

### The Hidden Meaning of “the Kingdom Inside You and Outside You” in the *Gospel of Thomas*

The brief prologue to the *Gospel of Thomas* introduces the sayings of Jesus in this collection as “the hidden words” of the living Jesus:

Prologue:

These are *the hidden words* that the living Jesus spoke and that Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down.

The expression “hidden words” can hardly mean that Jesus’ words should be kept secret, first of all because some of the sayings insist that the message of Jesus be proclaimed in public.<sup>1</sup> Rather this introductory sentence suggests that a deeper meaning is contained in the quoted words – a meaning which the readers or hearers will not discover if they read them superficially. The subsequent call to find the meaning of the words fits in with this understanding of the sayings of Jesus:

Thom 1:

And he (Jesus or Didymus Judas Thomas?) said, “Whoever finds the meaning of these words will not die.”

The next words – an admonition to keep seeking until one finds – also hint at a deeper meaning:

Thom 2:

Jesus said, “Let him who seeks not stop seeking until he finds. And when he finds, he will be troubled. And when he is troubled, he will be amazed and be king over the all.”<sup>2</sup>

Actually Thom 2 itself is a “hidden word”, for neither does it make clear what should be sought nor what eventually will be found. But the next saying, Thom 3a, at least gives a clue, for here an important object of seeking is mentioned: the kingdom (note that the Coptic text does not speak of the kingdom *of God*). Jesus discloses, and at the same time veils, where the kingdom is to be found: it is as near as possible and at the same time everywhere:

Thom 3a:

Jesus said, “If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the kingdom is in heaven’, then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea’, then the fish will precede you. Rather *the kingdom is inside you and it is outside you*.”

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<sup>1</sup> See esp. Thom 33.

<sup>2</sup> The translation, “who finds (...) will be *king* over the all” is preferable to “who finds (...) will *rule* over the all”, because it better preserves the terminological link in the Coptic text between Thom 2 (*r-rro*) and 3 (*mnt-rro*).

What is the “hidden” meaning of this saying? To what reality or ideal does “the kingdom inside you and outside you” refer?<sup>3</sup> In what ideological context should we understand this expression?

1. *A comparison with Luke 17:21.*

I begin with a comparison of Thom 3a with the well-known word of Jesus about God’s kingdom in Luke 17:20-21. If we base our interpretation of the Lucan verse on the *King James Version* (1611) or on another early modern translation, the resemblance to Thom 3a is quite close.

Luke 17:20-21

And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, “The kingdom of God comes not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo here! Or, lo there! For, behold, *the kingdom of God is within you* (ἐντὸς ὑμῶν).”

Cf. Martin Luther’s translation (1545): “*das Reich Gottes ist inwendig in euch*”.

However, in more recent versions, the Lucan phrase is translated rather differently. In the *New English Bible* (1961) we read: “*the kingdom of God is among you*”. Compare the *Contemporary English Version* (1991): “*God’s kingdom is here with you*”, and the *New American Standard Bible* (1995): “*the kingdom of God is in your midst*” (the same translation in *Today’s New International Version*).

Both translations (“within you” and “among you”) are grammatically possible because the rare Greek preposition (*entos*) used in Lk 17 can mean “in”/“within” as well as “among”. It occurs in the latter sense particularly before a word referring to a group of people, as is the case in Luke 17:21.<sup>4</sup> The same preposition *entos* is found in the Greek text of Thom 3 in one of the papyrus fragments of this Gospel found in Oxyrhynchos (pap. Oxy 654).

In the Lucan text, the translation “among you” or “in your midst” is preferable, first of all because of the direct literary context: the words are addressed to Pharisees. The words, “the kingdom is among you” or “in your midst”, might point to Jesus himself: when critical opponents asked him when the kingdom would come, he may have answered that it was anticipated in his own words and deeds. A similar saying is preserved in Luke 11:20 and in Matt. 12:28, “If it is by the finger (or: the Spirit) of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

But it is likewise very well possible that the Jesus of Luke’s Gospel included his followers, – those, that is, who, like Jesus himself, lived their lives in total conformity with God’s will and in line with the values and standards of God’s imminent kingdom. Particularly in this extension to the circle of his followers, the words addressed to Pharisees, “the kingdom is among you”, make sense.

If this is a correct interpretation it is doubtful that Luke 17:21 helps us to ascertain the meaning and purpose of the saying about the kingdom “inside you and outside you” in Thom 3a, in spite of the fact that both the Lucan verse and the Greek fragment of Thom 3 speak of a kingdom *entos humôn*. We have to look in another direction.

<sup>3</sup> The commentaries on the *Gospel of Thomas* give little attention to this issue. Richard Valantasis, for instance, writes: “*the imperial rule of God* is found both within and without the seeker” (1997, p. 58).

<sup>4</sup> W. Bauer, *WNT*, col. 534-5

## 2. *Biblical exegesis?*

Stevan Davies and Elaine Pagels suggest that the kingdom concept of this Gospel developed from a special exegesis of Gen 1:3. Their essays appeared in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. The study by Davies is entitled: “The Christology and Protology of the Gospel of Thomas” (*JBL* 1992, pp. 663-82). The essay by Pagels bears the title: “Exegesis of Genesis 1 in the Gospels of Thomas and John” (*JBL* 1999, 477-96). Although the kingdom is not mentioned in their titles, they more or less explicitly discuss the meaning of this term in Thom 3 and in other sayings of Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Davies argues that “kingdom” is another word for “light”: “For Thomas,” he states, “the kingdom of God is the indwelling of light in all things, within people and outside of them” (665). Then he specifies that the light of Gen 1:3 is meant (“And God said, ‘Let there be light: and there was light’”) and, furthermore that this “primordial light” is the image of God in which “primordial humanity” was created (668). The interpretation by Elaine Pagels is in the same line. She, too, identifies the light that God called into being with the divine image: “What God calls into being in Gen 1:3 is an emanation of his own being – light that simultaneously manifests the divine, the prototype of the human, and the energy manifested throughout ‘all things’” (486). Accordingly, Pagels argues that the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas* summons his addressees to recover this primordial light in themselves. This light, she adds, is available to humanity from the time of creation, and ever since (496). She presents a similar explanation in her book *Beyond Belief. The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (2003). Cf. 55: “Thus Jesus suggests that we have spiritual resources within us precisely because we were made ‘in the image of God’.”

Davies and Pagels believe that, as Elaine Pagels puts it (488), the source of the relevant ideas of the *Gospel of Thomas* is “quite simply” exegesis of Gen 1. Davies: “Thomas seems to derive from the same milieu as does Philo – Hellenistic Judaism which produced its vocabulary largely through allegorical exegesis, especially of Genesis 1 and 2” (665). The problem with this interpretation is that it seems to be at odds with the repeated rejection in “Thomas” of attempts to connect Jesus and his teaching with biblical and post-biblical Jewish traditions and customs. Note that these rejections are put into the mouth of Jesus in dialogues with his disciples.

On various occasions, the disciples pose a question or make an observation to which Jesus reacts. Quite often their words bear witness to a serious lack of knowledge. One example is the slightly blunt question they pose Jesus in Thom 43: “Who are you to say these things to us?” Jesus simply retorts to their question: “From what I say to you, you do not know who I am.” It may be recalled that for early-orthodox or “apostolic” contemporaries of the author(s) of the *Gospel of Thomas*, the disciples of Jesus (the apostles) were the guarantees of the truth about Jesus and his message. The blaming of the disciples for their ignorance and lack of comprehension is likely to show that “Thomas” is engaged in a polemic with early-orthodox Christians.

In Thom 52 the disciples claim: “Twenty-four prophets have spoken in Israel, and they all have spoken of you.” But Jesus responds: “You have disregarded the Living One who is in your presence and spoken of the dead.” This short dialogue unveils that one of the points of difference between the author(s) of the *Gospel of Thomas* and early-orthodox Christians concerned the relevance of the Old Testament for understanding Jesus. We may take it for granted that the author(s) and the intended readers identified themselves with Jesus’ statement. To them the prophetic writers of the Old Testament (the “twenty-four prophets”) were “dead”, while early-orthodox Christians valued and

quoted the books of the Old Testament as Holy Scripture, on account of their revelation of God as well as for their prophetic announcement of Jesus and his mission.

I come back to Thom 43: The reproach Jesus makes to his disciples in the second part of this text unit is in line with Thom 52, although it is of a more general nature. Because they are not able to know from his words who he is, Jesus says that they have become “like the Jews, for they love the tree but hate its fruit, or they love the fruit but hate the tree.” The exact meaning of the image of the tree and its fruit can be left aside here. The important thing is that the disciples are blamed for having become “like the Jews”. More than once in this Gospel, Jesus rejects Jewish rites and customs such as fasting, praying, alms giving, ritual purity and circumcision (Thom 6, 14, 39, 53, and 104) and he warns about “the Pharisees and the scribes” (Thom 39 and 102).<sup>5</sup> In stating that they have become like the Jews, Jesus reproaches the disciples for not having turned away from Jewish rites and traditions – unlike the Christian sympathizers with the *Gospel of Thomas*.

In effect, the *Gospel of Thomas* disconnects Jesus from his Jewish context and more or less explicitly denies the relevance of the Jewish Scriptures for understanding his teaching. That one of the central ideas of this Gospel developed from a special type of Old Testament exegesis is therefore implausible.

### 3. A hidden reference to God?

If it is correct to assume that the *Gospel of Thomas* is more than a chance collection of individual sayings, and – in other words – if it contains a more or less coherent message,<sup>6</sup> it makes sense to look for textual data in other parts of this Gospel that might shed light on the “hidden” meaning of Thom 3a, “the kingdom is inside you and it is outside you”. I begin with passages that are comparable to the first half of this saying (“the kingdom is inside you”).

#### a. “Inside you”.

The phrase, “the kingdom is inside you”, can be related, first of all, to the word about self-knowledge in Thom 3b, “When you know yourselves, then you will be known (...)”. One wonders if there is any difference at all in this Gospel between finding the kingdom inside oneself and self-knowledge. Note that in Thom 27 Jesus insists that his followers distance themselves (“fast”) from the world in order to *find the kingdom*, while in Thom 111 he disqualifies the world as an unworthy place to be for *whomever has found himself*.<sup>7</sup> The possible equation of self-knowledge and knowledge of “the kingdom inside you” suggests that “the kingdom inside” refers to the true “self” of the addressees (their soul, spirit or heart<sup>8</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Antti Marjanen, “Thomas and Jewish religious practices”, in Risto Uro (ed.), *Thomas at the Crossroads*, Edinburgh, 1998, 163-82.

<sup>6</sup> E. Pagels: “the sayings are not randomly arranged, but carefully ordered to lead one through a process of seeing and finding” (Thom 2), *JBL* 1999, 481.

<sup>7</sup> In Thom 67, Jesus states that the one who lacks self-knowledge, lacks everything. The message of Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* will probably not be violated if in this saying we substitute knowledge of “the kingdom inside oneself” for “self-knowledge”.

<sup>8</sup> Thom 87 and 112 (soul), Thom 14a and 29 (spirit), Thom 69a (heart).

The search for one's spiritual core goes together with a depreciation of the body and the material world. I already mentioned Thom 27 ("fasting" from the world) and Thom 111 (the world is an unworthy place). The innermost core of the human being has nothing in common with its present earthly environment and the followers of Jesus should therefore not behave as if they were at home in this "poverty".<sup>9</sup>

Other sayings speak about the origin and nature of the "self" or the "kingdom inside". In Thom 49 Jesus promises his chosen followers that they *will find the kingdom*. "*For you have come from it, and you will return there.*" In the next saying (Thom 50a) he instructs them: "If they say to you, 'Where have you come from?', say to them, '*We have come from the light, the place where the light came into being by itself (...)*'."<sup>10</sup> It seems clear that "coming from the kingdom" (Thom 49) means basically the same thing as "coming from the light" (Thom 50a), and that both expressions refer to the spiritual origin of the addressees.<sup>11</sup> I do not doubt that "the light" of Thom 50a (the light that *came into being by itself*) is a designation of God. This is even more clear from the next saying (50b), where Jesus juxtaposes the light and "the living Father".<sup>12</sup> If the followers are asked, "Is it you?", they should answer: "*We are (the light's) children, we are the chosen of the living Father.*" Note that the followers are advised to make themselves known as (God's) *children*. Obviously "natural" children are meant here (not adopted children, as in some Pauline texts, cf. Gal 4:5; Rom 9:4; Eph 1:5), children, that is, who share the luminous nature of God, their Father.<sup>13</sup>

b. "Outside you".

I turn to the second half of Thom 3a, "and it (the kingdom) is *outside you*". This statement is paraphrased near the end of the Gospel, Thom 113: "*the kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, but people do not see it.*" In Thom 28, Jesus explains why people do not see the kingdom in spite of its omnipresence:

Jesus said, "I stood in the midst of the world, and I appeared to them in flesh. *I found them all drunk, and I did not find any of them thirsty, My soul ached for the children of humanity, because they are blind in their hearts and do not see (...)*"

Thom 113 and 28 can be related to a few other sayings. It is interesting to compare, first of all, Thom 77b, where Jesus attributes omnipresence also to himself:

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<sup>9</sup> Compare Thom 29, "I marvel at how this great wealth has come to dwell in this poverty", with the conclusion of Thom 3b: "if you do not know yourselves, then you will dwell in poverty, and you are poverty." The spiritual essence will not die, see Thom 1 (quoted above), 11b and 18.

<sup>10</sup> Note that Gen 1:3-4 speaks of light that came into existence by God's word, while Thom 50 speaks of light that came into being by itself.

<sup>11</sup> Thom 19a also reminds the addressees of their spiritual pre-existence: "Blessed is the one who came into being (or: who was?) before he came into being."

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Thom 15: "When you see the one who was not born of a woman, fall on your faces and worship him. That is your Father." "The (my, your) Father" is the usual designation of God in the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* (3b, 15, 27, 40, 44, 50, 53, 57, 61, 64, 69, 79, 83, 96, 97, 98, 99). See the conclusion of this article.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. April DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, London 2007, 181.

*“Split a piece of wood, I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.”*

As the preceding saying (77a) reveals, Jesus is omnipresent (and omniscient, cf. Thom 108, quoted below) because he is the divine light:

*“I am the light that is above all things. I am everything. From me, everything came forth, and to me everything reached.*

So far we see a. that Jesus (“the light that is above all things”) and the Father (Thom 50: “the light that came into being by itself”) are closely associated, and b. that he is put on a par with the kingdom inasmuch as both are omnipresent. But there is more, for from Thom 108 we gather that Jesus is also closely connected – if not fully identified – with the ones who listen to his teaching:

*“Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me. I myself shall become that person.”*

Jesus adds: “and the hidden things will be revealed to him”. The one who responds to Jesus’ message will share in his divine omniscience.

c. Emphasis on unity/“oneness”.

In other ways, too, Jesus emphasizes the notion of unity or “oneness”, notably in his blessings of the *monachoi* (“single ones”, imagined as androgynous – or complete – human beings?). In Thom 49 (discussed above) Jesus assures: “Blessed are the *monachoi*, the chosen, for you will find the Kingdom, while in Thom 75, he promises: “the *monachoi* will enter the wedding chamber”. Apparently, the wedding or bridal chamber – and by implication the kingdom – is viewed as the place where the original unity of human beings is restored (cf. Thom 11d: “On the day when you were one, you became two. But when you are two, what will you do?”). Men as well as women (Thom 114!) are summoned to transcend their sexual one-sidedness and to become “one” (Thom 22).

#### 4. Conclusion

If we bring together the textual data that directly or indirectly concern “the kingdom inside and outside”, the picture emerges of an eternal reality that is present inside as well as everywhere outside human beings, although imperceptible to the senses, and that at the same time is imagined as fundamentally one and the same. Because of the emphasis on unity/“oneness” it seems less plausible that the kingdom metaphor refers to something that can be distinguished from God: God’s (imperial) power, God’s light, or another hypostasized divine attribute. It is tempting to conclude that the kingdom in the *Gospel of Thomas* is a “hidden” (in fact metonymic) reference to the eternal and ubiquitous Deity itself.

This tentative conclusion is perhaps confirmed negatively by the notable circumstance that, with the exception of Thom 100 (“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, give to God what is God’s”), the word

“God” does not occur in the Coptic text of this Gospel.<sup>14</sup> This may remind us of the traditional Jewish custom to avoid pronunciation of the Name, but it is also possible to relate this silence to the “hidden” character of Jesus’ words in the *Gospel of Thomas*.

It is hardly possible to reconcile the dualistic anthropology of the *Gospel of Thomas*, notably its idea that the supposedly pre-existent and immortal spiritual core of the addressees is essentially divine, with the teaching of Jesus as it is reported in the biblical Gospels or with any other biblical or post-biblical Jewish tradition, while it is in fundamental agreement with second-century philosophical, in particular Platonic, ideas.<sup>15</sup>

A final question is in order: Does the Jesus of this Gospel affirm that the inner core of *all* people is essentially divine and therefore existed before the birth of their material body? Or does this anthropological teaching apply only to his true followers, those who listen to his words? The first option seems to be the more plausible one: individual persons are not disciples of Jesus because they, unlike other people, are of divine descent but because these persons respond to Jesus’ message and thus *have knowledge* of the divine reality inside and outside themselves. The others are spiritually blind and “drunk” and continue to live in “poverty”.

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<sup>14</sup> In the Greek fragment Oxy 1 the phrase “kingdom of God” occurs in Thom 27. As April DeConick suggests, “of God” may be a routine addition by the scribe of this particular manuscript (*The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 129). In the Greek text of Thom 3a in pap. Oxy 654 only the first letters of the word *basileia* are readable. It is not clear whether this papyrus mentioned “the kingdom of God” or just “the kingdom”.

<sup>15</sup> See Jon Ma. Asgeirsson, “Conflicting Epic worlds”, in Asgeirsson et al. (eds), *Thomasine Traditions in Antiquity*, Leiden-Boston 2006, 155-74; Stephen Patterson, “Jesus Meets Plato: The Theology of the *Gospel of Thomas* and Middle Platonism”, in Jörg Frey et al. (eds), *Das Thomasevangelium*, Berlin 2008, 181-205.