The Gospel of Thomas and the Hermeneutics of Vision

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> *These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death."*

In these opening words the Gospel of Thomas offers a stunning hermeneutic challenge: "whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death." Unfortunately, the modern reader comes to this *incipit* or preface devoid of a technique of interpretive reading—a hermeneutics—that grants entry into the mysterious meaning vouchsafed by such words.

Current academic studies respond to the challenge of the Gospel of Thomas with modest modern techniques of historical and sociological analysis, conceptual dissections of parallelisms, and suppositions about obscuring temporal stratifications within the compilation of the sayings. Unable to find any method for unlocking a coherent meaning in the Gospel of Thomas, some critics simply deny the organic function of this preface relative to the remaining 114 says–or "logion"–contained in the document. In sum, critics conclude the words of the living Jesus collected in the Thomas gospel are a hodgepodge with no integral or coherent intention.

The question I pose is this: Was there an original tradition of interpretation, a hermeneutic technique, implicit in early transmissions of the Thomas tradition that gave an organic coherence to readings of the text, and if so, is that hermeneutic method still accessible? Can modern readers meet the challenge of the Thomas preface?

In attempt to answer this question, I start with a consideration of saying 12 of the Gospel of Thomas and its reference to "James the Just", then extend discussion to an overview of Jewish apocalyptic traditions in the intertestamental period, moving forward to the Sophianic tradition, and the tradition of vision in early Christianity. From there I finally circle back, by way of the twelfth logion, to elucidate the original interpretive technique—an anagogical, visionary hermeneutics—implicit in the Gospel of Thomas.

I. The Mysterious James

> *The disciples said to Jesus, "We know that you are going to leave us. Who will be our leader?" Jesus said to them, "No matter where you are you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being."* (Logion 12)

Reference to James as an authoritative figure in saying 12 of the Gospel of Thomas (GTh) has caused difficulty for scholars attempting to date the Gospel's composition to a period after the first century. The community of James, historical associated with Jerusalem, ceased to exist after the Roman destruction of Palestine around 70 CE. If the text of the Gospel of Thomas was produced subsequent to that date, or if the version we now possess underwent later redactions with intent of conforming the text to historical, theological and sociological views of a period foreign to the earliest formative years of Christianity, then why was this authoritative reference to James retained in the twelfth logion? And if the saying indeed dates to the earliest decades of Christian tradition, what significance does reference to James hold for interpretive readings of the Gospel?

As Robert Eisenman detailed in his provocative book *James: The Brother of Jesus* (1997), several persons named James appear in accounts of the early Christian community. Exactly which James was "James the Just" remains historically ambiguous, though the ecclesiastical importance of the James identified as "the Lord's brother" is clearly evidenced in the Pauline letters, the earliest documents of Christianity. Eisenman argues James the Just is this same "brother of the Lord", and his compilation of source materials on the James tradition merits close reading. Central to his discussion is the twelfth logion of Thomas:

> This statement [logion 12] is pregnant with implications where the pre-existent 'Just One' or *Zaddik*, so important in Jewish mystical tradition or *Kabbalah*, is concerned. It is also at odds with the orthodox tradition of the succession of Peter. It represents nothing less than the lost tradition of the direct appointment of James as successor to his brother. It is upheld by everything we know about groups that were expelled from orthodox Christianity.... (p 53)

While the thesis Eisenman develops from his sources and the conclusions he forms about the James tradition are highly tentative, the question from which his discussion takes flight deserves consideration: Was James associated with a "lost tradition" in early Christianity? And if so, how was this tradition related to the tradition of the Gospel of Thomas? To answer those questions, we must consider the environment from which early Palestinian Christianity arose.

II. Jewish Apocalyptics

The first century was a super-saturated cauldron of spiritual aspirations awaiting the nidus of new formation. Jesus appeared at a *kairos,* an auspicious moment, a moment ripe for renewal, and he was anointed by that age as a messiah. Regardless of how one understands the historical personage named Jesus of Nazareth, a new religious tradition crystallized around his life, words, and name. The tradition he catalyzed cannot, however, be entirely dissociated from preexistent aspirations of the epoch transformed by his appearance.

Central to the foundation of Christian tradition was the formation of a new story, or myth, about the relationship of God and humankind. Preexistent "apocalyptic" aspirations of the age clearly helped nurture development of this new myth. (The Greek word *apocalypse*, meaning a "revelation" or an "uncovering" of something hidden, refers in biblical scholarship to a genera of visionary writings common in the intertestamental period. I will use the term here in its broader connotation of "revelation", and without implying a cataclysmic context.) Mythopoetic (or, "myth creating") apocalyptic vision was not the idiosyncratic provenance solely of second-century Gnosticism, a fact often overlooked by students of early Christianity. This mythopoetic tendency associated with second-century Gnosticism stands in context of a preexistent and perpetuating tradition. As early as the second century BCE, the Enoch literature documents a strongly visionary mythopoetic inclination in intertestamental Judaism. Texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran further detail the burgeoning apocalyptic creativity of the century preceding Christianity's birth. Indeed, the formation of Christianity itself reflects a vast mythopoetic creativity—though, of course, by creedal affirmation this story is uniquely sanctified by divine authorship. (Within the visionary tradition, of course, each story mediated by the creative force of a prophetic voice is understood to be of divine authorship; faiths divide in selecting their prophets, but unite in affirming the validity of a prophetic voice and story.)

In first-century Palestinian, the cultural forces of unrest were not solely fomenting political renovation of the Jewish state, a theme often emphasized in sociologically biased considerations of the period. It was an age of equally intense spiritual unrest, expectantly awaiting manifestation of a divine touch and of a human ascendance. The transformative event would be mediated through a Teacher of Righteousness, a *Zaddik,* a *messiah*. Through him, living waters would come to those in thirst.

The *Thanksgiving Hymn* (found among the Dead Sea Scrolls) reads, "But Thou, O my God, hast put into my mouth as showers of early rain for all who thirst and a spring of living waters.... Suddenly they shall gush forth from the secret hiding places..." (Logion 108 in GTh vaguely echoes this same image, "Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to him.") In this broad cultural

setting there was a spiritual longing that sought after the living water of a human-divine communication. It sought after and claimed reception of revelation, vision, and prophecy. From experience of the visions vouchsafed these seekers there crystallized a new canon of salvific stories (or "myths") about the relation of humankind and God.

Christianity in earliest form should be understood within this associated matrix of traditions. Jesus' proclaimed initiator, John the Baptist, and several of his first disciples, had links to a broad milieu of Jewish apocalyptic traditions represented by the Enoch literature and Essene communities. Eisenman even suggests in a tenuous argument that the early Jesus movement was essentially contiguous with the Essene tradition.

To better understand this history, one must place apocalyptic, or "revelatory", experience in its human context. Western humanity has repeatedly told a story of an experienced intimate relationship that constitutes supreme communion with Divinity. Whatever it "be", it is a reality deeply entwined in the history of religions. The words religion and experience have, of course, been disconnected by the thrust of rational theology endured by our age. But in primordial origin, and in ongoing life, religion is intrinsically experiential. And visionary experience was alive in the matrix of Jewish apocalyptics that gave rise to early Christianity.

In the scientific bias of our age, such "revelatory experience", or "experience of God", has become the dream of diseased minds, or the aura produced by a brain in the midst of the aberrant neurochemical events (and as a physician I am well versed in this cognitive-neurophysiological model of understanding the events of human consciousness). Such linguistic amulets of reason cannot, however, ward off the fact that human history flows and eddies and takes course around the contours of this experience's reality: evidence Jesus, Paul, Mani, Mohammed, all men anointed by the charisma of experience, and all transformers of history. In the experience that is sometimes called vision, sometimes prophecy, there abides an intimate relationship between the experienced transcendent, named with the name of God, and the imminent Man. The conduit of that relationship is a living being, the human who touches and is touched by an experience of "Other". From his mouth their flows the living water that gives to religion new life.

The above statement is not intended as a metaphysical declaration. Nor am I speaking here of religious concepts. It is simply an empirical fact. Humans have given repeated testimony of *experiences* which they interpret as "transcendent", whatever the experiences' "psychological" or "spiritual" or "neurophysiological" source. History evidences well that there is an experience of transcendent vision which leaves upon heart and tongue the savor of Divine communication. This experience was most certainly alive among first century men and women stirred by the words of the living Jesus.

III. The Sophianic Tradition

The writings of Philo of Alexandria and the Alexandrian Jewish author of *Wisdom of Solomon* evidence another crucial motif of the visionary tendencies within intertestamental Judaism. Bringing the Sophianic (or "Wisdom") tradition represent by these works into context, however, requires, a consideration of the mythic domain of Sophia as she was developing in the age of Jesus: during the first century She was emphatically not just a philosophical concept, but a divine hypostasis of implied feminine gender with whom the seeker sought union.

David Winston, in his introduction to the Anchor Bible edition of the *Wisdom of Solomon* (WS), refers to her as "Dame Wisdom". By the time Philo and the author of WS put pen to papyrus in the Middle Platonic atmosphere of early first century Alexandria, her story had been developing for over two hundred years as an expression of a renewed Jewish mythopoetic vision. We find her in *Proverbs* and *Job*, and later in *Ecclesiasticus* (also known as in the *Wisdom of ben Sirach*). She was a "charming female figure playing always before Yahweh, after having been created by Him at the beginning of his work." (p 34) To know her — so the story tells — was a rapture, an *experience*. The author of WS describes the event with frank sexual imagery: she is the Bride with whom one entered the bridal chamber. Union with her is a union with God, a conjunction of immanent and transcendent. As Winston states in his introduction,

> There appears to be good reason, then, to conclude that the author's highly charged language concerning the pursuit of Wisdom and her promised gifts, may allude to a mystical experience through which, he believes, man is capable of some measure of union with Deity, at least under the aspect of Sophia. (p 42)

Who Sophia was she alone could reveal, and so she did: "Generation by generation she enters into the holy souls and renders them friends of God and prophets" (WS 7:27). But it must be understood that Sophia's story was still very much in a process of "becoming" during the first century. While Philo and WS offer literary evidence of her myth at a critical stage of formation, its development was certainly not confined to the philosophical discourse of Alexandria, nor was it restricted to the philosophical forms in which these writers appear to cast it— even if we understand the word "philosopher" within its full sense as a "lover of Sophia". Their writings are only two temporal snapshots of Sophia's myth within a broader cultural context and an extended organic process of formation. At the time of Philo (c. 30 CE) the Sophianic myth had been in development for at least two hundred years. It yet would see further metamorphosis within the visionary context of the next century's Gnostic exegesis.

This approach to Wisdom/Sophia as a myth in formation, and the assertion that at center the myth spoke of an experience of Divine-human intercourse,

will be foreign to some readers. Nonetheless, there is ample evidence that the Sophianic tradition was rooted in—or at very least nurtured by—an experiential, visionary (and, thus, "myth making") tradition that sought after something quite beyond the joys of "wise thought." It was not solely a "literary" tradition, even if literary manifestations are signal evidences of its existence. In the Palestine of Jesus, the myth of Sophia very probably found forming and sustaining voices within communities of individuals seeking direct, experiential, visionary contact with Divinity—the "holy souls and friends of God". In several of the Qumran documents we find Her spirit present. (Winston, p 31) She appears in subtle form as the Logos-Sophia of the Gospel of John. And Her gift reflects from within the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas.

The assumption that it is entirely a philosophical Middle Platonic concept that forms the Wisdom tradition in its intersection with the early Christianity discounts a fundamental fact of the Sophianic quest. The seeker of Sophia sought union with a Bride: he wished to experience Her, to be made a prophet by Her, to love Her, to enter the ecstasy of Her embrace. Throughout the Sophianic literature, it is never stated *what* Sophia teaches. We are only told that Her gift is a wonder and the most worthy quest of humankind. One might suggest this reticence is based in the fact that the *experience* of Sophia's embrace is completely beyond the bounds of exegetic expression.

IV. Formation of the Jesus Tradition in Palestine

Though every religion develops with sociological underpinnings, historical antecedents and political consequences, the formation of a "new" religion invariable is firmly rooted in charismatic mystery—the mystery of "spiritual gifts" and events. Again, let me make clear that this statement is not a metaphysical declaration, but a reflection of the long human record of empirical facts: humans experience relationship with "something" transcendent which—using a word born in time immemorial—they call God. By nature, religion links transcendent and immanent realities, it gives expression to the relationship of humanity and divinity. In the Western world, particularly amongst the children of Abraham, religious metamorphosis takes form in a human experience of divine revelation—an experience which makes of men prophets and visionaries in the mold of the prototypical prophet of the West. Whatever its "true source", there is an "event", a moment of epiphany, an intimate experience of intercourse between man and God: a prophet, or apostle, or visionary, or Zaddik is called by the divine voice. He subsequently speaks with the power of that charismatic anointing.

Regardless of how radically "new" a great religion-forming vision may seem in the perspective of Western history, its first formative voice —be it Jesus or Mani or Mohammed—invariably stands itself within the context of prophetic tradition. Vision itself is, after all, a tradition amongst the children of Abraham.

The reality of a new prophet's vision places him "at one" with all true revelation. His revelation—so it will be claimed—is the vision anticipated by every true revelation.

Of course the socially appointed guardians of tradition perpetually judge such deconstructive prophetic readings of conveyed tradition as *misreadings*—as heresies, as deviant aberrations of the received truth. And indeed they are. But the strongest of these strong misreadings (to use a term coined by Harold Bloom) make new religions. The prophetic voice speaks religious metamorphosis; it is the living reality of prophetic tradition. Henceforth all conveyed tradition—the cultural legacies of myth, text and memory—are reformed within the creative fire of reborn prophetic vision. Vision becomes the hermeneutics by which tradition is read and defined. However seemingly new, the *inspired misreading of vision* claims its primacy in a source older than time. Vision conveys the primal, true and everlasting tradition.

The tradition which coalesced around Jesus in Palestine was built upon a foundation of apocalyptic and Sophianic aspirations that characterized the visionary *zeitgeist* of the age. In the Jesus tradition, the epoch's creative spirit found both perpetuation and new avenues of maturation. It can be argued that the story or "myth" which developed around Jesus had been seeking various forms for two hundred years: it was presaged by the Teacher of Righteousness in Essene tradition; in Hellenistic culture Osiris, Hermes, Sarapis and Dionysus had all played roles that took new cast in the emergent story of Jesus. But the story of Jesus was clearly not just a "rehashing" of old motifs. In final development, it was a bold new creation of vision: a prophetic vision come to form in an age alive with visionary creativity.

Whatever the mythic underpinnings or visionary embellishments to his story, Jesus of Nazareth did apparently exist. His life was the nidus that initiated formation of a tradition. He walked and taught in Judea and Galilee. Disciples came to him and saw in him something extraordinary. Through him—through the story they found in him—they experienced a new vision of God and man. As indicated by the reported events on the Mount of Transfiguration, his disciples apparently shared visions with him. And after his death, they had visions of him. Though dead, he lived with them and in them. He spoke to them. Through them, his words reached out across the world.

In searching source for the "words of the Living Jesus", it is essential that we keep in mind the visionary proclivity of the age. Whatever Jesus said in life, those sayings were given significant new depths of meaning by events perceived to have followed upon his death. After his death the "living" (*redivivus*) Jesus was claimed by his disciples to have appeared to them and to have given them further teachings. Metaphysical or "faith-based" affirmations aside, this was the certain perception of those apostles who perpetuated his teachings and memory.

The four canonical gospels all end with assertion of this appearance (though textual evidence suggests the final verses of Mark dealing with the post-resurrection appearance, from 16:8 forward, are a later emendation). Continuing the story of the post-mortal ministry found in the Gospel of Luke, Acts begins:

> He showed himself to these men after his death, and gave ample proof that he was alive: over a period of forty days he appeared to them and taught them about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3-4)

While the four canonical Gospels and Acts are all late first century accounts, Paul gives very early evidence of a widespread witness to the perceived post-mortal ministry of Jesus in I Cor. 15:5-8 (dating to around 48-52 CE):

> He appeared to Cephas and afterwards to the Twelve then he appeared to over five hundred of our brothers at once, most of who are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James and afterwards to all the apostles. In the end he appeared even to me.

The Gospel of John, textually the latest and the most unique in heritage of the Gospels, gives the longest account of this ministry of the resurrected Jesus (making frequent mention of Thomas "the twin" in the account). The rendition ends with these words: "There is much else that Jesus did. If it were all to be recorded in detail, I suppose the whole world could not hold the books that would be written." (John 21:25)

Accounts from the first century seem in accord that there were transformations in the disciples' understanding of Jesus and his words during the period immediately following his death. The John gospel gives insight into the transformative spiritual force that was perceived to awaken this new perspective: "I have told you all this while I am still here with you; but your Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and *will call to mind all that I have told you*." (John 14:25-26) Assuming the Gospel of John took final form at least fifty years after the events it discusses, one might read this verse as reflecting ongoing perceptions within the Johannine community *not* about how the words and teachings of Jesus *would be recollected,* but about how they *had been recollected* by his disciples: and that recollection involved a spiritual anamnesis. Of course the reputed ministry of Jesus *redivivus* and the subsequent anamnesis (or "remembering") of his words mediated by the Holy Spirit played a continued role for segments of the second century Christian community eventually characterized as "Gnostic". One might suggest this Gnostic penchant for spiritual anamnesis was a process organically rooted in first-century traditions dating to the post-resurrection teachings received by the disciples.

Undoubtedly the mortal Jesus deeply influenced his disciples. But the words he spoke to them took multiple levels of new meaning in spiritual manifes-

tations perceived to follow his death. These manifestations emphatically confirmed to the disciples the meaning of his life and ministry. Any orally or textually transmitted record of the "sayings of the Living Jesus" originating among the original disciples of Jesus in Palestine would certainly have been formed and influenced by "apocalyptic" manifestations of meaning developed in the period following his death. The original disciples knew him in life and they experienced him again as living after his death. They gave apostolic testimony to their knowledge of this still-living Jesus.

It seems likely that there were words of Jesus *redivivus* recollected by some early disciples which would have been guarded and conveyed only within chosen communities. Teachings endowed with deeper levels of meaning—meanings "called to memory" by spiritual agencies—are the types of sayings most likely to have been held in limited circulation. The sayings recorded in Thomas are in large measure the very type of verbal recollections that might exemplify a collection of "hidden sayings", words endowed with profound implications "to be understood only through the spirit of revelation" (perhaps an implication of the common refrain in Thomas, "he who has ears, let him hear"). In making this assertion, I emphasize again the apocalyptic tenor of the time. Revelations and spiritual manifestations were formative forces in the early Christian community, and they undoubtedly influenced every recollection about Jesus shared by the first disciples.

V. Paul, Jerusalem and James

The Pauline letters, our earliest primary record of the new Jesus tradition, evidence the crucial role played by "revelation" and "spiritual manifestations" during the tradition's formation. Paul claimed knowledge of Jesus granted to him in its entirety through revelation. The story of Paul's vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus is well known. In his letter to the Galician's, dated between 48 and 58 CE, Paul boldly declares the exclusive revelatory source of his knowledge:

> I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is no human invention. I did not take it over from any man; no man taught it me; I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. ...When that happened, without consulting any human being, without going up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me, I went off at once to Arabia, and afterwards returned to Damascus. Three years later I did go up to Jerusalem to get to know Cephas. I stayed with him a fortnight, without seeing any other of the apostles, except James the Lord's brother. (Gal 1:11-12, 16-19. The point is restated in the pseudepigraphic Pauline letter to the Ephesians 3:3-5.)

Whatever the disagreements between Paul and the disciples residing around Jerusalem, those earliest disciples did apparently accept Paul as an apostle

of Jesus. Paul's visionary encounter with Jesus and his claims of knowledge gained through revelation were acknowledged as valid by disciples who had known Jesus in his mortality. It is difficult to imagine why this select group would have granted the Pauline revelation validity if it were not that they themselves had shared similar experiences. Gospel accounts document that they did have such analogous visionary experiences. Paul authenticates this fact in his letter to the Corinthians (quoted above), wherein he gives context to his own revelation through an affirmation of the original disciples' visions of Jesus.

But there was a crucial (and perhaps insurmountable) difference between Paul and the disciples in Jerusalem: They had walked with Jesus for several years and heard him teach. Paul had not. Some of them had been influenced by preexisting apocalyptic spiritual aspirations (broadly characterized as "Essene influences"), some may have been earlier followers of John the Baptist. Paul most certainly had not. While the original disciples developed a deepened understanding of Jesus after his death—through the mediation of an experience called "revelation"—for many of them this revelatory experience would have been an amplification of teachings they had heard Jesus offer during his mortality. Paul had not shared in that experience.

The Pauline revelation thus stands in ambivalent relationship to the "words of Jesus" which would have been recollected by early disciples. Jesus did speak. His words and their meanings were recalled after his death within an ambience claimed to have been enlightened by "spiritual" agencies bestowing revelatory anamnesis. While Paul professed access to the same "gifts of the spirit", he had limited access to the spoken heritage of Jesus' words. In his many epistles he seldom referred to or reflected specific knowledge of Jesus' words. History of course witnesses the profound charismatic power granted Paul by the spirit of revelation alone: he is the first chosen voice of Christianity. Nonetheless, it remains quite likely that there was another understanding of Jesus—a tradition rooted in words verbalized by Jesus to a select group of mortal men and women, a tradition subsequently nurtured by those same individuals' vision of their risen Lord—to which Paul had little access. The Gospel of Thomas may contain a remnant of that tradition.

And so we finally come back to logion 12 and the mystery of James the Just:

> *The disciples said to Jesus, "We know that you are going to leave us. Who will be our leader?" Jesus said to them, "No matter where you are you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being."*

In Paul's polemic, the name of James was associated with a Jesus tradition mired in Jewish cultural precedents and unwilling to break free of the "the Law".

But in light of the above comments, it might also be suggested that within this Jerusalem community there existed a memory of Jesus' teachings—a memory importantly augmented by revelatory events—to which Paul did not have ready access. Knowledge of sacred words was *sacred*. Its transmission was probably guarded. What we know of Paul's visits to Jerusalem does not suggest he gained intimacy with the inner community of original disciples. At various places in his letters Paul makes clear his competition with, and even antagonism toward, the church at Jerusalem, as well as toward others he refers to as "superlative apostles"—teachers apparently associated with a Jesus tradition not embraced by Paul.

In this context logion 12 is quite understandable—*if it is dated* to a period within the first decades after the death of Jesus, the period in which the original disciples were "recollecting" the words of Jesus. James the Just, "the brother of Jesus", would quite naturally have been accorded a role of leadership and honor by the community of disciples gathered in Palestine after the ascension of their Lord. James had evidently walked beside Jesus, he may have experienced visions with Jesus during his life, and he had seen the risen Jesus in vision after his death—the last a fact affirmed by Paul. He may even have verbally received from Jesus the commission memorialized in logion 12. Though conjectural, one might further suggest James the Just had links to influences infusing the Jesus movement from preexistent apocalyptic strains of Judaism (Eisenman attempts this argument), including the epoch's Sophianic aspirations.

If one wishes to go even further and intuitively impute an esoteric tenor to logion 12, this saying may have been read within an early community of understanding as affirming the priority of a "non-Pauline, non-Petrine" lineage of knowledge linked in memory to apocalyptic aspirations extant in non-normative Jewish traditions—a heritage understood by early disciples as having been consummated and vitally transformed by the Living Jesus. Such an argument accords well with what we know about early origins of the Jesus tradition. It is certainly not counter-intuitive to suppose some members of his incipient movement remembered and considered important what we have also finally come to understand, even at great temporal distance from the fact: the Jesus tradition had roots in, and was influenced by, Jewish apocalyptic culture of the first century.

VI. Thomas and the Hermeneutics of Vision

Among the first disciples of Jesus in Palestine there were at least some who did not see their movement as a "new religion". Instead, I suggest they understood it within the context of their time as the manifestation of a perpetual stream of living water flowing from the most ancient source of tradition: the vital, renewing intercourse between God and man. By nature, the "vision tradition" radically deconstructs a received tradition in the name of "true tradition". Apocalyptic tradition—the tradition of vision—is mediated neither by ritual nor text nor

dogma, but by the immediacy and verity of a unique human experience. This experience reads the prophetic past through the medium of its asserted origin: primary revelation, the experiential event of vision. At the beginning of the deconstruction mediated by new vision, exoteric vessels of tradition may persist even as they are being emptied, recast and refilled. Ritual behaviors—the outward inherited forms of tradition—take new meanings. Traditional texts are not rewritten but selected and reread (or mis-read) to reveal previously unanticipated implications.

One need only examine the later history of Kabbalah—"the tradition" of Jewish mysticism—for repeated evidence of this deconstructive process. Moses de Leon's masterful compilation of the *Zohar* in the thirteenth century and Isaac Luria's bold restatement of the Kabbalistic mythos in the sixteenth century were both unprecedented, and yet each was embraced in its time as a verity of immemorial tradition—a prophetic tradition reaching back to the first Adam, a tradition which allowed (or even demanded) its own restatement by primary, mythopoetic vision. The thirteenth century Islamic mystic Ibn Arabi stands as another example of a visionary "revisioning" redefining tradition within the prophetic legacy of Abraham. In each of these instances the exoteric forms of tradition were maintained while being reformed from within by a new mythos replete with new perceptions of symbolic meaning.

The hermeneutics embraced by the vision tradition is seldom properly understood. Following a schema proposed by Dante at the beginnings of fourteenth century, theories of hermeneutics continue to delineate four interpretive techniques that are typified in readings of sacred text: literal, moral, allegorical and anagogical. The last and most nebulous category, "anagogical interpretation", offers best entry point for understanding the radical hermeneutics of the vision tradition. Taken from Late Greek, the word *anagoge* roughly means "spiritually uplifted". An anagogical interpretation—as usually defined—"lifts" the text from its concrete form into a spiritual dimension of outwardly hidden meaning. In the vision tradition, the "lifting up" occurred specifically through the imaginative power of vision. It was not a rational, intellectual or discursive process, but an experiential, apocalyptic revelation that drove this hermeneutics.

Historically, Kabbalah is perhaps the most obvious and approachable tradition to embrace anagogical hermeneutics. Prophetic Kabbalah asserted that one could only understand the meaning of prophetic writings by personally entering into the primary experience of prophetic vision. Only an experience of primary vision granted understands of the meanings hidden within the prophetic and sacred texts of the Torah. Of course it was understood in Kabbalistic tradition that few men were blessed to reach such an exalted threshold of vision. But in every age some did. (This is a complex line of discussion. In addition to the prophetic aspect of Kabbalah, their developed philosophical and theosophical mani-

festations of Kabbalah in the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries that were more intellectually speculative and less primarily centered on pursuit of prophetic vision. I direct those interested to the extensive writings of Gershom Scholem and Moshe Idel.)

The Gnostic hermeneutics of the second century was anagogical in the same sense: through imaginative vision pseudepigraphical accounts were authored and myths were "remembered". Apocalyptic Gnostic writings were granted authority within their own community not by virtue of their historical provenance, but by the perceived primacy of their source, the prophetic imagination. This is the conundrum presented by the vision tradition that so infuriated more rational and prosaic minds in the second century: when does vision transform into immutable text, where does revelation stop and dogma begin? Or to use the terms of the sociologist Max Weber, how and when is charisma institutionalized?

I suggest that at a very early stage in the development of the Christian tradition there were disciples who gave primacy to an anagogical hermeneutics — a hermeneutics I choose to call "the hermeneutics of vision". In my comments above I have briefly indicated evidences that might suggest existence of a visionary hermeneutics within the early Jesus movement. I further suggest this hermeneutics of vision persisted as an accepted form of tradition into the second century and was organically linked to development of what later was termed Gnosticism. Within Jewish culture, it found independent early expression in Merkabah mysticism and then a later and more general acknowledgment in Kabbalah.

It is my opinion that the Gospel of Thomas represents an early ramus of this tradition—a tradition that predated Jesus and flourished under his influence. This tradition is defined by its hermeneutics: Only one who understands the method of interpretation will understand the message. It is a psychological paradox: the message is the method; the method is vision—a perceptive, spiritually uplifted, visionary encounter with the message. The Words of the Living Jesus presented in Thomas became doorways to an experience of knowing. Implicitly and explicitly, they demand from their interpreter an anagogical hermeneutics—a technique of interpretation vouchsafed by vision. This argument does not date the origins of Thomas into a second century "Gnostic milieu" but rather asserts the hermeneutics of vision that engendered Gnostic Christianity was taking form around Jesus at a very early date.

The vitality inherent in this imputed visionary hermeneutics might suggest inevitable instability in the textual forms of the words recorded in he Gospel of Thomas. But here an important distinction must be made: visionary mutability of a text's meaning does not necessarily demand redaction of the conveyed verbal forms of the text—indeed, quite the contrary. It was the interpreter who was to be changed by the text, and not the text that needed to be change by the interpreter! The words of the sayings are a doorway to visions of meaning. By passage

through that door the interpreter met radical transformation: "he will not taste death". A tradition of visionary hermeneutics might actually tend to preserve the integrity of a text more faithfully than did traditions of textual transmission focused on literal, moral or allegorical interpretation. By anagogically placing meaning above the concreteness of the words, there was arguably less motive for a redactor familiar with anagogical tradition to reform the text in order to bring it into conformity with literal (and temporally mutable) dogmatic demands. I suggest for this reason that the synoptic tradition was probably less stable within its provenances than were the sayings recorded in the Gospel of Thomas within their own lineage of transmission. Within the vision tradition, the words of the Living Jesus were endowed with a spiritual or magical potential—they had intrinsic transformative power.

Secular discussions of Thomas usually become mired in moral, literal and allegorical techniques of interpretation, accompanied by their sociological congeners. The *hermeneus* who will meet the challenge of the Gospel of Thomas' incipit needs enlist another type of hermeneutic technique—a technique hidden and obvious, ancient and modern, simple and complex. Unfortunately our human record documents well that this technique avails only those who have ears attuned to hear it. Without the grace of that gift, the hermeneutics of vision is an obscure and meaningless concept.

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