

The Hidden World in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas

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“Gos.Thom. contains 668 lines. Lines 67-68 read “I have cast fire upon / the world and behold, I watch over it.” Surprisingly, that is exactly what lines 67-68 do, for below them are 600 lines (69-668), and 600 is the value of kosmos (‘world’).”

So I wrote over three years ago, in my May, 2016 Summary of Findings¹. The question is, of course, whether this factoid was the product of intent or accident. I had additional information at the time which suggested it was intentional. I've never posted that information before, but I will here. In addition, I've since (about a year and a half after the Summary) found more support for that position in a new interpretation of what the omega likely meant to early Christians². It certainly evoked “the end” in its role as the last letter of the Greek alphabet, but as the number 800, it also represented a new beginning, given the resurrection on the 8th day as well as 800 being the numeric value of the *nomen sacrum* $\bar{\omega}\bar{\epsilon}$ for 'Christ'. This is consistent with the implication of more orthodox writings that Jesus was seen as a bridge between the old world and the new. Gos. Thom. uses the word 'kosmos' 16 times, all of which seem to refer to the existing earthly world except one:

Th51.1(b): “... when will the new world come?”

... to which the answer was that it's already come, but you don't recognize it. Since early Christians believed that the new world would be perfect, they would surely have recognized it if that had been all there was, so this answer must mean that the new world was emerging in the midst of the old, imperfect world. Now the 600 lines of Gos.Thom. that seem to me to represent a world aren't perfectly structured, but they do nearly correspond to an imperfect cosmos composed of an earthly world of 400 lines and two heavens of 100 lines each, so if anything, they must represent the old world, with perhaps some in-breaking pieces of perfection in it. Why design the text in that way? I believe it was because it was a student task to transform it into a perfect structure, perhaps as training to do the same thing in the actual world. If it got into the hands of outsiders, no harm done, since they would surely think, as we do, that it's just a jumbled mish-mash of sayings.

The following discussion will refer to the chart below, adapted from “The Sayings-Block Structure of Gos. Thom.”³.

Blk	sayings	S-cnt	lines	L-cnt	IS##	I-cnt	IHS	Blk	sayings	S-cnt	lines	L-cnt	IS##	I-cnt	IHS
1	1-9	9	1-66	66	1-8	8		13	72-88	17	471-548	78	67-80	14	
2a	10*	1	67-68	2	9	1		14	89-94	6	549-570	22	81-83	3	1
										23		100		17	
2b	11-19	9	69-148	80	10-21	12	1	15	95-96	2	571-577	7	84-85	2	
3	20-21	2	149-177	29	22-23	2		16	97-98	2	578-591	14	86-87	2	
4	22	1	178-193	16	24	1	1	17	99	1	592-597	6			
5	23-41	19	194-279	86	25-41	17		18	100	1	598-602	5	88	1	
6	42	1	280	1	42	1		19	101	1	603-608	6			
7	43-47	5	281-318	38	43-46	4		20	102-107	6	609-634	26	89-95	7	
8	48-54	7	319-354	36	47-50	4		21	108	1	635-637	3	96	1	
9	55-64	10	355-435	81	51-60	10		22	109	1	638-645	8	97	1	
10	65-67	3	436-455	20	61-62	2		23	110	1	646-647	2	98	1	
11	68-70	3	456-468	13	63-65	3		24	111-114	4	648-668	21*	99-102	4	
		60		400		56				20		98*		19	
12	71	1	469-470	2	66	1									

10* = only first two lines, 'until-it-burns' on line 69

21* = last line is the single word 'of-the-heavens'

¹ [Counting and Numbering in the Gospel of Thomas: Summary of Findings \(2016\)](#)

² [The Omega, the New World, and the Gospel of Thomas](#)

³ See <https://www.academia.edu/36115478>

Curiously, the cosmos depicted here is inverted – the earthly world is above the heavens. I suspect that won't last. But also the second heaven is incomplete. That won't do – and perhaps the perfection of the second heaven is the first step to be taken in the creation of a “new world”. We'll see about that below. First though, what does block 1 represent? I think it must be what might be called 'the house of the self.' If so, then the whole 668 lines could represent “what's inside you and what's outside you”, i.e., “the All”. And the 24 sayings-blocks are probably “houses”.

What about block (or house) 12 sitting under the 400 lines representing the earthly world? Suggestively, it says:

Th71: iĉ said, “I will destroy [this house] and no one will be able to build it [up again].”

This provides a frame below the earthly world, but I don't think it's an accident that this is the 66th occurrence of *iĉ* and the size of “the house of the self” is 66 lines. Rather, I think the reader was intended to be identified as a potential “world-killer” or “assassin”, as in Th98. I say this not only because the “powerful man” to be killed in Th98 may be a reference to the earthly world (or whoever rules it), but more definitively because Th98 makes reference to the potential killer/assassin drawing his sword “in his own house” and sticking it into the wall to prove to himself that he'll be strong enough to take on his powerful adversary. Given that Th6a (the four questions about fasting, etc.) clearly doesn't belong in “the house of the self”, this is a piece that can be cut out of block 1, and apparently should be. But we won't do that yet. The first task here is to see what can be done to perfect the second heaven.

Just as the omega symbolized both end and beginning, the physical end of the Gos. Thom. manuscript appears also to be a beginning. For a very long time, I couldn't figure out why there was that single word 'of-the-heavens’ on line 668. Given my informed belief that virtually nothing is accidental in Coptic Thomas, the only sense I could make of it was that it was needed to make the whole come out to 668 lines. But that's a clunky way to do it, and the authors of Gos. Thom. were anything but dunderheads. It must serve some other purpose. It's removable, since line 667 makes sense without it, so its purpose was likely to be a *clue* as to what should replace it in order to make the second heaven perfect. We know we need three lines, but which three? If 'of-the-heavens' is a clue, then the proper three must have something to do with the heavens. Well, turns out there's three lines within the body of the “earthly world” that fit nicely. They consist of Th11.1 (at the top of “the world”) and Th42, 210 lines distant. As I wrote in an earlier piece⁴, they form a triad of 70 letters based on a keyword:

Th11.1	ⲡⲈⲬⲈⲓⲈ̅ⲬⲈ ⲬⲈ ⲧⲈⲈⲓⲛⲈ ⲛⲁⲛ̅ⲛⲁⲣⲁⲒⲈ	23 letters
	Said-IS10 (--) This-heavn will-pass-away	
	ⲁⲩⲱ ⲧⲈⲧ̅ⲛ̅ⲧ̅ⲛⲈ ⲛ̅ⲙⲟⲛ̅ ⲛⲁⲛ̅ⲛⲁⲣⲁⲒⲈ	23 letters
	and she-who-is-above her will-pass-away	(46 total, on lines 69-70)
Th42	ⲡⲈⲬⲈⲓⲈ̅ⲬⲈ ⲬⲈ ⲱⲟⲛⲈ ⲈⲧⲈⲧ̅ⲛ̅ⲛ̅ⲛⲁⲣⲁⲒⲈ	24 letters (line 280)
	Said-IS42 (--) come-into-being as-you(pl)-pass-away. (280 - 70 = 210, the value of <i>iĉ</i>)	

As can be seen from the chart, Th42 is sayings-block 6 (surely no accident that that's the first perfect number). Sitting on line 280 by itself (the only one-line sayings-block), it's the shortest saying in Gos. Thom. and almost surely the most important. It simply must be translated as above, since the more-popular alternative (i.e., “Become passers-by”) doesn't evoke a beginning and an end – a double evocation that I believe to have been intended and necessary. For its part, 11.1 contains the only other occurrences of PARAGE in the ms. “Where there are three, they are among the gods”? Could be. At any rate, if these three lines are put in place on lines 668-670, we have a perfect second heaven. That this is the correct move is indicated by the fact that the reference to two heavens in Th11.1 fits with the clue 'of-the-heavens'.

What's the effect of this move on the “earthly world”? It now has fewer than 400 lines, but since the present earthly world is imperfect, that which represents it can be imperfect until it's totally rebuilt (probably with “four corners” which aren't now apparent). Recall in particular that it's the task of the “house of the self” to destroy the old world and build a new one, and that the wayward Th6a needs to be removed from the “house of the self” and put to use as part of that rebuilding.

One final thing worthy of note is that with the removal of L11.1, line 69 at the top of block 2b now contains a single word, viz., 'until-it-burns', and the remainder of Th 11 doesn't have a complete sense to it. If the single word on line 668 was, as I hope to have demonstrated, a clue as to what was to be put in its place, then the single word now sitting on line 69 is probably a clue to how to fix up Th11. If so, the solution to the problem of how to proceed with the building of the textual new world may lie in a sequence of one-word clues, a new one revealed each time the previous one is satisfied.

⁴ [Catchword at a Distance: The Strange Case of Logia 11.1 and 42](#)