knowledge of Coptic, not all do. You don't need to be Christian or even religious, but you do need to be logical, able to deal competently with numbers, and familiar with certain basic facts, such as the use of nomina sacra and the Greek alphabetic number system*. If you've read a lot about Thomas (and I have, by the way), you need to put that aside for awhile and be willing to do whatever is necessary to solve the puzzle. You need to accept that its designers were letter-counters, and that many of its sayings have a secondary level of meaning directed inwardly to the world of the text itself. That, in fact, was most likely a necessary criterion for being selected and/or constructed for this so-called "collection" - that they were conducive to the puzzle.

L19.2 illustrates this latter point: "If you become my disciples and listen to my words, these stones will serve you." What "stones"? Are we supposed to imagine that IHSOUS is pointing at some stones? No. I don't see how they can be anything other than the sayings

themselves. They - those "stones" - will serve you when you become "king over everything" in this textual "world", as in logion 2. You will change them, rearrange them, sometimes break them into pieces, all according to specific clues, pointers, and directions in the text, with the apparent goal of transforming an imperfect textual "world" into a perfect one.

In all, one might say that what's required to solve this ancient puzzle is intellectual detective work, informed but open-minded.

*see "Brief Notes on the Greek Number System ..." <https://www.academia.edu/34522174>
Other languages, incl Hebrew and Syriac, had similar systems. (3:25pm EDST, 9/23/21) rev

Thoughts of the day: Almost everyone familiar with the Gospel of Thomas has pre-conceived notions about it. Some of them are so strongly entrenched that we can't conceive that Gos.Thom. can be other than what we think it is. That's one of the reasons I call this paper "The Inconvenient Truth ..." But unless specific fault can be found in the textual evidence behind the puzzle-theory or in my inferences from that evidence, pre-conceptions to the contrary have to yield to those facts and inferences. It won't do to say "Thomas can't be a puzzle, because I know that Thomas is so-and-so, and being a puzzle runs contrary to that." That's specious reasoning. We can't reason facts out of existence. If being a puzzle runs contrary to so-and-so, and the puzzle theory can't be shown to be faulty on its own merits, then what will have to go is so-and-so. That's the logic of science 101. (1120pm EDST, 9/24/21)

Thoughts of the day: more on Th95 and 109:

1. I believe that the phrase-word 'at-interest' was intended to be a "catchword at a distance", since it occurs in only these two sayings. CAAD's are something I've discovered in my research. (The first such is "these-words", which links L1 to L38, with which it fits perfectly, both thematically and physically.)

2. This is the first case among the several I've looked at that involves the apparent removal of lettering entirely from the text. That's actually not a bad result, given that I think the prologue was intended to eventually replace 63 letters taken from the body of the text. (I wrote about this in "The Prologue ... as 'The Stone the Builders Rejected'".) Turns out that there are 21 letters that seem to have been intended to be removed from Th95 and 109 - which is the same size as each of the 3 lines in the logical structure of the prologue. Interestingly, 14 of the letters to be removed occur in Th95, and the difference in logia numbers is 14. Coincidence? Way too many of those.

3. Gathercole ("The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary") has some interesting remarks about how conventional scholars (unburdened by any knowledge of the puzzle theory) have evaluated the apparent conflict between Th94 and 109 (footnote 20 to L109.3, p.595):

"The idea that there is a 'serious discrepancy' (Valantasis, 190 ...) is unfounded. Pace Hedrick, 'Parables as Poetic Fictions' 140-141, since the usury motif is embedded within a parable, there is no question of the readers or auditors being left to come to a conclusion about the morality of the third man becoming a banker."

Explanations are constructed from what we think we know. Sometimes, what we rule out as impossible turns out to be true. (4:50pm EDST, 9/29/21)

Thoughts of the day:

In the penultimate sentence of this piece, I claim that the private faces of Th100 and Th109 aren't the same as their public faces - which puts into question interpretations of the

public faces of sayings in general. The proof for Th100 is contained in the piece "A Glimpse of Gos.Thom.'s Secret Inner Workings" in the Findings section of my papers here. The proof for Th109 is forthcoming, but I can tell you something about it here. In Th109, a treasure is hidden in a field without the owner knowing it. He dies and his son sells the field to someone else who then "went plowing", found the treasure, and began to lend money at interest. What I found odd about this is that there's another saying - Th95 - clearly commanding the reader not to lend money at interest. What's going on here? Just the natural result of haphazardly slinging together various sayings without giving too much thought to their connection? No, that's ruled out by the unmistakable signs of careful design of the entire text.

This is probably one of the first pair of sayings that lead to my hunch about 30 years ago that the text was talking about itself. A lot of hunches don't pan out, as the reader will surely know, but this one did. The solution seemed simple - remove the phrase 'at-interest' from Th109. But that leaves its size at 201 letters, which isn't "perfect". I was stuck at that point for years, until my letter-count collaborator Martijn Linssen pointed out in one of these Academia sessions some time back that the Coptic word for 'to plow' is spelt oddly in Th109. Normally, it's CKAI, but in Th109 it's CKAEI. Aha - the extra letter! Further analysis could proceed.

You'd think that might have been the end of the matter, but it wasn't. It turns out that the portion of Th95 that commands not lending money at interest is also removable, and that doing so reduces *its* size from 64 to 50 letters. Even better, but as it turns out, some extraordinary surprises were awaiting a closer analysis. If you look at the 4-letter Coptic word for 'field' in line 639 (58:32), there's a space between the first two letters and the second two. I'd spotted that long ago, but didn't know what (if anything) to make of it. Imperfection in the papyrus? Possible of course, but what are the chances that a random imperfection would occur in the midst of a word that's linked to two coincidences: (1) the letters as inscribed can be seen as a literal textual example of a "field" that's been "plowed", and (2) there are in fact two two-letter Coptic words containing the same letters in the same order as the divided four-letter word, and they make sense in a certain odd way. They mean "drink 100". Is that the "treasure" that the textual plower found?

Although Th2.3 promised some surprises after one went to some "trouble", the above line of thinking is so unusual that it has to be left as simply an intriguing possibility for now. But there are other things apparently intended to be done to Th109. Consider the matter of making a saying more perfect by joining up Coptic words that are split between two lines. Turns out there are pairs of them in Th109. The saying remains at 8 lines of 200 letters, but in its transformed version, the sizes of the lines occur in non-contiguous pairs of 50 each. (The reader is reminded that in Th77, the Coptic word translated "piece of wood" or 'timber' also means '100', and to "split" it would presumably result in two 50's. The split word for 'field' is followed by two N's - value 50 each.) Too much information? (1:25am EDT, 9/28/21)

Thoughts of the day:

1. This piece has now become my 4th most-viewed Academia "paper" (of 37). That's largely a function of the number of session participants, which at 94 is the 2nd highest of my 24 sessions. That in turn is largely a function of the number of folks who receive an Academia notice, which used to be followers only, but now apparently includes a lot of others with interest in the subject. So while it would be nice to believe that my approach to Thomas is gaining traction, I can't conclude that from the numbers. If you're a non-follower, I would like to know how you learned about this paper. Please do tell.

2. Over the years, I haven't received much feedback on my approach to Thomas, though I'm not sure why. I suspect some folks just aren't good with numbers, so they have no idea what's good number-based reasoning and what isn't, so they ignore it entirely. In email correspondence with Richard Bauckham some years ago, he told me that the least-liked part of his book "The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple" was the last chapter, wherein he discussed

numerical composition. Maybe some of his readers didn't like talk of authorial composition because that brought their focus down to the human level, whilst they wanted to focus on the "divine". But also I think that a distrust of numeric reasoning may have been at work. (There may also have been a third factor, namely that analysis of any canonical text runs into the difficulty of differences between various manuscripts. Happily, that isn't the case with Coptic Thomas - there's only one.)

3. Just as some folks might believe that anything can be proven with numbers (which is no more true than that anything can be proven with words), there may also be some (though I haven't heard of any) who opine about my findings that "you can do the same thing with any manuscript." If you hear such an opinion, rest assured that's it's not only false, but utterly worthless. Such folks are talking through their hats, as we say hereabouts. Either put up (a specific case) or shut up. I have no patience at all with baseless generalities.
(1:30 pm EDST, 10/6/21)

Thoughts of the day:

I spent my thinking time yesterday mulling over an idea that my sleeping mind had apparently come up with overnight (since I had it when I woke up). It was that there's a link between two of my findings that seems to indicate that the transformations involved in the one should come before the transformations in the other. This is rather a big deal, since I hadn't previously seen any sign of order in the doing of things.

The two findings in question are (1) the interaction between logia 95 and 109 that I've discussed here but not written up yet, and (2) the interaction between logia 100 and 72 that I wrote up in my Academia piece "A Glimpse of Gos. Thom.'s Secret Inner Workings". It looks like (1) was intended to precede (2).

The first reason for thinking so is that L95 says that one should give one's "money" to someone who won't return it. If the "private face" meaning of 'money' is, as I believe, a piece of text that is unneeded/unwanted in a saying, then this fits the interaction between logia 100 and 72, because L100 was evidently intended to give its line "and give me what's mine" without any return to that portion of L72 where an unnamed person is requesting that IHSOUS tell his (that person's) brothers to give him what belongs to him.

The second reason for thinking that the interactivity between logia 95 and 109 should precede that between 100 and 72 lies in the divided Coptic word for 'field' that I discussed in an earlier comment. Regarded as two two-letter Coptic words, it has a meaning as 'drink (as in "drink from my mouth") 100'. Now of course that could mean several different things, but it seems plausible that one of them might be as a pointer to L100. If so, it suggests that the analysis and transformation of 95 and 109 should come before that of 100 and 72.

The suggested sequence of steps would be (1) L95 draws attention to L109 and tells what to do with it, (2) the "treasure in the field" in L109 points to L100, (3) L100 gives what it doesn't need to L72a, and then (viola!) L72b points to something else. Why do I say that? Because at the end of 72b IHSOUS is made to turn to his disciples and ask plaintively "I'm not a divider am I?" Has no one else ever found this odd? Why does he do that? He's already said he isn't a divider. Why on earth would he ask for confirmation? My hunch has been that this is a pointer to some saying involving Q&A with the disciples, and that that other saying should be moved from elsewhere to the spot just below L72. I haven't looked into that yet, but it's always been on my list as another oddity that bears looking into. If it does turn out to be a pointer, that would be pretty good confirmation that there is an order of doing things.

(4:35pm EDST, 10/8/21)

p.s.: (1) L72 itself is in fact "a divider" on two counts - which can be seen in "Hidden World": (1) it's the beginning of block 13, which is the 2nd group of 12 blocks, and (2) it sits atop what appears to be the first of two "heavens". (2) There is some kind of "money" also involved in 100/72. In L100 it's a gold coin, in L72 "my father's inheritance". (5:14pm)

Thoughts of the day:

I want to precede today's comments by giving thanks to two groups of participants: (1) those who've attended more than a dozen of my 24 Academia sessions, and (2) those who've become new Academia "followers" of mine during this session. In the first group are Andrea Annese, Alexandros Tsakos, Rene Falkenberg, George Duffy, and Paul Skorpen (many or all of whom have views and publications of their own). The second group includes Jonah Khutsishvili, K. A. Cherian, Bernardo Schiavetta, David Osborne, and Heide Klinkhammer. Folks like y'all have lightened up this lonely journey a bit by your presence.

Now on to today's comments. They start with something I forgot to mention about L72b, namely that it's the home of the single occurrence of the letter-word omega (exclamation 'oh!'). In general, what omega must have symbolized for early Xians was two-fold: (1) as the last letter of the Greek alphabet, it symbolized an end, but (2) as the number 800, it was the value of XS - one of the nomina sacra for XRISTOS - hence it also symbolized a new beginning. It's interesting, then, that the transformed L72 (with the line "give me what's mine" from L100 now in 72a) is composed of two parts of 80 letters each. I don't know what to make of the fact that IHSOUS isn't named therein (one of 19 sayings where he isn't), but it seems clear that 72a would count as something belonging to Caesar, whereas 72b would count as something belonging to "god". If so, then the transformed L72 contains two items that match the distinction in the transformed L100 exactly. So it would seem that we're being instructed in L100 to give 72a to something that represents 'Caesar' and 72b to something that represents god or the heavens. The best sense I can make of that is that 72a is supposed to be moved over into the non-heavenly portion of this textual world that ends with L71, while 72b remains in the "heavens". Thematically, that accords well with the notion of IHSOUS XRISTOS as a bridge between the new and old worlds - the end of the old, the beginning of the new.

(12:00pm EDT, 10/11/21)

Thoughts of the day:

If item #2 in the "Data" section seems a bit thin, I've remembered another supposed scribal error that occurs in L66 and figured in my paper "The Prologue ... as 'The Stone the Builders Rejected.'" Conventional wisdom is agreed that what the scribe intended to write at the end of line 453 (45:18) and then continue onto line 454 was 'pwne', i.e., 'the stone'. But that isn't what's inscribed. There's *two* omegas at the end of line 453, so what we have is 'pwwne'. Now there's no known variant 'wwne' for 'stone', so what we're left with (at least as far as conventional analysis goes) is that the scribe mistakenly wrote two omegas at the end of line 453 instead of one. But consider the fact that 'pwwne' does have a meaning in Coptic - it's the verb 'move', as in the two "mountain move away" logia.

Does it make any sense that the Copts would create an amalgam of the words 'move' and 'the stone'? In the subject paper, I argue that it does, if L66 is taken in connection with L77.3's wording 'pick up the stone', and if "the stone" in question is the prologue. The prologue does, after all, present an impediment to realizing that the size of the main body of text is 16800 letters. It certainly was for me, anyway. I never could see anything special about the total number of letters in the text, because I was always including the prologue's 63 in my count.

What pretty much clinches the case for me that 'pwwne' is an intentional "amalgam word" rather than a scribal error, is the connection with the scene in the Gospel of John where IHSOUS is standing before the tomb of Lazarus, which is sealed with a large "stone". The best translation of what IHSOUS says at that moment seems to be "Move the stone!" I think that the Lazarus scene is a metaphor that's applicable to Thomas, but I won't go into all the reasoning here. It's contained in my session comments attached to the paper.

Mind you, I don't normally go looking for supposed scribal errors to see if I can resolve them. In the case of "The Sickness in Th74", I did take up a challenge to do so with a couple of supposed scribal errors in that logion, but with respect to 'pwwne', it just turned up in the

course of trying to solve the problem of how the prologue related to the rest of the text, both structurally and metaphorically. Hopefully, this additional example will firm up "Data" point #2 a bit. It would be odd indeed if the authors of Gos. Thom. went to such great pains with their design as indicated in point #1 and then overlooked a passel of "scribal errors" which would almost certainly have wrecked the intended total letter count. (12:30am EDST, 10/14/21)

Thoughts of the day:

1. I have no answer to the conundrum of why the Gospel of Thomas was highly regarded by full-blown Gnostics like the Naassenes and Barbeloites. In "Thomas and the Gospels", Mark Goodacre opines that the canonical material in Thomas was used as a lure to draw folks into a gnostic view. Although Mark is a long-time friend whose instincts I value highly, I'm not convinced. Among other things, that would seem to imply that the authors of Thomas didn't really believe the canonical material they chose to include - they included it only because they thought that their potential converts would like it. I find that unlikely. I'm inclined to think that the Thomasines did like their canonical material, because they envisioned a compromise between low-level gnosticism and low-level Christology. Part of my reason for thinking so is in public Thomas, part in private Thomas. In public Thomas, there's the notion of making the two into one and the "I'm not a divider" proclamation. In private Thomas, there's Th74, where the two erroneous words that are apparently intended to be "healed" mean 'sickness' and 'separation'. My hunch is that this arose out of a feeling of being outcasts, and a longing to find acceptance from those who were defining orthodoxy by defining a middle-ground that both could accept. The impossible dream, as it were. As to whether Goodacre's or my own view is the more correct, I think the best way to decide the issue is to solve the Thomas puzzle. What were the "weeds" to be thrown out, and what was to be saved?

2 How the Barbeloites arranged Codex II may be a clue as to how they regarded Gos. Thom. They preceded it with their master work "The Apocryphon of John" and followed it with "The Gospel of Philip". I've always regarded this as a possible trilogy since I first counted the lines. Though Ap. John appears in two other codices, the version in Codex II occupies exactly 1100 lines. Gos. Thom., of course, occupies 668 lines (the last line being but a single word), while Gos. Phil. occupies 1234, the last line being only half inscribed. So Thomas and Philip occupy a total of 1902 lines, if one uses the counts 668 and 1234, two less if we count just full lines. The three tractates are thus close enough to 3000 lines to make it a possibility that shouldn't be dismissed out of hand, IMO. Anyway, I did interlinears on all three back in the days when I'd first acquired some knowledge of Coptic, and still keep them on hand. I furnished a copy of the Ap. John interlinear to Stevan Davies for his 2005 book "The Secret Book of John: The Gnostic Gospel" in the "Annotated & Explained" series, which he noted as follows:

"It [this version of the Secret Book of John] is fundamentally based on the excellent interlinear translation of Michael Grondin." (xii, material in brackets mine)

Actually, I'm pretty sure it's far from "excellent". It was done a long time ago and I haven't revisited it since then, aside from the occasional check for something or other. But I did decide to do these interlinears line-for-line with Codex II, which enabled me to stumble on some features of Gos. Thom. that were surprisingly dependent on the position of a word within a line, and the number of that line (e.g., PARAGE occurring at the ends of both lines 70 and 280). It's rather a miracle that we're in possession of such an accurate copy of this work of genius. (12:38 am EDST, 10/19/21, point #1 reworded 10/21/21)

p.s.: Come to think of it, I do have an answer to the Gnostics and Thomas conundrum. As mentioned in the paper, the Naassenes and Barbeloites, in addition to being Gnostic sects, were also what I refer to as "Yeshuine mystery sects". As proof, Ap. John demands that its readers keep its contents secret. Thomas' mysteries were "both hidden and revealed at the same time." (4:11pm EDST, 10/21/21)