This article argues that the Gospel of Thomas was written in Alexandria, not in Eastern Syria as is the current consensus. The arguments in favor of a Syrian Gospel of Thomas are not as strong as is often assumed, and a stronger case can be made for Alexandria. The Gospel of Thomas has a number of features that suggest it was a product of the Judean intellectual culture of Alexandria, including its genre (a collection of chreiai), its presentation of Jesus as a wisdom teacher, and its Platonic/Philonic exegesis of the creation stories in Genesis. I argue that these features, particularly the exegesis of Gen 1:26–27 and 2:7, indicate an Alexandrian provenance for Thomas. Alexandria was a center of Judean philosophy and was known particularly for producing exegesis of the LXX. These social and literary affinities with Alexandrian intellectual life make an Alexandrian Gospel of Thomas more probable than a Syrian Thomas.

Writing shortly after the translation of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, Henri-Charles Puech noted that, because of similarities between the Gospel of Thomas and the Acts of Thomas (the use of the name Judas Thomas), it was “perhaps permissible” to suspect that the two works emanated from the same milieu, namely, Edessa. For the next fifty years the theory that the Gospel of Thomas was a product of Edessa (or eastern Syria more generally) remained the near consensus. Edessa,

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home to a small Judean diaspora, was removed from the violence of the Judean wars, and several traditions claim that stories of Jesus circulated in Edessa by the second century. An Edessene origin for Thomas has been hypothesized based on a variety of arguments including its purported dependence and influence on Syrian texts, Semitisms in the gospel, and the gospel's distinctness from the gospels of the New Testament. But the case for Edessa is not as strong as is often assumed. In this article, I argue that Edessa is not the uniquely qualified location for the composition of the gospel that it is often presented as and that there is a better location—Alexandria. Like Edessa, Alexandria housed a large, educated Judean diaspora familiar with Jesus traditions—at the latest by the mid-second century. Many of these Judeans were involved in the intellectual life of Alexandria, and I contend that the producers of the Gospel of Thomas were just such people. Finally, Alexandria boasted a distinct Judean exegetical tradition that paralleled Aristotelian and Platonic exegesis of Greek texts. The Gospel of Thomas fits in very comfortably with the Judean exegetical traditions of Alexandria, and therefore an Alexandrian Gospel of Thomas makes more sense than does an Edessene Gospel of Thomas. In order to make this argument I first review the eastern Syria/Edessa hypothesis along with criticisms of it. Second, I describe the intellectual life and exegetical traditions of Alexandria—both Greek and Judean—and situate the Gospel of Thomas within


these very traditions. My conclusion that this gospel was a product of Alexandria
does not simply move the work to a new geographical location but also reimagines
the ways in which Judean traditions were drawn upon in early writings about Jesus.
In addition, this conclusion further troubles a term frequently applied to the Gos-
pel of Thomas by those who argue for a Syrian milieu—“Jewish Christianity.”

I. THE EASTERN SYRIA/EDESSA HYPOTHESIS

While Puech was the first to suggest that the Gospel of Thomas originated
in Edessa, Gilles Quispel and Helmut Koester popularized the theory in Europe
and North America. Quispel published a series of articles and books between
1957 and 1978 wherein he argued that the gospel was a product of Edessa. Quispel's
exact argument evolved during the course of more than twenty years, but the
general tenets remain the same: the Gospel of Thomas was influenced by Syrian
sources and influenced subsequent Christianity in Syria. Quispel argued that
this gospel borrowed its “Jewish-Christian” sayings from the Gospel of the Hebrews,
and that the Gospel of the Hebrews contained Palestinian traditions. Quispel's
catalog of “Jewish-Christian” sayings in the Gospel of Thomas includes sayings
that show deference for the Pharisees (such as Gos. Thom. 39, paralleled in Justin
Martyr, Dial. 17.4), sayings that are more primitive than those in the canonical
gospels (Gos. Thom. 65), and sayings that contain Semitisms (Gos. Thom. 47).
In a later piece, Quispel identified twenty-six sayings in the Gospel of Thomas
that contain Jewish-Christian elements. These elements range from a relation
with the Gospel of the Hebrews and the Pseudo-Clementines, to direct contact
with the LXX.

Quispel expanded on his argument considerably in a 1966 article wherein he
more precisely tied the Gospel of Thomas to the Gospel of the Hebrews. He

Syrian Macarius”; Quispel, “Gospel of Thomas’ and the ‘Gospel of the Hebrews’”; and Koester,
“GNÔMAI DIAPHORÓI.”

5Some of the changes to Quispel’s theories include a shift from specific sources for Thomas
(the Gospel of the Hebrews and the Gospel of the Egyptians) toward a more general theory that
Thomas had distinct but unnamed Jewish-Christian and enкратic sources. See his introductory
note to his essay “Some Remarks on the Gospel of Thomas,” in van Oort, Gnostica, Judaica, Cath-
olica, 311–28, here 311; the essay was originally published in NTS 5 (1958–1959): 276–90.


7Ibid., 202.

8Ibid., 205.

9Ibid., 194.

10Quispel, “Gospel of Thomas Revisited,” 200–202. Quispel includes Gos. Thom. 2, 6, 12,
16, 23, 27, 31, 39, 44, 62, 64, 65, 68, 69, 71, 72, 84, 88, 90, 93, 95, 99, 104, 107, 109, and 113. Curi-
ously, Quispel leaves out sayings 83 and 85, both of which make direct reference to Genesis.

11Quispel, “‘Gospel of Thomas’ and the ‘Gospel of the Hebrews.’”