

Apocryphal Gospels and Historical
Jesus Research
A Reassessment

— Stephen J. Patterson —

THE SYMPOSIUM ORGANIZERS, Tony Burke and Brent Landau, have asked me to assess the impact of the apocryphal gospels on the historical study of Jesus in North America. If truth be told, this could be a very brief presentation: the apocryphal gospels have had virtually no impact on the historical study of Jesus in North America.¹ If we were to expand our topic to include the rest of the scholarly world, this talk might go on just long enough to state that neither have the apocryphal gospels made any impact on the historical study of Jesus in Europe, Asia, Africa, India, Australia, or South America. So far as I know, no one studies these things in Antarctica.

Perhaps exceptions come to mind.

One, perhaps, is the Jesus Seminar, whose efforts famously included an assessment of everything in all of the gospels written in the first three centuries. But of all the gospels considered in its study, only one, the *Gospel of Thomas*, contributed anything to the eventual database of things Jesus

1. For an overview of the situation, see Patterson, “Gospel of Thomas and Christian Beginnings”; reprinted in Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins*, 261–77.

might have said or done. This was the “fifth gospel” in *The Five Gospels*, the initial report of the Jesus Seminar published in 1993.² Much has been made of the statistical fact that, in *The Five Gospels*, *Thomas*, of all the gospels, ended up with the highest percentage of red or pink sayings (approximately 38%). Indeed, this is perhaps important, but more telling is the fact that out of 44 sayings in *Thomas* considered either red or pink, only two do not have close parallels in the Synoptic Gospels: logion 97 (the Parable of the Woman with the Jar) and logion 98 (the Parable of the Assassin).³ One should note, however, that initially both were voted “gray”; only on later consideration were they voted into the “pink” category. The vote on a third saying, logion 42, was a statistical tie, and so by rule was printed “gray.”⁴ Every one of the other 41 red or pink sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* have close Synoptic parallels. So, what the Jesus Seminar data on *Thomas* really shows is a preference in that body for a certain kind of Synoptic saying that happens also to turn up in *Thomas* with considerable frequency. If I may characterize the type formally, it runs to the simple aphorism, proverb, or prophetic saying (that is, social criticism), and the unembellished parable. Anyone who has read the *Gospel of Thomas* will see immediately that this is not the voice of Jesus that is distinctive of the *Gospel of Thomas*. This tendency to see Jesus as a simple, if clever, intellect—long-standing in North American scholarship—perhaps explains in some measure why the apocryphal gospels have only rarely come into the discussion of the historical Jesus, and never in a way that seriously challenges the direction of the conversation.

Again, perhaps exceptions come to mind.

One is the remarkable work of John Dominic Crossan, whose 1991 book, *The Historical Jesus*, is the most creative new proposal to emerge in historical Jesus studies for many years.⁵ Crossan’s method, which included the principle that canonical boundaries are not relevant to the historian, prompted him to consider apocryphal gospels, but in practice only *Thomas* and the *Gospel of Peter* come in for serious consideration. Of these, again, it is *Thomas* that has the most impact on his work, but this is because of the importance he places on multiple independent attestation. This meant that, for Crossan, the distinctive voice of Jesus would be determined by the dozens of *Thomas*/Synoptic overlaps, among which are found so many of those simple aphorisms, prophetic sayings, and parables. Crossan’s close tradition-historical work with these multiply-attested sayings was also im-

2. Funk and Hoover, eds., *Five Gospels*.

3. For logion 97, see *ibid.*, 523–24; for logion 98, *ibid.*, 524–25.

4. *Ibid.*, 496.

5. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*.

portant, however. Crossan's work tended to show that the apocalypticism of the Synoptic side of these parallels was distinctive of the Synoptic sayings, and often manifestly secondary—as in the case of allegorically-dressed-out parables—so that one may rightly wash this trait out of the commonly-held, earliest layer of the tradition. By this same method, of course, the distinctive voice of *Thomas* was also washed out—what Crossan would later call the “ascetical eschatology”⁶ of this tradition. The result was the hypothesis that Jesus advocated a new Kingdom of God, a concept that should be understood “sapientially” rather than “apocalyptically”—that is, a Kingdom of God “described by his parables and aphorisms as a here and now Kingdom of nobodies and the destitute, of mustard, darnel, and leaven.”⁷ Crossan's Jesus is to be discerned primarily in the simple but clever voice of the aphorisms, prophetic sayings, and parables.

The critics of this approach were many. Laying aside the dozens of American scholars, especially, whose prior confessional commitments to the Bible predisposed them to a biblical Jesus untainted by non-biblical, heretical gospels, we might cite just one critical scholar, whose objections were both typical and well-stated. Dale Allison argued that the use of *Thomas* to check the apocalypticism of the Synoptic tradition overlooked the fact that *Thomas* may itself reflect the views of an author who had rejected the apocalypticism of the Jesus tradition, which the Synoptic Gospels reflect with historical accuracy.⁸ In other words, *Thomas* had “de-apocalypticized” the tradition. I have since argued against Allison's view,⁹ so I will not belabor this discussion further, except to note that critical scholars can arrive at very different conclusions. This also goes without saying for the presupposition of Crossan's view, that *Thomas* is indeed a more or less independent witness to the Jesus tradition, a question to which one of the respondents to this paper recently has devoted an entire monograph—another discussion that could easily occupy us for hours.¹⁰

But the relevant point I would like to stress now about Crossan is that *Thomas* was not the only, nor even the primary evidence driving him toward a sapiential, non-apocalyptic Jesus. Crossan's view of the parables and aphorisms as central to Jesus' message was more important. Also key was

6. Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 265–71.

7. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 292.

8. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 122–28. Also see *ibid.*, 10–33 for Allison's critique of Crossan's method on a number of different points.

9. Patterson, “Apocalypticism or Prophecy”; earlier see also the exchange of views on this and other matters between Dale Allison, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Stephen J. Patterson in Miller, ed., *Apocalyptic Jesus*.

10. Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels*.

his acceptance of John Kloppenborg's theory about an early, sapiential edition of Q (Q₁).¹¹ *Thomas* and other apocryphal gospels were not necessarily determinative of this shift to a non-apocalyptic Jesus. This was also true of the work of Norman Perrin, perhaps the first North American scholar to incorporate the *Gospel of Thomas* into a full-blown treatment of the historical Jesus. In his 1967 book, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, Perrin used evidence from *Thomas* to argue for a less apocalyptic Jesus.¹² But he had already argued his basic hypothesis about the Kingdom of God in his dissertation, published in 1963 as *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, in which *Thomas* plays no role.¹³ Perrin's teacher, Joachim Jeremias, began using *Thomas* to do tradition-historical analysis of the parables very similar to that of Crossan in the 1962 edition of his classic work, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, but nonetheless retained his more "eschatological" view of Jesus. And on the other side, one should note that the originator of the most recent protest against an apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus, Marcus Borg, made his "Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus" without reference to the *Gospel of Thomas*.¹⁴ Therefore, if one of the most striking recent trends in historical Jesus scholarship is the questioning of the apocalyptic hypothesis, this is not due primarily to the *Gospel of Thomas*.¹⁵

So, there are exceptions and qualifications and protests one might register to my fundamental thesis, but no real argument against it: the apocryphal gospels have played virtually no role in the latest phase of the quest for the historical Jesus, in North America, or on any other continent for that matter. For the most part, the Synoptic Jesus is still the focus of this work, and the resulting portraits are either a straight-up repristinization of the Synoptic view, or a simpler, critically-derived Jesus who spoke in aphorism and parable. Since my own Jesus work fits snugly into this characterization,¹⁶ might I be forgiven if I raise a few critical questions about it—questions I have raised with myself? Might not a skeptic observe our discipline from afar and conclude that the canonical status of gospels apparently does mat-

11. Kloppenborg, *Formation of Q*.

12. For comments on the status of *Thomas*, see esp. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 37.

13. To illustrate, compare Perrin's analysis of Luke 17:20–21 in *Kingdom of God* (174–78) and the later work, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (68–74).

14. Borg, "Temperate Case"; reprinted in Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 47–67.

15. In my 1995 essay, "End of Apocalypse," I cited the discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas* as one reason for the collapsing consensus around an apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus. That was clearly wrong, with few exceptions.

16. Patterson, *God of Jesus*.

ter, even to a body like the Jesus Seminar, which explicitly renounced it? Might a critic point out that the trend toward a simpler, plain-spoken Jesus avoids not just the embarrassment of apocalypticism (a critique often heard of Crossan and others who share his view), but also the mysticism, asceticism, and Platonism of the apocryphal gospels? North American Jesus scholarship has a long history of preferring the simple, plain-spoken Jesus. When cutting and pasting together his “Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth” in 1804, Thomas Jefferson’s aim was not simply to eliminate all the miracle stories, but also the equally-suspect work of “the Platonists and Plotinists, the Stagyrites and Gamalielites, the Eclectics, (and) the Gnostics.”¹⁷

Here is an example of this trend from Crossan, whose work, let me repeat, represents in my view the best that this generation has to offer. On p. 295 of *The Historical Jesus*, Crossan takes what can only be described as a surprising turn, veering off into a cluster of sayings having to do with primordial androgyny, including logion 22 of the *Gospel of Thomas* (“When you make the two one . . . in order to make the male and the female into a single one, so that the male will not be male and the female will not be female. . .”¹⁸)—words that are not likely to make it into anyone’s database of authentic sayings of Jesus. But Crossan wades in. He likes the fact that Paul has something like this in Galatians 3:28 (“there is neither male nor female”)—though most would hesitate to call this a “version” of the *Thomas* saying. But it is a parallel showing at least that very early nascent Christians could think this way; what is more, 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 shows that men and women in a Pauline community might even go so far as to enact this primordial androgyny. But then, on the question of whether this idea could have come from Jesus, he demurs, following Dennis MacDonald’s learned opinion: “The anthropology and Genesis speculation implied by the saying were foreign to Jesus, but were quite at home in Alexandrian Judaism . . .”¹⁹ My instincts, too, have inclined me against the view that Jesus was interested in androgyny. But the author of the *Gospel of the Egyptians* thought he was;²⁰ so did the author of 2 *Clement* (12.2). In fact, the idea is fairly common in the apocryphal gospels. So, do our instincts tell us that it was too sophisticated

17. From a letter from Jefferson to John Adams, 13 October 1813 (see *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 6:218). The quotation from this letter turns up in the Wikipedia entry on the Jefferson Bible, which must be where I first encountered it—with thanks to the savant who anonymously entered it there.

18. All quotations from the *Gospel of Thomas* are based on the author’s own translation from the Coptic.

19. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 298; quoting MacDonald, *There is No Male and Female*, 128.

20. As this lost work is cited by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 3.13.92).

an idea for Jesus? The “not-well-born” rustics Paul had recruited into the Corinthian community seem to have taken to it well enough—if indeed the Corinthian prophets Paul engages in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 had developed a liturgical expression of “neither male nor female” in their worship practices.²¹ Was it just too odd for Jesus—is that what our instincts are telling us? Is it odder, really, than the notion that a divine-human warrior will come from the sky and destroy one’s enemies with earthquake and fire? I don’t think it is. There are many odd things in the canonical gospels with which we have become comfortable through repeated exposure, and many scholars just assume Jesus said or did these things. In the end, Crossan settles for the idea that the sayings relating to primordial androgyny, though not authentic, are an interpretation of something that was authentic: radical egalitarianism.²² I recall reading this at one time with a sense of relief and satisfaction. But now I wonder if I shouldn’t have been a little disappointed.

For the sake of argument, I want to suggest the *possibility* that our lack of interest in the apocryphal gospels as a source of information about what Jesus said, did, or thought reflects a certain lack of imagination. If the apocryphal gospels strike us as more speculative, mystical, ascetical, enigmatic, or just downright confusing, should this necessarily disqualify them completely from the discussion? Is it unthinkable that Jesus could have been speculative, mystical, ascetical, enigmatic, or just downright confusing? If so, let me attempt to convince you, and myself, that it is not unthinkable.

To do this I want to begin, not with Jesus, but before Jesus—with the teacher of Jesus: John the Baptist. What did John teach Jesus? Now, in the Synoptic Gospels John appears like Jesus—a prophetic figure with an apocalyptic message. If the Synoptic Jesus is the historical Jesus, this could be the historical John as well. But in the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptist is not like this at all. It is supposed, rather, that he was someone about whom the Johannine Prologue could have been composed—that is why the Fourth Evangelist inserts vv. 6–8 into the Prologue, as Bultmann argued many years ago.²³ In other words, in the Fourth Gospel, the Johannine Baptist is like the Johannine Jesus. So, the Synoptic John is like the Synoptic Jesus, and the

21. That 1 Cor 11:2–16 reflects a Corinthian interpretation of Gal 3:28 (“there is no male and female”) was first argued by Wayne Meeks in “Image of the Androgyne,” esp. 200–203; later MacDonald argued similarly (*There is No Male and Female*, 72–110). Both assume that the passage has to do principally with women (not women *and* men), and think of their ritual in terms of women becoming like men. But vv. 4, 7, 11–12, and 14 indicate that the passage concerns the practice of both men and women. Men with long, flowing hair (v. 14) would have represented a compromise of the masculine ideal as much as women with hair unbound (v. 15), a compromise of the feminine ideal.

22. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 298.

23. Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, 48–49.

Johannine John is like the Johannine Jesus. I am skeptical of this strategic alignment: is the precursor simply being made to match the successor? Are there other, less strategic witnesses to what John the Baptist might have taught? Indeed, there are other followers of John the Baptist to whom we might appeal. The followers of Simon Magus held Simon to be the chief disciple of John the Baptist, as was also Dositheus, who is said to have led the Baptist sect after John's death.²⁴ Dositheus also turns up as the source of the Sethian text, the *Three Steles of Seth*, from Nag Hammadi Codex VII. The Mandaeans, of course, also claimed descent from John the Baptist.²⁵ That is all very interesting to note, but having seen that canonical boundaries might matter after all, at least sub-consciously, I would prefer another canonical witness to John the Baptist. Is there one? What about Apollos?

Apollos, of course, was Paul's rival in Corinth (see 1 Cor 1–4). Remember how he is described in Acts 18:25: "He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord. . . and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John." Acts goes on to state that Priscilla and Aquila went about setting him straight, presumably on the issue of Jesus' preeminence over John. But then in chapter 19, our account goes on to state that when Paul came later to Ephesus, he encountered disciples who had been baptized "into John's baptism" (Acts 19:3)—presumably by the hand of Apollos or others whom Apollos had instructed. Paul, by this account, sets them straight—now explicitly—on the issue of Jesus' preeminence over John (Acts 19:4). If this odd little episode in Acts may be counted upon to provide at least a faded memory of Apollos, we might infer that, 1) Apollos was a follower of John the Baptist, as well as Jesus; 2) that he baptized in the manner of John the Baptist; and 3) that he did not teach that John was merely Jesus' precursor. In other words, Apollos was not just a Jesus follower. He was also a Baptist follower. And when he came to Ephesus, and later to Corinth, he was still a Baptist follower. If, then, we can discover what Apollos taught, we will perhaps also discover what John the Baptist taught—not only to Apollos, but also to his more famous pupil, Jesus of Nazareth. Let us proceed, then, with two questions: 1) what did Apollos teach? and 2) is there any evidence in the Jesus tradition that Jesus might also have learned similar ideas from John the Baptist, and promulgated them?

So, what did Apollos teach? I will answer the question with the assumption, undefended in this very brief frame, that many of the ideas against

24. In the Pseudo-Clementine writings, *Hom. 2* (see Irmscher and Strecker, "Pseudo-Clementines," 512–13).

25. In the *Haran Gawaita* scroll (see Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 363).

which Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 1–4 will have come from Apollos—a premise that is not undisputed, and yet, widely held.²⁶

Let us begin with the most certain of things based on this assumption: Apollos was a baptizer. The factionalism running through the Corinthian communities was apparently based on partisan notions of baptism (1:12–17). Since Apollos was a follower of John the Baptist, and he apparently baptized in the Johannine manner, let us assume that the dust-up over baptism in Corinth was due in part to the presence of Apollos the baptizer.

Did John's other famous pupil, Jesus, also baptize? Curiously, the Synoptic Gospels do not say that he did . . . nor that he didn't (although, the passages Clement associates with the *Secret Gospel of Mark* depict the young man who comes to Jesus by night as prepared for baptism). The Gospel of John does say that Jesus baptized people (3:22, 26; 4:1), but then, in an editorial aside—perhaps from the ecclesiastical redactor—denies it (4:2). I assume, then, that John 3:22, 26, and 4:1 represents the earlier tradition and constitutes evidence that Jesus, too, *may* have learned to baptize people in the way John had baptized. If he did, what did it mean to him? What did it mean to Apollos?

Returning to 1 Corinthians 1–4 we may infer that Apollos's baptism was part of a tradition in which wisdom in the form of words, or sayings, was conveyed. This is clear from 1:17, 18–25; 2:1 (etc.) and is, moreover, consistent with the commonplace that initiation would be accompanied by specialized teaching. It should be noted, too, that what Paul opposes in Corinth is described as a “secret” (*mysterion*—1 Cor 2:1), a term he uses to describe his own counter-wisdom teaching in 2:7. Secret teaching would also have been a commonplace in such cultic settings. Since, in 2:14–3:4, the apostle goes on to wrangle over who is to be considered truly “spiritual,” who has truly received “the things of the spirit,” and who is worthy of being addressed as “*pneumatikos*,” we may further infer that, in addition to special, secret teaching, those who received Apollos's baptism were thought also to receive the “spirit” and thereby to join the ranks of the “spiritual.” Did Apollos get any of this from John the Baptist?

We know John the Baptist mostly as a baptizer, but we should also assume that he taught his initiates something as well. In Q he is identified, alongside Jesus, as one of “Wisdom's (Sophia's) children” (Q 7:35), and the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel presupposes an audience who might have been inclined to see John as the descending/ascending Logos figure, instead of Jesus (John 1:6–8). So John had wisdom credentials—and not just in later Mandaean and Sethian circles. Moreover, his baptism was also thought to

26. See Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 56–57.

impart the “holy spirit,” as the scenes of Jesus’ own baptism in Q, Mark, and John all attest. John is not depicted in the Synoptics or the Gospel of John as offering secret wisdom teachings, but among the Mandaeans he was, of course, known primarily for this.²⁷

And is there evidence that when Jesus baptized people he also conveyed to them wisdom teaching, even secret wisdom teaching, accompanied by the imparting of the “spirit?” That Jesus’ baptism was accompanied by the imparting of the spirit is claimed by the Synoptic accounts of John’s preaching *about* Jesus: “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). Q contains nearly identical wording to this, save the addition of “fire”: “he will baptize you in a holy spirit and fire” (Q 3:16). In the Fourth Gospel John the Baptist says something similar about Jesus: “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” (John 1:33). Since these claims play virtually no role in the canonical accounts of Jesus’ unfolding career, I am inclined to credit them as an obscure historical memory that, for whatever reason, was later denied (as, specifically, in John 4:2).

Did Jesus, like Apollos, have secret wisdom teachings that were imparted only to an inner circle of initiates? There is, perhaps surprisingly, widespread agreement about this among the sources. The apocryphal gospel Q claims it explicitly:

21 Then (Jesus) said, “I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for you have hidden these things from sages and scholars and revealed them to babes. Yes, Father, for this is what seemed right to you. 22 All things have been entrusted me by my Father. And no one knows the son except the Father, and none the Father except the son, and anyone to whom the son wishes to reveal (him).” (Q 10:21–22²⁸)

The *Gospel of Thomas* is a collection of just such sayings (“These are the secret sayings that the Living Jesus spoke . . .” [Prologue]), and the Gospel of Mark—if a canonical witness is preferable—claims this secret status for Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God: “To you has been given the secret (*mysterion*) of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables” (Mark 4:11). Elsewhere in Mark we hear about this secret

27. See, e.g., *Right Ginza*, Books 7 and 8 (see Lidzbarski, *Ginza*; an English translation of the *Ginza* may now be found in Barnstone and Meyer, eds., *Gnostic Bible*, with relevant passages on John the Baptist on pp. 549–51).

28. All quotations from Q are the author’s own translation based on the reconstructed Greek text of Q created by the International Q Project: Robinson et al., *Sayings Gospel Q*.

teaching only in the fragments Clement assigns to *Secret Mark*. This occurs (in fragment 1 of *Secret Mark*) when Jesus raises a young man from the dead in Bethany. “Six days later” this same young man comes to Jesus by night, “dressed only in a linen cloth”—a clear reference to baptism—and Jesus teaches him “the secret (*mysterion*, again) of the kingdom of God.”²⁹ This is the only tradition in which baptism and secret teaching are linked in connection with Jesus.

This is all very interesting. But is any of it *historical*? Let me remind you that I have not been charged here with a discussion of the historical Jesus, but with *how* we have talked about the historical Jesus. Is it not surprising how easily noncanonical sources fit into a discussion about the historical Jesus, even when that discussion begins and is guided by some of the earliest texts and traditions at our disposal—Paul’s letters and Q? And the results—that Jesus might have baptized people, imparting to them the spirit, and initiating them into secret wisdom teachings—are perhaps as strange as anything you have ever heard from a respectable scholar (respectable, that is, until now). And yet, are they really all that far-fetched? My point is this: how we have read these early sources and the possibilities we see in them has been guided and limited by certain constraints imposed by the Synoptic portrait. Does this not indeed indicate a certain lack of imagination? How far could a reasonable, yet imaginative, inquiry along these lines continue?

I proceed, then—even if I have gone too far already.

Let us begin again with baptism and an early tradition indicating its meaning among nascent Christians. This tradition is, in fact, the earliest baptismal tradition we have in early Christian literature:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:27–28)

Again, in this limited frame I will not delve into the reasons why so many scholars regard this as a pre-Pauline formula, nor into an exegesis of it vis-à-vis Paul’s own interests in Galatians.³⁰ I am only interested in what it might tell us about how very early followers of Jesus understood the practice of baptism. In this vein it is rather remarkable: in baptism the basic distinctions by which human beings order themselves—ethnicity, class, and gender—are all overcome. And perhaps the most remarkable of these three distinctions

29. For references to *Secret Mark*, see Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*. The translation used here is that of Helmut Koester in Miller, ed., *Complete Gospels*, 415.

30. See, for example, Meeks, “Image of the Androgyne,” 180–82. The idea, however, is very old in scholarship—see MacDonald, *There is No Male and Female*, 4 n. 7.

is the third: “there is no longer male and female.” Many have called attention to the slightly distinct wording of this member of the formula (“male and female” rather than “neither man nor woman”) designed to reflect more precisely the language of Genesis 1:27. The earliest, nascent Christian understanding of baptism apparently included the notion that redemption finally must involve a return to the beginning, before Adam’s fall, when he still retained the image of God in which he was created: androgynous, at once both male and female.³¹ This was the part of the formula that perhaps made Paul uncomfortable—or so one might infer from his choice to omit it when he repeats the formula in 1 Corinthians (12:13). Perhaps the reason for this is revealed in chapter 11 of that letter, where Paul tries to dissuade people in Corinth from praying and prophesying in a manner of dress and coiffeur that blurs the distinction between male and female. I am convinced by Meeks and others that this was indeed an attempt by the Corinthian prophets to enact in ritual the baptismal claim that in Christ there is no longer male and female. Where did this idea come from? Not from Paul, who claims not to have baptized anyone in Corinth—except Crispus and Gaius, the household of Stephanas . . . and maybe a few others (1 Cor 1:14–16). They must have gotten it from the other baptizer in Corinth, Apollos. Could this also have been something Apollos learned from his baptizer, John? Let us consult John’s other, more famous pupil, to see if he too held such a view of baptism.

Could Jesus have understood baptism in this way—as signaling a return to Adam’s pre-lapsarian state of androgynous perfection? The canonical gospels, which are largely silent on the issue of Jesus’ baptizing activity, also say nothing about how Jesus might have understood baptism. But the apocryphal gospels do. Of the apocryphal gospels, the *Gospel of Philip* is the most expansive on the subject. But *Philip* is probably too late to be of any real help. The *Gospel of Thomas*, however, contains at least one saying purporting to offer Jesus’ view of baptism, logion 37:

1His disciples said, “When will you appear to us and when will we see you?” 2 Jesus said, “When you undress without being ashamed and take your clothes (and) put them under your feet like little children and trample them, 3then [you] will see the son of the Living One, and you will not be afraid.”

As Jonathan Z. Smith has shown,³² the valences of this odd saying are two. On the one hand, it references the Jewish and early Christian baptismal

31. Meeks, “Image of the Androgyne,” 183–97.

32. Smith, “Garments of Shame.”

practice of disrobing—the only kind of cultic nudity tolerated by Jews and Christians in antiquity. On the other hand, disrobing *without shame* refers to the primordial nakedness of Adam, before the fall—a theme that also accompanies later Christian baptismal practice. In other words, here is an interpretation of baptism that involves a return to Adam's primordial state before the fall. Now, this is quite in keeping with soteriology in the *Gospel of Thomas*, generally speaking, where the end is said to be like the beginning (logion 18). Logion 22, which is not a baptismal saying, clarifies the meaning of this protological idea further:

⁴ Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside and the above like the below—⁵ that is, in order to make the male and the female into a single one, so that the male will not be male and the female will not be female—⁶ when you make eyes in place of an eye and a hand in place of a hand and a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, ⁷ then you will enter the Kingdom.”

Thomas credits Jesus with a protological soteriology, in which the image of God, which Adam lost when he sinned, is regained through baptism and enlightenment through the secret sayings of Jesus.³³ And so we arrive at that point where Crossan turned back in 1991 and opted for a slightly less speculative Jesus, who promoted the general principle of egalitarianism, rather than ritual androgyny. Perhaps his reserve yields a more plausible historical Jesus. But another, stranger Jesus, is not really so far from our sources than one might think.

Just to complete this thought experiment, I want to return to the Jesus Seminar. It did not contemplate putting *Thomas* 22 into the database of historical Jesus sayings. But it did include one very odd saying from the Gospel of Matthew:³⁴

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can. (Matt 19:12)

I take it that the history of religions context for this saying is relatively clear. Some in the Jesus movement had adopted the practice of ritual self-castration, much like the *galli* of the Great Mother cult. The *galli* were thought to

33. See esp. Pagels, “Exegesis of Genesis 1”; also Davies, “Christology and Protology.”

34. Funk and Hoover, eds., *Five Gospels*, 220.

be neither male nor female, but something like androgynous servants of their androgynous god. I recall voting against this saying in the Seminar, ostensibly because it was attested only once, and late; but really it was because it was just too strange for my Jesus. But Arthur Dewey made a strong case for authenticity based on dissimilarity and general embarrassment.³⁵ On that count he had us, and the saying was voted in. On that day the historical Jesus became just as daring as the author of Matthew thought he was: a promoter of self-castration for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. To the ancient way of thinking, this goes beyond *ritual* androgyny to the real thing.

North American New Testament scholarship has more or less absorbed the insights of Walter Bauer and begun to see the unfolding of early Christianity as a widely diverse phenomenon where many interpretations of Jesus are possible.³⁶ But his insight has not been brought to bear on historical Jesus scholarship. Generally speaking, the Synoptic Jesus still reigns supreme. But what if Jesus himself was part of a more diverse and interesting religious event, one in which John participated as well, which spawned strange hybrids like Apollos, devoted to them both? What if the Synoptic Gospels represent only a limited band-width of this event, only a part of what could have emanated from it with authenticity? If so, in order to gain a fuller sense of what Jesus and his companions were up to, what they were thinking and doing, we might need to listen to more than just the Synoptic representation of him. Conservative scholars have long admonished us not to overlook the Fourth Gospel nor the Pauline epistles. We have looked at them here. But is there a reason not to cast our net wider still, beyond the artificial boundaries of the Christian canon, to include apocryphal gospels and their traditions as well? The question is not, after all, which of the gospels best represents the historical Jesus. The question for critical scholarship is how to imagine a historical figure from which could emanate all of the various traditions and interpretations that appear in the first century or so of nascent Christian development. If we frame the question in this way, I am convinced that we still have much more to talk about before we close the door on the quest for the historical Jesus.

35. Dewey, "Unkindest Cut."

36. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*.