

6. Revelation and Concealment

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Sudden light

Reducing Chapter 5 to a single visual image, let's say that you live inside a *bubble of perception*. This bubble is invisible from the inside, because it appears *as* the visible world. But *the world* is a projection of your habitual vision, reflected back to you from the inner surface of that surrounding screen.

Likewise you live in a cognitive bubble with all you know inside, while *the other side is dark*. This bubble maintains its autopoietic integrity just as a cell membrane does, admitting the bits you can easily absorb while screening out others, protecting you from perturbations you may not be able to handle. This self-organizing process *determines* (sets the limits of) your knowledge of the world, just as a cultural bubble or *Lebenswelt* *defines* a culture. Yet now and then comes a big surprise, a rending of the veil, a flash of light. If the opening instantly closes up again, all you get is a fleeting glimpse of mystery. But sometimes the bubble has to reorganize, incorporating the new vision, in order to recover its own order – and then you learn something new: the bubble *grows*. It's not just a matter of adding more facts; it's more like adding a new sense to the familiar five or six, or perhaps waking up a sense that was asleep. It's a new *kind* of thing that you're aware of now.

Looking back to the original opening, you might call it a

revelation. You might also use the same word for what you learned from that opening, or a text that represents it. How do you read such a text? Will your next reading recreate the opening, or seal it up again?

'Revelation' as the title of the last book of the Bible translates the Greek word ἀποκάλυψις (*apocalypsis*). Yet we can't speak of an *apocalypse* (as we can of a *revelation*) in the past. That word points forward to the end of history – a bubble-bursting irruption of reality. A more literal translation of ἀποκάλυψις would be 'discovery' (or 'uncovering'), but these words have gone their separate ways in modern English, *discovery* gravitating toward the scientific universe and *revelation* toward the religious. Either word can denote an act or event from which we learn something new, or the content of that learning. The difference seems to lie in how we regard the original event: did we open the bubble from the inside, proceeding from the known to the unknown? Or did it come from beyond the bubble, given to us ready-made?

In the latter case we might well ask *who* gave or made this revelation. In English, the most usual sense of *revelation* has been 'disclosure or communication of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency' (OED). But defining the manner of disclosure is itself a way of closure. This one weaves together notions of 'man,' 'divine,' 'nature' and 'agency' as if we knew what they represent. But as Chuang-tzu asks, 'How do we know that what we call divine is not human, and what we call human is not divine?' (Cleary 1992, 104).

There are other ways of understanding the opening. Gendlin (recall Chapter 4) might say that since the body extends far beyond all formulations, you can open the cognitive bubble by *focusing* into it, *dipping* into the *implicit intricacy*, or 'thinking at the edge' (Hendricks 2004). In Zen they say that the eggshell of delusion is opened from both sides, the master pecking at it from without and the student from within. If anything is truly *revealed* through the opening, does it matter whether you speak of it as 'sent down' from above or 'drawn up' to the surface of consciousness like a big fish from the deep? This divergence of idiom hides a common faith: that some of the currently unknown is *knowable*, in a way that could transform life as we know it, if we can only *let it come* to realization. Such a faith guides every deep reading, whether of

nature or of scripture. For present purposes, then, *revelation* is the reciprocal of *deep reading*.

As a semiotic event, revelation makes a lasting difference: the mark made by the sudden opening survives in its continuing relevance. Revelation is also *relevation* – etymologically a ‘lifting up,’ much like resurrection, especially when it comes as a new reading of old signs, a renewal of their relevance. It’s as if some long-lost member of your body is now re-membered. Ancient scriptures turn out to express your presence here now, in a way that wouldn’t occur to you otherwise. This intimate ‘turning out’ is a flash of lightning, though the whole history of humanity and life has primed you for it.

Symbols grow, as Peirce affirmed (EP2:10), and the study of their growth is *semiotic*. The method of explicating the implicit, or revealing hidden meaning (especially of scripture), is sometimes called *hermeneutic*, after the Greek ἑρμηνεύς (‘interpreter’ or ‘translator’) and its adjective form transliterated *hermeneutikos*. Hiding within this term is the god *Hermes*, ‘the herald and messenger of the gods ... god of science, commerce, invention, and the arts of life, and patron of travelers and rogues’ (CD). Hermes is a trickster; his Egyptian counterpart *Thoth* invented language and writing, which must be among the best tricks ever played on (or by) humankind. But you have to risk falling for a trick or two, unless you intend to stay locked in the usual bubble. ‘Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise’ (1 *Corinthians* 3:18).

Hermeneutic reading, especially of an ancient text, requires an open and questing mind equipped with critical thinking and semiotic sense. From the seed of any sacred text, through its history of being read as scripture, branches of interpretation will proliferate, some esoteric and some with official sanction. As the readings multiply, they will range from the profound to the preposterous. Consider for example the myriad competing readings of the *Book of Revelation* (the *Apocalypse* of John), which itself interprets older prophetic writings in an innovative way. The polyversity of Scripture is proverbial. Every verse of the *Qur’an* is said to have seven inner meanings, based on a *hadith* (‘tradition’) whose meaning is itself disputed (see Glassé, *New Encyclopedia of*

Islam, 413.) Each word of the *Torah* has 70 meanings, according to Kabbalah, and this too is disputed. The *Lotus Sutra* is said to have ‘innumerable meanings,’ but not every formulation of even one will survive honest criticism.

Hermeneutic disputes are often over claims to authority, more or less disguised as attempts to find the ‘true meaning’ of Scripture. But deep reading is a *dialog*, carried forward by the reader with one critical eye on the author’s intention (through the lens of historical research), and one primal eye on his own. Author and reader collaborate to recreate the original act of meaning, together taking a step along the *way of inquiry* which leads beyond the cognitive bubble and back again.

Hidden words

Take for example the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas*. How could you read it deeply if it hadn’t been hidden and then discovered? How can it be a revelation if you don’t read it deeply?

Recovering the Nag Hammadi library has greatly enhanced our historical picture of early Christian times, thanks to the work of many scholars (some are listed in the gnostic SourceNet). But more intimately, *Thomas* challenges us to renew our understanding of *scripture* and revelation. This challenge is quite explicit in its opening lines, presented here in the *Fifth Gospel* translation:

These are the hidden words that the living Jesus spoke. And Didymos Judas Thomas wrote them down.

1. And he said: ‘Whoever finds the meaning of these words will not taste death.’

2. ¹Jesus says: ‘The one who seeks should not cease seeking until he finds. ²And when he finds, he will be dismayed. ³And when he is dismayed, he will be astonished. ⁴And he will be king over the All.’

As we have already heard, *Thomas* 3 goes on to say that the ‘kingdom’ is not to be found in any specific place, since it is *both* inside and out. Yet the opening of this Gospel is all about seeking

and finding, and gives in seed-form some clues about how to *seek* and what *finding* will entail.

This in itself is unusual: not every scripture begins by telling you how to read it. 'Meaning' in Saying 1 represents the Greek ἐρμηνεία; that the *Gospel of Thomas* explicates its own hermeneutic in Sayings 1 and 2 is a sign that *how* you read it is an essential part of *what* this Gospel means. But let us begin by asking how and why these words (or their meaning) were (or are) *hidden* in the first place. To answer that, we need to look into this Gospel's original context, beginning where it begins.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Coptic (and only complete) manuscript of this Gospel was discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. The prior Greek version is lost, except for a few papyrus fragments found earlier at Oxyrhynchus. But there's no sense in reading the expression 'hidden words' as the Gospel's reference to its own future of being lost – not when the text itself tells us that these 'words' were 'hidden' *before* they were written down. The reader indeed has to guess what this means, but some guesses make more sense than others in the context of the opening sentence, and in the larger context of the whole gospel, and beyond that, in the cultural context from which it emerged.

The Nag Hammadi library is a set of *codices* (i.e. bound books rather than scrolls) containing several books in each *codex*. In NHL Codex II, as in many others, the title (such as 'Gospel according to Thomas') is found at the end of the book, followed on the same page by a short prologue to the next book. The technical term for this kind of prologue is *incipit*, that being the word with which it typically begins in a Latin manuscript. The *incipit* of *Thomas* tells us that the words of this gospel were first spoken by 'the living Jesus' and then written down by 'Didymos Judas Thomas.' This bears witness to a transmission of some *logos* from Jesus through Thomas to the reader. Looking back on that transmission in historical perspective, we can see that every stage of it was also a *translation*. Since Jesus spoke in Aramaic, what he 'says' had to be translated into Greek, and the Greek into Coptic, and the Coptic into English, in order to produce the text you see above – and this hardly scratches the surface of the translation/transmission process, as we will see below. The first two sayings in this Gospel strongly imply that every reader must also participate in this

process in order to hear *the living Jesus*.

The *incipit* places Thomas at the head of the line of written transmission. But who was this 'Thomas'? We can begin to answer that question by comparing the *Gospel of Thomas* with other gospels. Historical evidence indicates that *none* of the surviving gospels – including the four later admitted into the canon of the 'New Testament' – were written during the lifetime of Jesus; nor is it likely that the writers were eyewitnesses to his life. Apparently neither Jesus nor his immediate disciples considered it very important to record his actual words for a posterity of readers. His mission was rather to *connect* with those who would listen, waking them up to a better way of life. Those who heard the message were moved to pass it on directly, face to face, without recourse to external memory aids. Writing it down was an afterthought, following years and decades of oral transmission.

Now, every performance of a text from memory is in itself a kind of translation, an interpretant which leaves its own memory trace in place of the previous one, to be replaced in turn by the next performance. Moreover, the next performance may well take place in a different situation – the more impact the utterance has, the greater the difference may be. Just to give one example: Jesus apparently said things which led his followers to expect the end of the world, and the arrival of heaven's kingdom, in their own lifetime. The implications of this, though drawn in various ways by various people, certainly changed their way of living whatever time they had. But after a generation of living this way, without the end arriving in the way they had expected, the original saying could only arouse a *different* expectation. Perhaps Jesus meant that the kingdom of heaven is already here, if we can only learn to see it! His message then has to be heard – and therefore said – in a different way. The circulation of scripture, by transforming the world, transforms itself. In circumstances like these, transmission as translation amounts to continuous composition.

According to April DeConick, 'the culture out of which *Thomas* emerged was one dominated by an oral consciousness in which composition occurred mainly in the field of oral performance' (2007a, 16). Any written record left behind in the course of such a continuous process can only give us a 'fix' on one stage in its growth. Also, where the growth produces various branches, as

early Christianity did, even records from the same time will diverge. No wonder the *historical* record of Jesus and his teaching appears to us riddled with gaps and inconsistencies: when we look at the transmission process from outside and afterwards, the inner side is dark.

Despite the importance of oral transmission, it remains *possible* that writers of extant gospels may have drawn on earlier written sources which are now lost. Indeed scholars have reconstructed one of these, called *Q* (from the German *Quelle* or 'source'), based mostly on remarkable similarities in phrasing between the Gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke*. These two gospels often attribute the same Greek words to Jesus even when they disagree on where, when and why he said these things. The *Gospel of Mark* includes a rather different set of sayings, perhaps drawing on a different written source or representing a different oral tradition. It is dated earlier than the others, probably prior to 70 C.E. Still, those three agree with each other enough to be called the *synoptic* ('seeing-together') gospels. The last of the four to be written, *John*, tells a radically different story, as we will see below.

The emerging scholarly consensus would place the original form of *Thomas* as early as *Mark*, and quite likely as early as *Q*. The Coptic version represents a later stage of its development, but DeConick has tried to 'recover' the original Gospel by sorting the various sayings into two groups, which she calls 'kernel' and 'accretions.' We could likewise speak of *Q* as the 'kernel' of *Matthew* and *Luke*; but those Gospels would then consist mostly of 'accretions' added by their authors to provide a narrative context around the sayings. *Mark* and *John* were probably likewise constructed, each author framing the sayings according to his own perspective and revelatory purpose (though he would likely see it as the divine purpose, not 'his own'). The *Gospel of Thomas* is different: even the later Coptic version is about half 'kernel,' by DeConick's count, with very little narrative structure added even by the 'accretions.' The whole Gospel thus resembles *Q*, in form and content, more than any canonical gospel does.

As a 'sayings' Gospel, *Thomas* has a uniquely concentrated quality. Its *words* are *hidden* just as a plant is hidden in a seed. *Thomas* 20 and its synoptic parallels tell us that the kingdom of heaven is like the mustard seed, the smallest of all; it is also said to

be hidden like yeast in dough (*Thomas 96*). A revelation can come to you in a momentary experience, or a very small text, which grows in significance until your whole life is changed. Indeed some purveyors of wisdom consider the smallest package to carry the greatest potential. Pythagoras did, according to Iamblichus:

His practice was to use the very briefest speech to spark off in his disciples, by the method of symbols, infinitely varied interpretations; just as Apollo Pythios with a few easily handled words, or nature herself with seeds which are small in size, manifests an endless and almost inconceivable multitude of ideas and their fruition.

— *On the Pythagorean Life*, 161 (tr. Gillian Clark, Liverpool University Press, 1989)

Intentionally or not, the apparent simplicity of the seed conceals the extravagant growth which it will engender, and *vice versa*. Heraclitus, another master of pithy sayings, left us one which could be taken as the seed of all semiotics:

ὁ ἄναξ οὐ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς οὔτε λέγει
οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει.

The lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but *signifies* (gives a sign).

— Heraclitus (Wheelwright fr. 18, Kahn XXXIII, DK 93)

This could apply to any scripture, or even to language itself, thus: *not speaking* (or *not declaring*) means *not making its meaning explicit* (at least not verbally). Legible signs move like waves upon the deep, representing the visible surface of an *implicit intricacy*, only a minute part of which can be explicit at the moment, just as only a tiny part of the visual field can be kept in focus. What is not yet explicit is no more and no less *concealed* than the future is concealed by the present. In just this way, components of the cognitive bubble – including those remnants of past openings that we now call ‘revelations’ – conceal all that is knowable but currently unknown.

If words, or rather their meanings, can be *hidden* in this sense by nature, they can also be hidden on purpose. Oracles, prophets

and writers of gnomic wisdom are often accused of using a deliberately cryptic style to create an illusion of significance, taking advantage of the fact that the reader who seeks a hidden meaning in a text has to *believe* in its presence there before she can find it. But this is not the only reason for hiding meanings. As we will see below, all of the extant gospels suggest that Jesus had some reasons of his own, and perhaps the *Thomas* community had still others – not to mention whatever reasons somebody had for hiding the whole Nag Hammadi library. Part of the challenge of reading *hidden words* is to take all this into account.

Thomas the Twin

And Didymos Judas Thomas wrote them down.

The *incipit* is, according to DeConick, among the ‘accretions’ to this Gospel which identify it as emerging from a Syrian community now called ‘Thomasine’ or ‘Thomas Christians.’ Concerning Thomas himself, the historical record is not very clear. Several early Christian scriptures, some of them canonical, mention an apostle named Thomas, and a Judas who was the brother of Jesus. The name ‘Judas Thomas’ might have served to distinguish him from another Judas (Iscairiot). But *Thomas* means ‘twin’ in Aramaic, and a few Syrian sources refer to Judas Thomas as the twin brother of Jesus. This surely points to a spiritual relationship, emphasized even further by adding *Didymos*, the Greek word for ‘twin.’ The *Book of Thomas the Contender*, also found in NHL Codex II, begins with a fuller description of that relationship:

The hidden sayings that the Savior spoke to Judas Thomas, which I, Mathaias, in turn recorded. I was walking, listening to them speak with each other.

The Savior said, ‘Brother Thomas, while you are still in the world, listen to me and I shall reveal to you what you have thought about in your heart.

‘Since it has been said that you are my twin and true friend, examine yourself and understand who you are, how you exist, and how you will come to be. Since you are to be called my brother, it is not fitting for you

to be ignorant of yourself. And I know that you have understood, for already you have understood that I am the knowledge of truth. So while you are walking with me, though you do lack understanding, already you have obtained knowledge and you will be called one who knows himself. For those who have not known themselves have known nothing, but those who have known themselves have already have acquired knowledge about the depth of the All. So then, my brother Thomas, you have seen what is hidden from people, what they stumble against in their ignorance.'

— tr. Turner and Meyer (NHS, 239)

This represents the kind of intimate, esoteric dialogue which also pervades the *Gospel of Thomas*. Its core message is that to know Jesus is to know oneself, and to understand the revelation of Jesus is to become like him, as 'twin and true companion.' Thomas apparently has this knowledge already, but hasn't quite realized it, and Jesus shows him how to do so, and thus to become even more like him. This is a virtual 'twin' to the Buddhist idea that all sentient beings have the original buddha-nature, but few fully realize it enough to become in their turn 'enlightening beings.' As the *Lotus Sutra* says, 'Only a buddha together with a buddha can fathom the Reality of All Existence' (Kato et al. 1975, 52). The *Gospel of Thomas* likewise challenges the reader to become a 'twin' of Jesus by finding the meaning of his words. This challenge comes in Saying 1, and near the end again:

Jesus said, 'Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to that person.'

— *Thomas* 108 (Meyer)

DeConick labels both Sayings 1 and 108 'accretions,' but the Coptic writer clearly found them a suitable frame for the whole *Gospel*, 'kernel' and all.

Jesus also shows an esoteric side in many other gospels, including the synoptics: sometimes he limits his audience to an inner circle of disciples rather than preaching to the multitudes. *Mark* 4:10-12 even has Jesus saying that he preaches in parables

not to clarify his meaning for the broader public, but to *prevent* them from understanding:

And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning the parables. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven.'

— (RSV)

The words of Jesus here echo *Isaiah* 6:9, which is followed by a verse instructing the prophet to 'Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.' Some of the parables themselves, notably the one of the sower, show that not everyone is ready for *turning signs*; but in this passage from *Mark*, the unready or unworthy seem to be deliberately turned away from the truth. In *Thomas*, however, Jesus says nothing like this, though he does warn his disciples not to throw pearls before swine (Saying 93), as he also does in *Matthew* 7:6.

Some gospel stories show that even most of the inner circle are unworthy, or at least unready, to receive the whole truth. Occasionally Jesus takes one or two disciples aside to tell them things hidden even from the other disciples. *Thomas* 13 singles out Thomas himself as the most worthy of hearing *hidden words*:

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 righteous 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 consume you.'

(Meyer)

This is similar to stories found in *Matthew* 16:13-23, *Mark* 8:27-33 and *Luke* 9:18-22 – except that in those accounts, Peter rather than Thomas is singled out as the one who really understands Jesus, and there is no private message delivered to him alone. *Thomas* 13 suggests that there is something dangerous about these private teachings, that not even the other disciples (let alone the masses) are ready to hear them. This would seem to escalate the destructive power which Jesus ascribes to his teaching generally:

Jesus says: 'I will [destroy this] house, and no one will be able to build it [again].'

— *Thomas* 71 (5G)

Jesus said, "I have thrown fire upon the world, and look, I am watching it until it blazes."

— *Thomas* 10 (NHS)

These again have synoptic parallels (with polyverse interpretations). Perhaps the 'bubbling' of the spring in Saying 13 (above) is a watery version of the fire in Saying 10, and equally dangerous – 'intoxication' is, after all, *toxic*. In that spring, guidance is 'metaphorized as active water, bubbling water that activates the revelatory process in the seeker' (Valantasis 1997, 76). This 'activation,' erupting from within as a spring bubbles up from the earth, should be a source of renewal and life to the whole community – but to the established order, it often appears as a threat. Rather than encourage 'the revelatory process in the seeker,' the guardians of this order would prefer to shut it down, using their authority to keep the cognitive bubble closed. One way to do this is to define the religion by specifying a creed and a scriptural canon, and then weeding out all non-conforming

'heresies.' In this the 'church fathers' eventually succeeded – in part by rejecting the *Gospel of Thomas*, which does not lend itself to the establishment and maintenance of authoritative institutions. It promotes instead the *way of inquiry*. This is most clearly visible by contrast with the *way of belief*, especially as represented by the *Gospel of John*.

The way of belief

In the synoptic gospels and *Thomas*, as we have seen above, Jesus asks his disciples to tell him who they think he is, and they try to answer, with varying degrees of success. Instead of this episode of dialogue, *John* gives us a monologue on the subject which dominates the entire Gospel. Some of this monologue is put into the mouth of Jesus, and some delivered by the narrator, but all of it differs remarkably from what Jesus says about himself in the other gospels. While they refer to Jesus as 'son of God' or 'son of man' – terms used quite broadly in the dialect of the time – John turns these into unique titles of Jesus, who thus becomes the *only-begotten* son of God. The one unique title accorded to Jesus in the synoptics is 'Christ' (Χριστός, a translation of the Hebrew 'Messiah,' the future king of Israel foretold by the prophets) – a title not found in *Thomas* or *Q*. *John* alone identifies Jesus not only with the Christ but also with the *logos* through whom the world was created, and with God Himself (1:1). Almost all of the sayings attributed to Jesus by the other four gospels are missing in *John*, and in their place is a Jesus who talks mostly about himself and his relation to the Father. In this there is no trace of the Thomasine challenge to the seeker, that he should become like Jesus through self-knowledge. In other gospels, when people ask Jesus what they should do with *their* lives, he often gives them guidance; but compare his response in *John* 6:28-9:

Then they said to him, 'What must we do, to be doing the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'

(RSV)

John's Jesus is unique in many ways, but especially in his overwhelming emphasis on *belief*. The contrast with *Thomas* and the *way of inquiry* is so clear that, as Elaine Pagels (2003, 58) has suggested, 'John could have written his gospel to refute what Thomas teaches.' He does this by 'insisting that it is Jesus – and only Jesus – who embodies God's word, and therefore speaks with divine authority' (58). In setting up Jesus as an object of worship and belief, John shows little interest in the sayings of Jesus in dialogue with others, and even less in 'finding the meaning' of his sayings. All that matters is to recognize him as the Word, the Way, the Truth, the Life and Light of the World. If you 'believe in the name of the only son of God' you will 'have eternal life' (3:16-18); otherwise you are 'condemned.' But the question of who *you* are is never raised in *John*.

The *Gospel of John* tells of many who believed in Jesus because of his 'signs and wonders' (4:48), but reserves the highest praise for those who believe without any evidence at all. This theme reaches its climax in the story of 'doubting Thomas,' which again is unique to this Gospel, and specifically targets Thomas 'called the Twin':

Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the LORD. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My LORD and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.

— *John* 20:24-31 (KJV)

The irony here, and throughout the *Gospel of John*, is that it consists entirely of signs ‘written that ye might believe,’ and yet it says repeatedly that reading the signs and inquiring into their meaning is a poor substitute for intuitive belief. Moreover, this intuitive belief has nothing to do with self-knowledge; it’s all about recognizing an external authority. But what authority could the author of *John* claim, beyond his own creative genius, for the words he put into the mouth of Jesus? From his own perspective he could probably say in all sincerity what he makes his Jesus say: ‘My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me’ (7:16), and ‘I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me’ (8:28). But woe betide anyone who questioned his authority, or that of the church which canonized his Gospel, to decide who speaks for Jesus and who does not.

Doves and serpents

This is not the only way of reading *John*, of course, but it shows how useful this Gospel could be for the purpose of blocking the way of inquiry – which is ‘the one unpardonable offence in reasoning,’ according to Peirce (CP 1.136). Reasoning is involved in every honest attempt to learn from experience, and is thus the way of inquiry itself. If we still see ‘reason’ and ‘revelation’ as opposed to one another, it’s because ‘revelation’ has been identified in practice with the way of belief, institutionalized as the way of authority. The *Gospel of Thomas*, in contrast, takes a dim view of self-appointed authorities who block the way of inquiry.

Jesus said, ‘The Pharisees and the scribes have taken the keys of knowledge and hidden them. They themselves have not entered, nor have they allowed to

enter those who wish to. You, however, be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.'

— *Thomas 39* (Lambdin)

Saying 102 likewise compares the Pharisees to a dog in a manger. Indeed there is no reason for secrecy on anyone's part, according to Saying 33:

¹ Jesus said, 'What you will hear in your ear, in the other ear proclaim from your rooftops. ² For no one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, nor does one put it in a hidden place. ³ Rather one puts it on a stand so that all who come and go will see its light.'

— (Meyer)

How do we reconcile this with the esoteric side of Jesus' teaching, as seen above? Well, just as it is your responsibility to inquire into the meaning of that teaching, you are also charged to take responsibility for transmitting it by the means appropriate to the situation. This may be the point of *Thomas 62*, which consists of two seemingly unrelated sayings:

¹ Jesus said, 'I disclose my mysteries to those [who are worthy] of [my] mysteries.'

² 'Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.'

— *Thomas 62* (Meyer)

Matthew 6:3 may provide a clue to the link between these sayings. It places 62.2 in the context of alms-giving, the point being that you shouldn't make a public show of generosity or virtuous behavior. This draws a line between public and private in *practice*, and *Thomas 62.1* draws a similar line in *preaching*, which Jesus tells us not to cross. If Saying 33.1 (above) has not been garbled in the Coptic text, as some argue, perhaps it is saying that the left ear should not know what the right ear is doing, as it were.

In any case, the importance of the esoteric does not imply that exoteric teaching is any less urgent – only that the two should not be confused. Nor should the naturally hidden 'word' be confused with the artificially concealed or deliberately obscure. The gates of

the Kingdom require no elaborate locks, because only a rare and 'hidden harmony' of wisdom and innocence can open them anyway. Jesus in these sayings challenges you to make an effort, not to dig up anything abstruse, but to see what's in front of your nose:

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 which will not be revealed.'

— *Thomas 5* (Meyer)

The *Q* version of this saying (*Matthew 10:26, Luke 12:2*) says that 'nothing is covered up that will not be *discovered*' (*apokalyphthesetai*). However, the hardest thing to discover is the one you think you already know, and likewise, 'a prophet is not acceptable in the prophet's own town; a doctor does not heal those who know the doctor' (*Thomas 31*, Meyer). A prudent teacher, then, would be careful not to 'inoculate' the student against a revelation by presenting it in a too-familiar form before the student is ready to realize its deeper truth. On the other hand, perhaps the sayings are only hard to hear because of noise and interference from bad habits – for instance, relying too much on 'authorities' who hide knowledge (even from themselves!) in order to protect their status. Such habits have to be unlearned if you want to 'be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves,' or to awaken your primal bodymind.

Even reliance on *genuine* authority can be a bad habit. If we ask the prophet to answer our questions for us, or prescribe an explicit practice, we may be disappointed.

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

Jesus said, 'Do not lie, and do not do what you hate, because all things are disclosed before Heaven. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed, and there is nothing covered that will remain undisclosed.'

— *Thomas 6* (Meyer)

The idea that nothing is hidden and 'all things are disclosed before

Heaven' – repeated from the previous saying, but given here as a reason not to lie or 'do what you hate' – implicitly condemns the hypocrisy of doing something merely to be seen doing it by others, and thus to win their approval. As for Heaven, there's no use trying to present your best face before it, since your original face will be revealed in any case. To the disciples' questions about religious practice, a more direct answer is given in Saying 14 – but this one is even more challenging to conventional piety:

(1) Jesus said to them, "If you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves, (2) and if you pray, you will be condemned, (3) and if you give to charity, you will harm your spirits. (4) "When you go into any region and walk through the countryside, when people receive you, eat what they serve you and heal the sick among them. (5) For what goes into your mouth will not defile you; rather, it is what comes out of your mouth that will defile you."

— *Thomas 14* (NHS)

If the spiritual life is one of wandering, interaction and dialogue, as it seems to be in the *Gospel of Thomas*, then religious ritual or observance may do more harm than good to the spirit. Valantasis (1997, 79) suggests that the contrast here is between 'religiously settled pious practices' and the 'itinerancy' of the true seeker or "enlightening being." The more rules and regulations you try to carry around in your head, the less likely you are to hear other voices. In *Thomas*, Jesus does not ask us to 'believe in his name,' but to realize the implicit source of genuine guidance. Giving in to our demands for explicit regulations would only interfere with the seed-sower's mission.

The seed symbolizes not only extreme compression or concentration, but also implicit potential. Once the potential has been realized explicitly – as when you have chosen a word or metaphor to express your idea – the myriad other ways in which the idea could have been expressed are, as it were, hidden behind the one you chose. Perhaps this explains (or perhaps it conceals!) what is intimated by *Thomas 83*:

Jesus says: 'The images are visible to humanity, but the light within them is hidden in the image. The light of the Father will reveal itself, but his image is hidden by his light.'

— (5G)

As a 'hermeneutical key' to the whole *Gospel of Thomas*, Marvin Meyer proposes that 'what characterizes all these sayings is that they are all hidden, that is to say, they are all capable of interpretation and in fact require interpretation' (Meyer 2003, 100). Of course, every text is 'capable of interpretation,' but what's unusual about an 'open work' like *Thomas* is its way of challenging you. And what happens if you meet the challenge?

Seeking meaning, finding life

And he said: 'Whoever finds the meaning of these words will not taste death.'

We have already met a similar promise in *Thomas* 18: 'Blessed is he who will take his place in the beginning; he will know the end and will not experience death' (Lambdin translation). *Thomas* 19 seems to develop the idea a little further, though perhaps more cryptically:

¹Jesus says: 'Blessed is he who was, before he came into being. ²If you become disciples of mine (and) listen to my words, these stones will serve you. ³For you have five trees in Paradise that do not change during summer (and) winter, and their leaves do not fall.

⁴Whoever comes to know them will not taste death.'

— (5G)

DeConick translates that final expression as 'will not die,' on the grounds that 'taste death' is a common idiom for 'die' in Semitic languages. But this obliterates the difference between dying and *experiencing* death. Biologically speaking, death is observable from without, but to *experience* it from within would be an entirely different matter. The difference is evoked more strongly by the

expression 'taste death' than by 'see death' as exemplified in *John* 8:51, where Jesus says that 'If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death' (θάνατον οὐ μὴ θεωρήσῃ).

The reference to 'five trees in Paradise' is obscure, but whatever they are, they are like 'the meaning of these words' in Saying 1, in that 'whoever comes to know them will not taste death.' Such a promise would make sense only on the assumption that 'tasting death' is the normal course of events or experience, which can be avoided by 'coming to know' or finding the meaning of these 'hidden words.' But how could this 'death' refer to a biological event, if biological life is a precondition for conscious experience? As Wittgenstein put it, 'Death is not an event in life; we do not live to experience death' (*Tractatus* 6.4311). On the other hand, as Wittgenstein went on to say, 'If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present.' So perhaps finding the meaning of the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* will teach us to live in the presence of Paradise. In that case, the five trees of 18.3 could be the five senses, through which we can read the infinite variety of creation, *because* they 'do not change' relative to that variety.

It makes more sense, then, to read both 'life' and 'death' as referring to states of the soul (i.e. 'psychological' states). This is the obvious reading in many Bible passages; in *Ephesians* 2:1, for example, 'death' is the state of a sinner, and Christ has brought the dead back to life through his own resurrection: 'And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins' (KJV). However, this leaves the meaning of 'life' somewhat ambiguous. One hermeneutical habit would take 'not tasting death' as referring to an 'afterlife,' in the sense that a specific self-conscious individual soul continues to live forever after its body dies. The promise would then be that of all those now living, only those who 'find the meaning' will have an afterlife, while the rest cannot look forward to having one. But this reading would reinforce a 'preoccupation with the afterlife' which, according to Marcus Borg (2001, 255), 'has profoundly distorted Christianity.' It would mean saving only a shrunken self, while burying the primal person.

A step beyond the narrow notion of individual salvation, though still far short of the bodhisattva vow to save all sentient beings, is the idea (common in early Christian times) of a spiritual

'elect' exclusively destined for immortality. But again, this 'immortality' need not be relegated to an afterlife. A Nag Hammadi text entitled *On the Origin of the World* tells us that the savior has created four 'races,' the highest of which is 'kingless and perfect, being the highest of all. For these shall enter the holy place of their father.... Moreover they are kings within the mortal domain, in that they are immortal' (NHL, 188). Why put off eternal life until after death? Perhaps 'what you look for has come, but you do not know it' (*Thomas* 51, Meyer) – for if you knew it, you would be a 'king.'

The following passage from a 'Syrian father' may throw some light on what Thomas could have meant by 'life' and 'death':

The real death takes place interiorly in the heart. It lies hidden. The interior man perishes. If anyone, therefore, has passed from death into the hidden life, that one truly lives forever and does not die.

— *Pseudo-Macarius*, quoted by DeConick (2007a, 251)

Perhaps the one who has passed into 'the hidden life' is 'he who was, before he came into being,' as in *Thomas* 19.1 above. Meyer translates this as 'one who came into being before coming into being,' while DeConick has 'Whoever existed before being born.' Any of these could refer to what we have called, since Chapter 4, *the primal person*. This 'interior' reading of 'not tasting death' could reflect the ancient author's intention. Besides, 'immortality' may take the form of a crossing or *exchange* of identity between reader and author of scripture. *Thomas* 108 (above) suggests this, and so does Thoreau, in his chapter on 'Reading' in *Walden*:

... in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindu philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now renews the vision.

In order to 'renew the vision,' sometimes you have to burst the bubble of the old. At the apocalyptic moment, 'the skies roll up like a scroll' (*Isaiah* 34.4), an image echoed in *Revelation* 6:14 and in

Thomas 111:

¹Jesus said, “The heavens and the earth will roll up in your presence, ²and whoever is living from the living one will not see death.” ³Doesn’t Jesus say, “Whoever has found oneself, of that person the world is not worthy”?

(NHS)

Only the first part of this is a ‘kernel’ saying, according to DeConick, but as a whole it combines three central Thomasine themes: apocalypse, immortality and self-knowledge. Compare what Jesus says to Martha in *John* 11:25-6: ‘I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.’ If Jesus here speaks as the primal person (the Living One), the point here is the same (except that the ‘seeker’ in *Thomas* becomes in *John* a ‘believer’). The end of the world turns out to be the beginning of reunion with the Living One. The exit of the old separated self caught in its cage of birth-and-death is the entrance of a deeper self, which we might describe as ‘superior to the world’ – or perhaps ‘king over the All.’

Kingdom come

Jesus says: “The one who seeks should not cease seeking until he finds. And when he finds, he will be dismayed. And when he is dismayed, he will be astonished. And he will be king over the All.”

The first part of saying 2 is clear enough; if you ever find what you’re searching for, it’s always in the last place you look. And since the seeker is usually motivated by an expectation of finding, ‘Seek and you shall find’ is a familiar refrain in several gospels, heard again in *Thomas* 92 and 94. But why will you be *dismayed* when you find it? —Because it’s not what you expected; nor is it just another piece of knowledge to add to your collection. It comes as an *interruption* of your usual routine. As the Kabbalistic text *Bahir* has it, ‘You cannot grasp these things unless you stumble

over them' (Matt 1995, 163).

Once you stumble, though, the next step is to recover your balance. You won't be able to cope with such things without *changing* your mind, your habits, the way you inhabit the world. *Astonishment* comes as you begin to sense the implications of your discovery, and ushers in the recovery through which it will make a lasting difference to your life. —Or rather to *all* life, since you are now *king over the All!* What do you make of that?

The stumbling block at this point is the political sense of *king*, which also lurks behind the Hebrew *Messiah* and its Greek equivalent *Christ*. Both terms mean 'the anointed one,' thus harking back to Israel's ancient coronation ceremonies, during which 'the future king was anointed' to single him out as God's representative or 'son' (Pagels 2003, 42). In the time of Jesus, then, it was expected that the advent of the Messiah/Christ would mean the restoration of long-lost Jewish sovereignty. By the time the gospels were written, of course, the realm of the Christ had shifted from 'the world' to the 'kingdom of heaven' or 'of the father.' But for many Christians, the political sense was simply transferred to the new domain: Jesus the teacher and prophet was replaced by Christ the King, a ruler to be worshipped and obeyed exclusively. In this way the collective guidance system restored its familiar focus on a single external authority, a father-figure, raising the old habit of idolatry to a higher level. As Blake put it, God became 'a tyrant crown'd' (*Europe*, 10:23); for the king 'is the Selfhood's attempt to express the imaginative idea of the unity of society in a single man' (Frye 1947, 395).

But the *Gospel of Thomas* turns the language of Selfhood against itself. The 'king' here is not Jesus as political or religious lord over lesser selves, but the one who has sought and found the meaning of his words, becoming twin brother of Jesus by knowing himself as primal person. The community thus inspired resembles the 'kingless kings' described above; you join them by perceiving yourself to be 'the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you' (recalling Thomas Traherne from Chapter 4).

Though the idea of turning into such a 'king' may be foreign to many Christians, it has many precedents, going back to the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: 'He who meditates upon Brahman as

such goes beyond all created beings and becomes the glorious ruler of all' (Prabhavananda and Manchester 1947, 134). Shunryu Suzuki (1999, 66) offered a colloquial, contemporary version: 'Each one of us is the boss of the whole world.' Of course this has nothing to do with dominance over others, but rather expresses the sense of waking up, or being 'born again.' It is said that 'when old Shakyamuni Buddha was first born, he pointed to the sky with one hand and to the earth with the other hand, scanned the four directions and said "In the heavens and on earth, I alone am the Honored One"' (Cleary and Cleary 1977, 108). But as Uchiyama Roshi remarked, this applies to every one of us (Wright 1983, 45). As the nowborn primal person, what else can one say?

Just at the very time when things are thus, both inside and outside of sentient beings are, as such, the *entire being* of the Buddha-nature.

...

The entire world is completely free of all objective dust; right here and now there is no second person!

— Dogen, 'Bussho' (Waddell and Abe 2002, 61, 62)

A living system *is* a guidance system; there is no separation between the guided and the guide. You are already 'king over the All' in the sense that your All is your *Umwelt*.

Nobody is a product of their environment – everybody is the master of one's *Umwelt*.

— Jakob von Uexküll (cited by Kull 2001)

This mastery cannot express itself as domination or possession. As Dogen puts it, 'the idea that the entire world and everything in it are my personal possessions is a false, non-Buddhist teaching' ('Bussho,' Waddell and Abe 2002, 63). Rather, as primal person,

the whole scene, in all its myriad forms, the grasses and trees, the humans and beasts, clearly and completely reveal your own personal style, in a unique individual perspective.

— Tenkei (Cleary 2002, 24)

‘All other beings are the contents of our personality,’ said Dainin Katagiri (1988, 7). This is why no individual can enter *nirvana* without taking the whole world along. Waking up to this reality sparks a sense of exultation at first, but as the revelation settles into habit – which it must, if it triggers a long-term transformation – the feeling is one of peace, ‘rest’ or ‘repose.’

Jesus says: ‘Come to me, for my yoke is gentle and my lordship is mild. And you will find repose for yourselves.’

— *Thomas* 90 (5G)

At the end of seeking, finding, dismay and astonishment, the crowning moment inaugurates a reign of equilibrium. The word translated *repose* here is (in Greek) a form of ἀνάπαυσις, which LSG glosses as ‘rest,’ ‘relaxation’ and ‘recreation.’ The Coptic form appears several times in *Thomas*, and according to Meyer (2005, 303) is ‘the term commonly used in gnostic texts to describe the state of ultimate bliss.’ But the ‘peak experience’ that comes with a flash of insight is anything but restful, and can’t be sustained for long. On the other hand, *bliss* is far from a state like thermodynamic equilibrium – a ‘peace’ in which only the dead can ‘rest.’ The ‘repose’ which Jesus says you will find must be the relative, psychological equilibrium which follows from closure of the cognitive bubble. The immediate end of seeking and striving is *relief* – which is also, etymologically, ‘raising up,’ as is *relevance*. The longer-term effect is to settle into a habit-system better attuned with reality, and more compassionate, than the old one it replaces. This realm of ‘repose’ is the embodiment of viability.

Human being

The world being inside out, the one who is *king over the All* is not other than the *kingdom*. The latter part of the *Gospel of Thomas* offers several parables and analogies concerning the kingdom (‘of heaven’ or ‘of the father’): consistently this kingdom is said to be like *a person* of one sort or another, and not like *a place* in which a person dwells. For instance:

Jesus said, 'The kingdom of the father is like a merchant who had a consignment of merchandise and who discovered a pearl. That merchant was shrewd. He sold the merchandise and bought the pearl alone for himself. You too, seek his unfailing and enduring treasure where no moth comes near to devour and no worm destroys.'

— *Thomas 76* (Lambdin)

We find this same pattern in Sayings 57, 96, 97, 98, 107 and 109. In most of these the 'moral of the story' is not directly stated in terms of guidance, as it is in 76, and in some the point may seem obscure; but in each case the kingdom is likened to a person. The first of these parables in *Thomas* refers to neither the *king* nor the *kingdom* but to a generic *human being*:

And he says: 'The human being is like a sensible fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up from the sea filled with little fish. Among them the sensible fisherman found a large, fine fish. He threw all the little fish back into the sea, and he chose the large fish effortlessly. Whoever has ears to hear should hear.'

— *Thomas 8* (5G)

My guess is that this big fish is none other than the primal person; and as you may choose it over the world, so may you be chosen. In *Thomas 23.1*, Jesus says 'I will choose you, one from a thousand and two from ten thousand.' But you can only qualify to be 'chosen' by accepting the implicit challenge in these little stories and finding their deeper meaning. If you are willing to dispense with a boatload of lesser possessions, any one of these sayings could reveal the pearl within. Then the one who 'has ears to hear' is *saved*:

Jesus says, 'If you bring it into being within you, (then) that which you have will save you. If you do not have it within you, (then) that which you do not have within you [will] kill you.'

— *Thomas 70* (5G)

Another translation of 70 has Jesus saying, 'If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you' (Pagels-Meyer 2003). This clarifies the point that the saving light from beyond the world-bubble turns out to be coming from *within you*. When you find it you light up the world.

His disciples said, 'Show us the place where you are, for we must seek it.'

He said to them, 'Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear! There is light within a person of light, and it lights up the whole world. If it does not shine, it is dark.'

— *Thomas 24* (Pagels/Meyer)

If you see this light, you see everyone in it as a source of it just like you, and treat them accordingly:

Jesus said, 'Love your sibling like your soul, protect that person like the pupil of your eye.'

— *Thomas 25* (Meyer)

Jesus said, 'You see the speck that is in your sibling's eye, but you do not see the beam that is in your own eye. When you take the beam out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your sibling's eye.'

— *Thomas 26* (Meyer)

Again, the 'superiority' of the person who 'has ears to hear' (and therefore discovers the pearl within) has nothing to do with one's 'place' in the social hierarchy, and the 'King over the all' has no interest in lording it over others. Rather he realizes how the other *is* oneself, as a plural singularity and a singular plurality. This realization brings light, intimacy and depth to any dialog – because it means speaking from, and listening for, *experience*.