Reading the *Gospel of Thomas* from Here: A Trans-Centred Hermeneutic

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**Abstract**

This article adopts a trans-centered approach to reading the *Gospel of Thomas*, in particular key statements found in Gos. Thom. 22 and 114. Treatments of gender in the gospel are discussed from the author's position as a queer woman of transgender experience, informed by postcolonial, feminist, and gender-critical theory and practice. Literary and historical comparisons with Philo of Alexandria and the apostle Paul are explored to uncover Thomas's worldview, which is seen to be darkly critical of the material world, while being hopeful for spiritual transformation. Though the *Gospel of Thomas* participates in the prevalent masculinist ideology of most literature of the day, many of its sayings may garner a new or nuanced meaning when read through a transgender lens, including especially the demand for replacement of the outer person with the inner person (Gos. Thom. 22), and potential salvation through erasure of conventional gender difference in the making of an ungendered Living Spirit resembling Jesus (Gos. Thom. 114).

**Keywords**

Gospel of Thomas, gender, transgender, queering Jesus, reader response

Jesus said: “The one who seeks should not stop seeking until they find. Whenever they find, they will be disturbed. And if they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will reign over all.” (Gos. Thom. 2, Coptic version)

Writing as someone who has taught and published in New Testament and early Christian studies for more than thirty years, but who has only recently emerged into public as a transgender (trans) woman, it is both a privilege and a challenge for me to offer my

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1 Apart from three fragmentary Greek papyri, the *Gospel of Thomas* survives fully only in its Coptic version. The structure of the text consists of a series of statements attributed to Jesus, with occasional questions or comments from others. The standard numbering counts 114 of these statements, opening with a two-sentence introduction: “These are the hidden sayings that Jesus the Living One spoke, and Judas Didymus Thomas wrote them down. And he said, ‘Whoever finds the meaning of these sayings will not taste death.’” When quoting Thomas, I rely mainly on the edition of Bentley Layton and Harold W. Attridge. *Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2–7, vol. 1 (NHMS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989). Translations from the Coptic and Greek are mostly my own. Where possible, as here in Gos. Thom. 2, I render the Coptic masculine singular with such words as “the/that person” or the third-person pronoun “they” or “their” when a subject is (rhetorically, not grammatically) unmarked for gender.
perspective on how we might read our texts from a place of trans marginality. How might we usefully centre various experiences of having a nonconforming or nonbinary gender identity as we read and interpret ancient religious literature? How can we locate and find inspiration from the fierce energy that has powered other, earlier readings from locations off the centre(s) that can still dominate our discipline?

For me, as a scholar and a human being, this is far from an academic enterprise, in the colloquial meaning of the phrase. I want to preface my discussion of gender in the Gospel of Thomas with some personal reflections. For what seems like forever, but certainly for a long time, I had to operate in a strange twilight zone of absence. As a queer woman of transgender experience, I struggled for far too long—and fear too that I often failed—to find ways to bring my largely hidden inner gender truth to my work on early Christian literature, whether biblical or not, with all its beauties and terrors. As a trans woman operating from the margins, undercover in the camouflage of apparent male identity, I felt that I lacked the standing to offer the perspective of any gender, be that my real (female) or presumptive (male) identity, as I read and interpreted the texts. From my place as a woman in hiding, I certainly heard and felt the weight and sting of dismissive, exploitative, and suppressive voices of the ancient authors, aspects of which echo still in scholarship today. That place of hiding was a lonely, conflicted, and often melancholy place to be.

As a collaborator, for all intents and purposes—whether willing or unwilling—in the systems of privilege that my body and name and race and class would wield on my behalf, I noticed and felt distress at the pervasive racism, sexism, and misogyny at work in my profession. But in that time of hiding, off in my zone of absence, I too often found myself unable or perhaps unwilling to address those particular inequities and injustices with sufficient integrity and authenticity. I acknowledge and emphasize that having feelings of discomfort while protected by the armour of apparent white male privilege is of course quite different from experiencing these pressures more directly and personally.

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2 This essay began as an invited presentation for a panel on Trans Hermeneutics at the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. The paper delivered there was expanded for discussion in WCHWGS (the Workshop on Comparative History of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies) at the University of Minnesota, and lastly for a meeting of the Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism Network at Fordham University. I would like to thank the organizers and my fellow participants in all three events, especially my respondent at WCHWGS, Susanna Drake, as well as the editor and two anonymous readers for this journal, for their very helpful suggestions.

All this is meant to say that when I first started to read and explore the Gospel of Thomas, one of the main topics of interest across my career, I responded in complicated ways to its own complex presentations of sex, gender, and the body. Thomas includes several fascinating statements attributed to Jesus that touch on the authentic self, or, in the view of the text, on the inauthentic way in which humans typically must live and operate in this earthly, fleshly realm. Salvation can be termed coming to know oneself, and thus be known by God: “When (if) you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are the children of the Living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you exist in poverty, and you are the poverty” (Gos. Thom. 3).

My ability to understand myself and others sharpened in the process of searching and finding (Gos. Thom. 2), which reached a new level through my gender transition. I am now able to sense further depths and different nuances in this and similar statements in the Gospel of Thomas than I had previously noticed. For a person with a history of uncertainty about her gender identity, statements like these have a particular resonance and force. Self-discovery and self-understanding are central to the project of becoming known and thus avoiding the poverty of misunderstanding and confusion.

In this article I draw on several approaches to interpreting ancient texts. Perhaps the most important perspective that inspires me here derives from postcolonial, feminist, and queer critical theory, as they have been applied to biblical and cognate literature. Rather than reach for interpretations of Thomas’s statements relating to gender from which one might hope to achieve some objectivity or universal acceptance, I am intentionally working from a clearly defined vantage point, identified above as that of a queer, white, transgender female scholar of early Christian literature.

My approach, which gives interpretive value to personal experience, insight, and response, owes much to the move started over two decades ago towards claiming and demonstrating legitimacy for what Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert termed “reading from this place.” Their two edited volumes featured programmatic articles outlining and exemplifying interpretive strategies from a variety of locations, ceding the majority of space to feminist and/or postcolonial voices (including female scholars from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, as well as immigrants, Native Americans, and African-American).
This focus on feminist readings makes sense; as Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocinio Schweikart note, “Reader-centered criticism and feminist criticism are alike in that they induce a heightened awareness of the way perspective conditions comprehension and interpretation. Perspective here signifies the capacity for certain insights as well as the limitation of vision.”

My adoption of a reader-centred approach to interpreting Thomas is motivated in part by the position summarized so eloquently by Hebrew Bible scholar Gale A. Yee. In her essay in the Reading from This Place collection, Yee discusses how and where power lies in determining meaning in religious texts:

The suspicion of the reader of the biblical text is closely allied to the determination of both religious and academic communities to control the interpretation of such a founding text ... Reader-centered biblical scholars challenge historical-critical methods with their so-called objective, value-neutral search for the definitive and universal meaning in the biblical text, thought to be located either in the author’s intention or in the world represented by the text. The shift of paradigm to the reader underscores the importance of context and a reader’s specific social location or place of interpretation. The positionality of the reader with respect to factors such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, and religion becomes determinative in answering the question, What does the text mean?

Even for interpreters working within the bounds of more traditional historical-criticism (an approach which clearly retains considerable value), a reader-centred method when applied to the Gospel of Thomas has particular advantages. Neither “the author’s intention” nor “the world represented by the text” is securely known in scholarship on Thomas, and there has been little consensus on some central historical questions. Seven decades after its discovery, and sixty years after its first publication, disagreements persist as to Thomas’s place and time of composition, and thus its utility

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5 Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).
7 Gale A. Yee, “The Author/Text/Reader and Power: Suggestions for a Critical Framework for Biblical Studies,” in Segovia and Tolbert, Reading from This Place, 1:113–14 (emphasis original).
as a data point for imagining Christian origins. Does at least some of its material derive from first-century Jewish Palestine, in which case it might provide evidence for the teachings of the historical Jesus? Or is it instead a second-century pastiche of words ascribed to Jesus extracted from the New Testament gospels, combined with “gnostic,” “mystic,” or “Encratite” teachings of apparently less savoury provenance, and thus of less interest to those focused on the mainstream and the normative?

Though I have my own views on these and related questions, and continue to rely on historical, literary, and linguistic data in offering my interpretations, I find it more interesting and fruitful in this instance to leave those issues largely to the side and study the gospel in its own terms.9 Where only a modicum of consensus can be achieved, adopting a different angle of approach can be useful. Instead of using one’s view of Thomas as a weapon in various modern controversies over the nature of Christian origins (as is often done), why not pay attention to the text in and of itself—its own values, specific ideologies, rhetorical strategies, and potential target audiences? An approach oriented to the experience of a putative reader who is alert to the special properties of the text offers something of value, whatever one’s stance on the document’s origins and relative antiquity.10

As the prologue to Thomas states, the text offers secret words of the Living Jesus, and warns that finding their meaning is a necessary path to salvation (Gos. Thom. 1). Yet neither the narrator nor Jesus offers explanations for the meaning of his mysteries: this is a task left to the reader or listener. Instead we are urged to seek and find via self-scrutiny, leading to knowledge of self and of God (Gos. Thom. 2, 3).

Knowing oneself is not a simple process of looking in a mirror—indeed, looking into the mirror is, for trans folks (and others), all too often an occasion of doubt and sorrow and shame.11 Literary theorist Gayle Salamon helpfully ponders how one could

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10 A reader-centered approach need not be limited to the implied modern reader. For discussion of how Thomas was likely received or resisted by ancient monastics, see Melissa Harl Sellew, “Reading Jesus in the Desert: The Gospel of Thomas Meets the Apophthegmata Patrum,” in The Nag Hammadi Codices and Late Antique Egypt (ed. Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jennot; STAC 110; Tübingen, 2018), 81–106; Sarit Kattan Gribetz, “Women as Readers of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” Journal of Early Christian Studies 26 (2018): 463–94.

11 Ancient Greek and Roman discussions of the mirror as an instrument of self-scrutiny, whether for moral improvement or to assess one’s beauty in a more erotic context, are discussed in Shadi Bartsch, The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). See also Charles M. Stang, Our Divine Double (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
apply Lacan’s theory of an infant’s méconnnaissance of its reflection in a mirror to the fractured relation of body and soul experienced by many transgender people. Salamon draws on Kaja Silverman’s book, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, to understand this identification through misrecognition as “identity-at-a-distance”:

Silverman emphasized that the infant’s joy at being presented with its own image is based on a complicated oscillation between otherness and sameness: “On the one hand, the mirror stage represents a méconnnaissance, because the subject identifies with what he or she is not. On the other hand, what he or she sees when looking into the mirror is literally his or her own image.”

Salamon considers the notion of identity-at-a-distance to be:

a particularly elegant way of capturing the complicated interplay between interiority and exteriority, between sameness and difference, at the heart of our conceptions of both body and self … [This] can help us think the myriad ways in which the establishment of identity is always already marked by nonidentity or difference and contains distance at its very core.

Salamon’s psychoanalytic perspective may help illuminate the experience of many gender nonconforming and trans people, including myself. The *Gospel of Thomas* urges a recognition of one’s truth in one’s interior self, which the text calls the “soul,” or sometimes the “spirit,” and a devaluation of the fleshly body. We might deploy the concept of identity-at-a-distance to outline a process of coming to know oneself in a less material, less body-centred, and more interior fashion. In a sense, by inscribing a pointed dichotomy or dualism between body/flesh and soul/spirit, *Thomas* hopes to achieve some sort of unity (“salvation”) through rejection of fleshly existence.

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14 Stang, *Our Divine Double*, 64–106, offers a different reading of “singularity” and “duality” in the *Gospel of Thomas*, viewing this polarity through the lens of later Thomasine interest in the apostle as the “twin” of Jesus. Stang expresses doubts about the existence of a Thomasine school or community (70–73), but nonetheless uses later Thomasine literature to interpret the gospel. For a critique of this approach see my article “Thomas Christianity: Scholars in Search of a Community,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer; Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 11–35.
Such an embrace of an interior self to the detriment or even exclusion of the physical body may strike some as disturbing in light of some positive, contemporary feminist valuations of our material being, as encapsulated in the phrase “our bodies [=] ourselves,” and our desire not to succumb to a destructive dismissal of our embodied existence. This discomfort with Thomas’s stark body/soul dualism may be felt especially strongly by those who have historically found their bodies to be sites of oppression or submission. As Elizabeth Clark notes, “Throughout history, women’s identification with the body has served precisely to keep them in their subjugated positions.”\textsuperscript{15}

Yet for many trans people, our bodies, especially as seen through the mirror of other people’s perceptions, truly do not represent, indeed they misrepresent, our actual identities. As we will see, Gos. Thom. 22b suggests that the process of return to or attainment of authentic humanity would involve, to begin with, making the inner like the outer, and the outer like the inner. These are deeply resonant images for a trans person. As Salamon explains, “the production of normative gender itself relies on a distinction between the ‘felt sense’ of the body and the body’s corporeal contours.”\textsuperscript{16} It follows that a sense of oneself in connection with one’s body is especially complicated for a trans person. The contrast between one’s outer (material) appearance and one’s inner (psychic) reality is fundamental to what it means to be transgender, or for other people, to be gender nonconforming. For trans people, our bodies can frequently be sites of gendered performance as assertions of our inner identities.

The insights of Judith Butler are also useful here, as she theorizes that gender performance is productive rather than mimetic. As Jonathan Cahana-Blum explains, “According to Butler, gender is something that is continuously done, as if to conform to an ‘original’; but by this very doing it actually creates this ‘original’.”\textsuperscript{17} Or to use Butler’s own words:

To enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification is not a choice, for the “I” that might enter is always already inside: there is no possibility of agency or reality outside the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have. The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical

\textsuperscript{16}Salamon, Assuming a Body, 23.
\textsuperscript{17}Cahana-Blum, Wrestling with Archons, 88, analyses how gnostic (or gnostic-adjacent) texts constitute a “cultural phenomenon” (2) critiquing traditional Greco-Roman views of “futurity, gender and sex, and material [vs.] ‘the real’” (3 and passim).
proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.\textsuperscript{18}

Salamon similarly offers a guided tour through the dense thicket of psychoanalytic theory on human experience of the relation of body and the inner person. As she explains:

The concept of the bodily ego is of particular use in thinking transgender\textsuperscript{19} because it shows that the body of which one has a “felt sense” is not necessarily contiguous with the physical body as it is perceived from the outside ... This is the case even for any normatively gendered subject. Taken together, these [Freudian] models offer a theory of gendered embodiment in which the body is understood as something more complex and capacious than a unitary formation of matter, singularly given to or claimed by one sex. To understand embodiment as necessarily routed through a bodily ego is not to contend that body and ego are coterminal or selfsame, but to assert that projections of various kinds are required in the construction of both the ego and the body, that the ego is itself a projection, and that difference, distance, and otherness are at the heart of the ego and the body.\textsuperscript{20}

By various processes, including medical interventions for many of us, trans people may attempt to correlate their outer appearance (bodies) to their inner and genuine identities, which are truths known at first, if ever, only to themselves—in effect, to work out their own “theories of gendered embodiment” and perhaps confirm identities that might typically remain known only “at-a-distance,” if at all. Gospel of Thomas 22 also mentions transforming the upper and the lower. Bodily realms of upper and lower—face, hair, throat, voice, chest, hands, waist, hips, feet, genitals—often combine to mark the trans person as other, and thus can pose significant challenges in any attempts to correlate one’s physical appearance (in accordance with societal norms) with one’s interior and perhaps more spiritual identity.

As we proceed in the remainder of this article to examine the more significant aspects of the Gospel of Thomas for a contemporary reader of transgender or gender nonconforming experience, I consider how the gospel constructs its notion of authentic

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\textsuperscript{19} Language related to transgender experience shifts quickly. Salamon frequently uses wording that fit her time of writing (a decade ago) better than it would now. So here, for example, instead of saying “thinking transgender” (as though transgender were a gender, as in Butler) one might write “thinking about transgender experience.”

\textsuperscript{20} Salamon, \textit{Assuming a Body}, 14 (emphases mine).
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human existence. I pay close attention to its language of unity (or singularity) and division (or duality), especially as these concepts relate to gender, and note the pervasive use of strict binary opposites that the text employs to map its world. I also discuss how the gospel envisions “salvation” as escaping our world of materiality and death and returning to divinity, a place of life and light. And, near the end, I pose some questions about how the text offers opportunities to query and indeed queer the gender of Jesus.

Gospel of Thomas 22b requires a closer look:

Jesus said to them: “When21 you make the two one, and when (if) you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and so that you make male and female into the single one, so that the male not be male nor the female female, when (if) you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the Kingdom].” (emphasis added)

Here we read of a transformative process involving exchange of body parts, whether meant physically or symbolically, and the attainment of an undifferentiated unity, with male no longer being male, female no longer female, presented as a precondition of salvation. The process of making the two one—a key step in the process of the Thomasine theory of salvation—has typically been seen, through the lens of comparative scriptural exegesis, as referring to hope for a reversal of the creative actions described in the opening chapters of Genesis.22

According to Gen 1, at first God made human being (Hebrew ‘adam) into an image of Godself, a unity that somehow combined the qualities of male and female (Gen 1:26–27). This first account of the creation of heaven, earth, and their content, including humanity, comes near its close with the summary statement, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31 NRSV).

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21 The Coptic construction of “when” (2OTM) with the conditional in Thomas signals indeterminacy, which could be more literally if clumsily translated as “if and when you make the two one,” etc. Cf. the Greek indeterminacy in Gos. Thom. 3, which employs the indefinite relative ὃς ἄν ... (Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 654). No Greek version of Gos. Thom. 22 survives.

A near contemporary writer to the *Gospel of Thomas*, the first-century Jewish philosopher and exegete Philo of Alexandria, is often drawn upon to offer interpretive parallels to how *Thomas* construes topics like creation, humanity, and terms for gender and their usages. It is difficult to understand how *Thomas* could judge that the creation was “very good” in light of the gospel’s pervasive distaste for and rejection of the created, material world. But this was not so for Philo, who, among others, drew on Platonic notions of a truly real (immaterial) world of Being, in contrast to the less real (material) world of Becoming and ordinary existence. Philo understood this initial creation of humanity and its world as occurring in the mind of God, or in some spiritual realm apart from fleshly, human existence, and only in that sense “very good.” For Philo, for *Thomas*, and also for gender nonconforming or trans people, flesh and earthiness are precisely elements that are found to be most challenging in terms of locating our “real” or “authentic” existence.

And yet in Gen 2, without explanation, God then creates a human being (still ‘adam) out of the thick material of mud or clay, a being who tends to melancholy or restlessness due to its solitary existence. A reader employing a trans-centred hermeneutic might notice that this being apparently inhabits no particular sex or gender, apart from grammatical gender. Rather than existing on an immaterial, invisible plane, such as in the mind of God, this ‘adam is set into an earthly garden planted with beautiful and mysteriously powerful trees (Gen 2:8–9). After some failed attempts at providing a suitable companion for it in the form of various animals, God decides to divide this fleshly human being by extracting a rib and creating a woman separate from the ‘adam, who can now be more clearly read as the man we know as Adam (Gen 2:21–23).

This scenario of a double creation of both an ideal world and (subsequently) an actualized world apparently influenced the *Gospel of Thomas*, among other early Christian texts, suggesting the hope that one could return to an earlier, pre-Edenic state, prior to the separation of earthly man and woman, to become once again a fully integrated and undivided human being. If we assume the gospel is using Genesis directly to ponder humanity’s origins, the setting of the human into this earthly realm would

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24 Pagels concedes that “Thomas’s Genesis exegesis was [not] original or unique,” but that its “basic pattern ... was widely known and shared among groups of Genesis readers” (“Exegesis of Genesis 1 in Thomas and John,” 479). Brown’s article makes a detailed case for *Thomas* adopting an approach to Genesis along the lines of Philo’s multiplex interpretations (“Where Indeed Was Thomas Written?” esp. 464–69).
constitute the “Fall” from perfection: the arrival of gender, sexuality, and death are mere inevitable after-effects of this terrible decline into materiality. Scholarship appeals to this scriptural myth of double creation to explain the final passage of the gospel (Gos. Thom. 114), with its call to “make the female male” as a condition of salvation, a potentially troubling proposal to which we will return.\(^{25}\)

It could be that the *Gospel of Thomas* alludes to the two-step creation myth, even if indirectly, when it insists on unity over division. As Coptic scholar Marvin Meyer suggests:

Throughout the *Gospel of Thomas* one of the most terse and significant terms to be used is the Coptic phrase *oua ouot*, a phrase which ... seeks to be an intensive form of the number one, so that I prefer “single one” as the most pleasing rendition of the phrase in English. In any case, *oua ouot* functions importantly to designate the wholeness, beyond the division and fragmentation of human existence, which the Gnostics judged characteristic of salvation. This concept of wholeness comes to a focus in *logion* 22. This saying indicates that nothing less than a totally new being is required if one is to enter the kingdom: what is needed is reunification, integration, assimilation, *oua ouot*.\(^{26}\)

In light of these factors, it is not surprising that scholars have read passages like Gos. Thom. 22 and 114 as reflecting exegesis of the opening chapters of Genesis. Yet, while *Thomas* might have allowed the repeated claims of Gen 1 that the initially created, spiritual world is “good” because it is filled with light (one of Thomas’s key descriptors of divinity), when the gospel refers to our actual world—the material world we know and must operate in, pictured in Gen 2–4—our earthly existence is seen instead as saturated by death and spiritual darkness.\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\) Gathercole (*Gospel of Thomas*, 614) summarizes this perspective in his commentary on *Thomas*: ”The saved state ... may well reflect the *Urzeit* of Gen 2:4–20 when male and female are both one and the same (as in GTh 22), and exist as a male androgyne, Adam (as here in 114)."

\(^{26}\) Marvin W. Meyer, “‘Making Mary Male’: The Categories ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in the Gospel of Thomas,” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 554–70. More recent scholarship largely discounts “gnostic” parallels as less than useful for understanding *Thomas* than Meyer, though cf. Enno Edzard Popkes, *Das Menschenbild des Thomasevangeliums* (WUNT 206; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), and Cahana-Blum, who considers *Thomas* only a “borderline case” of a gnostic text (*Wrestling with Archons*, 70, 74–78). Klijn (“The ‘Single One’ in *Thomas*”) analyzed the Coptic words used for this concept in the gospel, namely, *ⲟⲩⲁ* (one), *ⲟⲩⲁ ⲁⲟⲩⲧ* (single one, one alone), and *ⲟⲩⲁⲧⲧⲟⲩⲧ* (single one, solitary).

In *Thomas*, the process of “salvation” involves scrutiny of the self, finding one’s true identity as a “single one” (an undivided child of the divine Light), and escape from this life of division and duality to return to God’s presence. Consider passages such as these:

Jesus said: “When (if) you come into the Light, what will you do? On the day when you were one, you became two. But if you become two, what will you do?” (*Gos. Thom.* 11c)

The disciples said to Jesus: “Tell us how our end will come.” Jesus said, “Have you discovered the beginning so that you might find the end? For in the place where the beginning is, that’s where the end will be. Blessed is the person who stands at the beginning: that person will know the end and not taste death.” (*Gos. Thom.* 18)

Jesus said: “There is light within a person of Light, and it gives light to the whole world. If it does not give light, that person [or: the world] is darkness.” (*Gos. Thom.* 24b)

Jesus said, “When (if) they say to you, ‘Where have you come from?’ say to them, ‘We have come from the Light, where the Light came into being of its own accord and stood and appeared in their images.’ If they say to you, ‘Is that you?’ say, ‘We are its children and we are the chosen of the Living Father’.” (*Gos. Thom.* 50)

Jesus said: “I am the Light that is above them all. I am the All; it is from me that the All came forth, and it is to me that the All has extended.” (*Gos. Thom.* 77)

As mentioned above, the Platonizing biblical scholarship of Philo offers a valuable intertextual resource to understand the language found in *Thomas* about the world, human identity, and gender. We need not imagine that the author of *Thomas* had direct access to the often-perplexing treatises of the Alexandrian philosopher. The similar perspectives of *Thomas* and Philo on creation, the world, and the human condition likely derive from their shared exposure to Middle Platonism, rather than any

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28 Stang does not recognize the contingency of the statement “if (when) you become two,” reading it as a key part of his divine double pattern (*Our Divine Double*, 88–89); I take the question instead to be a warning: What would you do if you ever became two again?

common interest in scrutiny of the scriptures. As Stephen J. Patterson observes, “Thomas shares none of Philo’s scribal interest in the Jewish scriptural tradition and his complex allegorical method.”30 Nor does Thomas ever cite the Jewish Scriptures; indeed, the few allusions made seem to have been mediated by other Christian authors.31 For both Philo and Thomas, “To discover one’s true self bearing the image of God is to discover in oneself that most quintessentially divine quality in the recently revived Platonic universe: light.”32 These parallels serve mostly to document that the gospel’s ideological perspectives on the body, human being, gender, and the world at large are in no way peculiar to it, but rather reflect a view of the cosmos and creation that was informed by a general cultural reception of popularized philosophical notions.33

We might consider for example the following passage from Philo’s great treatise on the opening chapters of Genesis, On the Creation of the World.34 In commenting on the second creation of human being (‘adam/anthropos) out of the earth in Gen 2, Philo remarks:

There is a vast difference between the human now formed [from the clay] and the human who came into existence earlier after the image of God. For the human now formed is an object of sense-perception, partakes already of quality [specific characteristics], consists of body and soul, is man or woman, and by nature mortal. But the human who came into existence after the image of God [Gen 1:26–27] is what one might call an idea, or genus, or a seal, an object of thought, incorporeal, neither male nor female, by nature incorruptible.35

Richard Baer insists that apart from a single passage in his voluminous surviving works (Creation 151–52), Philo never considers the original human of Gen 1 to be an “androgynous” creature, that is, both male and female, but instead to be an asexual being, who is neither (or not yet) male nor female, distant and distinct from the material

32 Patterson, Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins, 50 (emphasis mine).
33 For a thorough treatment of Philo’s participation in an eclectic Middle Platonism and a measured approach to philosophical parallels in Thomas, see Miroshnikov, Thomas and Plato.
34 On this work see especially the now standard translation and detailed commentary of David T. Runia, On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses (Leiden: Brill, 2001), together with his earlier book Philo of Alexandria and the “Timaeus” of Plato (Leiden: Brill, 1986).
35 Creation 134, adapted from the translation of Baer, Philo on the Categories Male and Female, 21.
existence into which gendered individuals are born. This observation will be important for our continued analysis of Gos. Thom. 22 and 114.

Philo’s conviction that the ideal human being is a unity, undivided by gender or any material qualities, is connected to his firm belief in the “oneness” of God. This key background sheds considerable light on Thomas’s interest in the “single one,” as shown by A. F. J. Klijn:

In Philo the idea that God is one is very much emphasized. That God is “one” does not mean that he is “unique,” but that he is a “oneness,” a monas, thus being “unmixed” ... Man in his present state is a “twoness.” In this way man is identical with the visible world ... To be saved from this creation means to be saved from the body, to leave the “twoness” in order to gain “oneness.” Philo says about Moses: “Afterwards the time came when he had to make his pilgrimage from earth to heaven, and leave this mortal life for immortality, summoned thither by the Father who resolves his ‘twoness’ of soul and body into a ‘oneness,’ transforming his whole being into mind, pure as sunlight.”

As in Thomas, salvation for Philo involves escape from materiality and duality to achieve a divine singularity that can be termed “soul” and (in Philo’s case) also “mind.”

A crucial advance in understanding this aspect of Thomas was made by Richard Valantasis, who adopted a resolutely literary and reader-centred approach to the gospel, with attention to effects that reading the text might have on its audience. His approach has been influential on my own work. In his 1997 commentary on Thomas, with reference to statements like Gos. Thom. 22b, Valantasis declares that:

the newly envisioned identity ... finds its expression most dramatically developed in two major areas: gender and singularity. This person has become in essence a third gender, a person no longer fitting into the cultural categories of male or female, but one who is now a fully integrated person with a body whose parts are replaced by newly understood parts in a sort of ascetical reconstruction of the meaning and significance of each member of the physical body.

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36 Baer, Philo on the Categories Male and Female, 72.
The gospel is saturated with language and imagery evoking an ascetic, world-denying sensibility, suspicious of hierarchy and dismissive of family life and reproduction. Valantasis devised an influential description of the asceticism which he presumed to be fundamental for *Thomas*, as “performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations and an alternative symbolic universe.” Though there is no scholarly unanimity on the role of ascetic or encratite practices in *Thomas*, there are several statements that suggest distance from or even hostility to conventional ancient family structures, including, at least implicitly, marriage and reproduction:

Jesus said: “Perhaps people think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. They do not know that I have come to bring divisions on the earth—fire, sword, and war. For there will be five in a house, and three will be against two, and two against three: father against son, and son against father. And they will stand as single ones (ⲙⲓⲟⲛⲥⲧⲟⲥ).” (*Gos. Thom.* 16)

Jesus said, “Whoever does not hate their father and their mother cannot become my disciple. And whoever does not hate their brothers and their sisters, and does not take up their cross as I do, is not worthy of me.” (*Gos. Thom.* 55)

The disciples said to him, “Your siblings and your mother are standing outside.” He said to them, “They who are here, who are doing the will of my Father, these are my siblings and my mother. It is these people who will enter the kingdom of my Father.” (*Gos. Thom.* 99)

Valantasis defines the “single one” featured in *Gos. Thom.* 16, 22, and elsewhere as a person who “transforms both [conventional genders] completely into a third gender identity that revolves around that integration … The metamorphized ‘single one’ makes concrete and defines the new third gender that replaces the former dual-gender paradigm.” While I appreciate and build on his insights here and elsewhere, I need to qualify what I see as Valantasis’ optimistic or even celebratory reading of transcending gender difference in *Thomas* by having it construct a nonsexual, singular third gender

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40 His theory is updated and discussed in *The Making of the Self*, 37–38, 101–16.


42 Quoted with slight alterations from the translation of Gathercole, *Gospel of Thomas*, 275.

that still combines the qualities of “male and female.” Instead, as we are told at the conclusion of the gospel (Gos. Thom. 114), the female is to be absorbed into the male.

Here and throughout the text, the Gospel of Thomas operates with a fundamental system of polarities and oppositions. And so, in Gos. Thom. 22b, we read about the two (duality) and the one (singularity), the upper and the lower, the inner and the outer, the male and the female, to which could be added light and darkness, wealth and poverty, flesh and spirit/soul, life and death, amongst other pairs of binary opposites. Almost always, one of the pair is construed positively and the other quite negatively, with the interesting and perhaps only partial exception of the male/female binary, where on the surface, at least, it appears that the collapse of the polarity and of difference is in view. From a trans-centred perspective, this insistence on sorting the world into binary categories can at times be deeply problematic, as it leaves little space for those who operate between or outside those inscribed binaries.

The apparent merging of male and/or female gender that Valantasis sees in the gospel seems to me a bit off the mark: the new person envisioned by Thomas must exist, as it turns out, in a decidedly male form of human engagement, at least on this material plane. As I concluded in a recent publication on Thomas, which I wrote with an unstated but fully active trans-conscious perspective:

The focus on singleness clearly privileges a specifically male performative asceticism, despite the text’s putative ideal of sexless true humanity … The point of becoming a single one or a solitary one is perhaps not merely to achieve an uncomplicated simplicity of the heart, though this is surely part of the project, but also to negotiate a posture of masculine solitude and self-reliance over against the world.

Three decades of scholarship, since the foundational work of (among others) Elizabeth Clark, Virginia Burrus, Peter Brown, and Elizabeth Castelli, have shown how powerful was the need to compose or hear stories of women in exceptional circumstances—

44 Stang recognizes a potential difficulty to his theory of oneness that somehow preserves duality in the closing line of Gos. Thom. 4, “they will become one and the same.” He says: “On the one hand, there is a clear endorsement of unity, of our becoming one—though in exactly what sense ‘one’ requires further investigation.” So far, so good. But I cannot agree with him that “On the other hand, there is a clear understanding that unity is forged from duality, and that duality does not disappear in the unity, that the one preserves the two” (Our Divine Double, 83).

women who adopt one or another version of masculine privileged identity, such as autonomy, self-declared freedom from marriage and family responsibilities, and expectations of self-determination and self-reliance. These struggles to call on values and virtues normatively associated in their culture with freeborn men are famously exemplified by the narratives of figures like Blandina of Lyons, Thecla of Iconium, or Perpetua of Carthage. In the words of Virginia Burrus:

ancient Christian writings have been understood to adopt a dominant strategy of transcendence in relation to sexual distinctions by allowing (some) women to join men in shedding their gender—an approach both criticized and effectively appropriated by their feminist interpreters.

So, in a sense, Gos. Thom. 22 can be heard as a text of liberation, as an admission that our bodily existences are not necessarily what they should be, and that processes to improve or correct what some of us term our birth defects are in view. But then the text goes on to insist on the (supposed) removal of differentiated gender identity altogether: If you make male and female into the single one, so that the male be not male and the female be not female, then you will be “saved,” or restored to the state of ideal or intended humanity. After a lifelong struggle to free the female within me from the constrictions of its male packaging, finally to assert my femaleness, this requirement to deny gender altogether reads to me as less than affirming, less than liberating.

Of course, erasure of gender distinctions as a goal could presumably have some advantages for the world at large, especially in social, economic, and political terms. Removal of gender-based, sex-based, and other inequalities and oppressions should be celebrated. And I suspect that for some individuals who can locate no gender within themselves, or are uncomfortable with being assigned any gender in particular, this part of Gos. Thom. 22 might seem just as liberating as I found the earlier part about making the outer person like the inner person.

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Along with Philo’s views on the unity or singularity of the ideal or spiritual human being, another intriguing comparison to Gos. Thom. 22 can be drawn with a famous passage in Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians. Here we find the idealized erasure—or more likely, the masking—of difference between binary social categories being pronounced in the baptismal formula that Paul quotes at the end of Galatians 3, a passage itself often read as a text of liberation.\(^{48}\)

As many of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed [Greek: σπέρμα], heirs according to the promise.\(^{49}\)

One wonders whether to understand this formula (as well as that of Gos. Thom. 22) mythically or in historical terms, individually or communally. The use of the second-person plural pronoun in the phrase you are all one in Gal 3:28 (πάντες γὰρ ύμείς εἰς ἑστε) suggests a corporate rather than an individual masking of difference. Pioneering feminist biblical theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza approaches this passage socially and rhetorically.\(^{50}\) She states that the theological conviction lying behind the claim that in you there is no male and female is not the androgyne myth (see below) but the insistence that “patriarchal marriage—and sexual relations between male and female—is no longer constitutive of the new [Pauline] community in Christ” which now “allowed not only gentiles and slaves but also women to exercise leadership functions within the missionary movement.”\(^{51}\)

But the erasure of difference can also be felt as an erasure of identity in a fashion considerably less positive. Paul’s construction of the mythical Body of Christ (spelled out more fully in Rom 12 and 1 Cor 12) has both implicit and more obvious elements of masculinity embedded in it (specifically, Jewish, freeborn masculinity).\(^{52}\)

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\(^{49}\) Gal 3:28–29 (nRSV, altered). This standard translation drains the word σπέρμα of its sexual connotations by rendering a word meaning “seed,” including human sperm, with the less precise and less colorful term “offspring.”


\(^{51}\) Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 217–18.

\(^{52}\) When Paul repeats the formula of oneness in Christ in 1 Cor 12:13, he tellingly omits the “no longer male and female” portion of the claim. For a trans-sensitive reading of gender questions in 1
important. As feminist theologian Brigitte Kahl has stated, the Epistle to the Galatians is the “most phallocentric” writing of all the New Testament, with its obsessions about penises (circumcised or not), sperm, threats of castration, and patrilineral inheritance claims.\(^{53}\)

Comparison of Gal 3:28 with the *Gospel of Thomas* was powered by Wayne Meeks's seminal article on “The Image of the Androgyne,” published in 1974. Meeks connects what he reconstructed as a pre-Pauline performative utterance about unity in Christ (employed in baptism) to notions of reunification of the divided human being. Later in the article, Meeks links this symbolism with the biblical creation narratives that we have been discussing:

The allusion to Genesis 1:26–27 is unmistakable; similarly ... Galatians 3:28 contains a reference to the “male and female” of Genesis 1:27 and suggests that somehow the act of Christian initiation reverses the fateful division of Genesis 2:21–22. Where the image of God is restored, there, it seems, man is no longer divided—not even by the most fundamental division of all, male and female. The baptismal reunification formula thus belongs to the familiar Urzeit—Endzeit pattern, and it presupposes an interpretation of the creation story in which the divine image after which Adam was modeled was masculofeminine.\(^{54}\)

Ever since Meeks, most scholars have agreed that the ideal human being of the Genesis creation myth was an androgyne, or what he terms here masculofeminine (Greek ἄρσενόθηλς), a combination of male and female. In my view, we have been imprecise in thinking that the first human being was understood by Thomas Christians as somehow *both* male and female, and thus androgynous, though this was the view of authors like Plato and Ovid.\(^{55}\) Instead, as Marvin Meyer has pointed out, both Gos. Thom. 22 and the

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\(^{55}\) Meeks, “Image of the Androgyne,” connects this material with Gos. Thom. 22 (193–96). He is followed by others in appealing to Philo *Creation* 151–52 to argue that Philo is following the androgyne myth of Plato’s *Symposium* (§§ 189–92) and then applying that myth to Thomas’s conception of the ideal
Gal 3:28 formula (and Philo) state the opposite: “there is no longer male and female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Moreover, a traditional saying ascribed to Jesus (and possibly the source of Gos. Thom. 22) links the coming of the Kingdom to when “the two are one, and the male with the female neither male nor female.” As Meyer suggests, the mythic use of androgyny in other (later?) Nag Hammadi treatises may overdetermine our understanding of the ideal Thomasine human. It may also be that our modern misreading of the ideal Thomasine human as androgynous descends, knowingly or not, from Freud’s early work on what he called hermaphroditism, a condition we now know as intersexuality, that is, presenting aspects of both conventionally male and female bodies, especially genitals.

According to Meyer, “At first glance we might conclude, as many commentators have concluded, that logion 22 advocates androgyny, the restitution of the original unified sexual condition. Such a conclusion would certainly be in full harmony with much of what is characteristic of late antiquity in general and the Nag Hammadi tractates in particular … Yet a careful reading of the text of the Gospel of Thomas prompts us to take a slightly different approach with regard to logion 22. To be sure, male and female become oua ouot; but the saying goes on to specify that this transformation is to take place by means of the mutual elimination of sexual characteristics rather than the hermaphroditic manifestation of complete sexual features” (“Making Mary Male,” 560). Also see Marvin W. Meyer, Secret Gospels: Essays on Thomas and the Secret Gospel of Mark (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2003), 96–106.

Versions of this saying attributed to Jesus are found in the second-century homily 2 Clement (12.2) and in a fragment of the lost Gospel of the Egyptians, quoted via Julius Cassianus by the late second-century philosophical theologian Clement of Alexandria (Stromateis 3.13.92). See Dennis Ronald MacDonald, There Is No Male and Female: The Fate of a Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism (HDR 20; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 17–50; also Patterson, “Why Can’t a Woman,” 120; Hogan, “No Longer Male and Female,” 70–121.

Early Christians could employ explicitly androgynous imagery for either the highest power, the demiurge, and/or the first (heavenly) human being, as seen in other writings preserved in the Nag Hammadi corpus, such as within Codex II itself the Gospel of Philip, Nature of the Rulers, and On the Origin of the World, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 75–94; cf. also the eclectic sect of the Naasenes, who identified a primal androgynous Anthropos whom they identified with Adam, Attis, Mercury, and Christ, at least as reported by Ps.-Origen (“Hippolytus”), Heresies 5.7.14; on this see Hogan, “There Is No Male and Female,” 78–79, Cahana-Blum, Wrestling with Archons, 80–87.

For a discussion of Freud’s treatment of the topic as it may (not) relate to a transgender identity, see Salamon, Assuming a Body, 14–21. Patterson (“Why Can’t a Woman?”) first questions whether ancient representations of mythical hermaphrodites (sculpted and poetic) are mostly about sex (which he and others call “love”) or else about power. Though this initial focus on “primordial androgyny” as seen in external, physical intersexuality may seem out of place given current understanding what it means to be transgender, his article moves helpfully to a reading of Gos. Thom. 114 as offering enlightenment and thus empowerment to (a few) women in early Christian, in something of a parallel to Schüssler Fiorenza on...
The infamous conclusion of the *Gospel of Thomas* (114) has Jesus explain that the whole matter of subsuming two genders into one, or of replacing duality with singularity, involves a precisely androcentric process: the female can be saved only when she becomes a “living spirit resembling ... males.” To borrow the words of Gayle Salamon, “The presumptive masculinity of the ostensibly universal subject is unremarkably present.” But before we head to that disturbing end of the gospel, allow me to mention some of the other statements made in the text which speak rather to human liberation, in particular to liberation for people struggling to conform their inner understanding of self with society’s demands.

An early statement validates the process of searching for one’s truth: “Jesus said, ‘The one who seeks should not stop seeking until they find. Whenever they find, they will be disturbed. And if they are disturbed, they will marvel, and will reign over all’” (Gos. Thom. 2). The process of trans folk seeking after our true selves does usually lead to disturbance, and sometimes the weight and cost of that disturbance ends the process right there. If one can get past the troubling aspects of this particular sort of self-discovery, however, one is promised wonder and power and ultimately (in the Greek version of the gospel) one is offered rest. Many trans people, including myself, can attest to having experienced this very sequence in our processes of searching for and finding ourselves. When we achieve some level of understanding, of self-understanding, this can often bring with it a sense of wonder, joy, empowerment, and release from lifelong distress.

We have already seen that the very next statement made by Jesus in the gospel calls one to knowledge of the self: “When (if) you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the Living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty” (Gos. Thom. 3). Being known by others requires first that we know ourselves. Failure to recognize or acknowledge our truths leaves us in a state of poverty, of spiritual emptiness, of what I have termed my long experience of living in a twilight zone of absence, with my true identity only seen and felt at-a-distance. The search for self-knowledge leads to the disclosure of what is hidden within: “Jesus said, ‘Know what is in front of your face, and what is hidden from you will be disclosed to you. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed’” (Gos. Thom. 5).

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Gal 3:28; even in Thomas’s androcentric, patriarchal world, some women can successfully assume leadership roles.

Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 48, discussing the theories of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

The opening of *Thomas* is preserved in Greek in Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 4.654; see Gathercole, *Thomas*, 198–205.
Later we learn that failure to perceive one’s inner self will leave one unenlightened, and prevent one’s truth from shining out into the world: “Jesus said, ‘Anyone with an ear to hear had better listen! There is light within a person of Light, and it gives light to the whole world. If it does not give light, that person [or: the world] is darkness’” (Gos. Thom. 24).

Thomas has Jesus validate a sensibility that grants priority to the spiritual, psychic, or nonmaterial self (termed spirit and wealth) over the outward, fleshly, bodily existence, which is dismissed as poverty: “Jesus said: ‘If the flesh came into being because of spirit, that is a marvel; but if spirit came into being because of the body, that is a marvel of marvels. Yet I marvel at how this great wealth has come to dwell in this poverty’” (Gos. Thom. 29). We read that overcoming duality within oneself—perhaps the duality of incongruence between inner gender identity and physical appearance, or assumptions made by others—can be empowering: “Jesus said: ‘If two make peace with one another in a single house, they will say to the mountain, “Move from here!” and it will move’” (Gos. Thom. 48). One body—one house—with two inhabitants at war with each other might make peace; thus, a person experiencing conflict over their gender identity can find peace and empowerment.

I could continue to list statements that one might read through a transgender lens as affirming gender difference, or the relative importance of inner, nonmaterial identity as contrasted with one’s outer, fleshly appearance. But in the interests of space, I must now return to that final shocker, the conclusion of the gospel that throws in doubt the impression that may have held up to that final point: that Thomas could be heard as a text that celebrates gender nonconformity, or that potentially offers a notion of discipleship that transcends gender particularity. Instead we find a re-inscription or validation of normative, celibate, apparently heterosexual masculinity. In Gos. Thom. 114a we read: “Simon Peter said, ‘Make Mary leave us, for females are not worthy of life.’” In some ways, Peter’s suggestion further solidifies my reading of Thomas as revealing a reflexively masculinist mindset rather than being a fully gender-liberating text. As Schweikart notes:

androcentric literature structures the reading experience differently depending on the gender of the reader. For the male reader, the text serves as the meeting ground of the personal and the universal. Whether or not the text approximates the particularities of his own experience, he is invited to validate the equation of maleness with humanity. The male

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62 As in Salome’s unchallenged claim in Gos. Thom. 61 that she is Jesus’ disciple: on this see Corley, “Salome and Jesus at Table in Thomas,” and Cwikla, “There’s Nothing about Mary.”
reader feels his affinity with the universal, with the paradigmatic human being, precisely because he is male.\(^{63}\)

One way to escape the discomfort caused by this stark rejection of female suitability for “life” (meaning a return to the primordial state of existence in the Light) is to attribute this attitude to Peter’s well-attested (literary) rivalry, indeed active jealousy, over the prominent place that a female follower named Mary occupied in the coterie around Jesus. Indeed, near the end of the second-century Gospel of Mary we find Peter’s colleague Levi rebuking him for his hot-headed misogyny when Peter attempts to silence her.\(^{64}\) This is a useful parallel, and could possibly be read as a direct response to something like Gos. Thom. 114. But explaining away the ending of Thomas as merely a reflection of Peter’s ingrained sexism (and thus that of the proto-orthodox churches, for which Peter can stand as a sign) ignores the fact that it is Jesus, not Peter, who explains that he must lead Mary and make her into a spirit resembling a male for her to achieve salvation. One wishes that Jesus had rebuked his impetuous follower, Back off, dude! But instead he said, “Look, I myself\(^{65}\) will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a Living Spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (Gos. Thom. 114b).

Really? Someone like me, who in a sense is a female long mistaken for a male, who in some people’s eyes, though not my own, is perhaps a male who made himself female, now has to give up her womanhood and attempt to gain some semblance of maleness? That is not going to happen.

The notion of Jesus offering Mary (and potentially any disciple) a “return” to a unified, male state of existence offers something of a parallel with the implicitly male Body of Christ symbol so important to Paul. But this would only remove women from the realm of Living Spirits that much more clearly. Jesus is superior to the male Living Spirits, who themselves are superior to women. I can summarize the tendency no better than did Elizabeth Castelli in her classic article on gender difference in early Christian literature, where she discusses Gos. Thom. 114 alongside the visions of Perpetua of Carthage:

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\(^{64}\) Gospel of Mary 10, translated from its Coptic version in Berlin Gnostic Codex 8502 by Karen L. King, in The Gospel of Mary Magdalene: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2003), 17–19.

\(^{65}\) Here I follow Anna Cwikla’s suggestion to highlight the text’s use of the emphatic pronoun (“There’s Nothing about Mary,” 103–104).
In the Christian tradition, there is virtually no evidence for the movement across conventional gender boundaries by the “male” toward the “female,” except when it is negatively construed, as in polemics against homosexuality. The female can and should strive to become male—to overcome gender distinction, since the male embodies the generic “human” and therefore the potential for human existence to transcend differences and return to the same. Of course, it is precisely in the assumption that the “male” can stand for both the masculine and the human that a tension emerges in the discourses under discussion. “Becoming male” marks for these thinkers the transcendence of gendered differences, but it does so only by re-inscribing the traditional gender of male over female, masculine over feminine.66

In a recent article, Anna Cwikla argues that modern scholarship has been distracted in its reading of Gos. Thom. 114 by trying to find an important place for Mary and other women as disciples, whether in Thomas or other early Christian texts.67 Instead, by applying homosocial bonding theory to the passage, Cwikla points out that in this final paragraph, Mary lacks agency or voice; she may not even be present for the conversation between Peter and Jesus.68 In Cwikla’s reading, Mary (and her role) is thus not the actual interest or point of that exchange, but instead serves as a place where two men negotiate their own relationship and respective positions of power:

Jesus does not really focus on Mary as an individual but simply talks about how he will solve the problem of Mary being a woman. So while it could seem that Jesus is intervening on behalf of Mary ... he does nothing to uphold Mary’s presence in and of herself. With Jesus getting the final word, coupled with the lack of engagement with or by Mary directly, it seems that Gos. Thom. 114 is far more interested in accentuating the role of the men than it is in liberating Mary.69

Thus, Mary merely provides an opportunity to reinscribe the androcentric power structure assumed by Thomas. Cwikla’s analysis offers a very helpful approach for my reading of Gos. Thom. 114, in that it further underlines the covertly masculinist ideology of the gospel, at least with regard to Peter’s intentions in his demand that Mary be

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66 Elizabeth Castelli, “I Will Make Mary Male,” in Body Guards, 33.
67 Cwikla, “There’s Nothing about Mary.”
68 Cwikla (“There’s Nothing about Mary”) employs the homosocial male bonding theory pioneered by Eve Sedgwick as an example of how women characters often function largely to advance a man’s narrative.
69 Cwikla, “There’s Nothing about Mary,” 103.
excluded. But from a transgender interpretive perspective, we might doubt Cwikla’s assumption that the Jesus of *Thomas* is best understood as conventionally male.

Another approach to vindicate the text from its apparent misogyny is that of Valantasis, who applies his construction of the third-gender single one in *Thomas* to this troubling text:

This task of creating something that is neither male nor female has been presented as a goal for all the seekers posited in these sayings. Here Jesus makes that articulated goal explicit for women. It does not seem to manifest a degree of misogyny, but makes the stated goal for women as well.\(^70\)

He even claims that “males must become female as well,”\(^71\) though I do not find this putative task mentioned or alluded to in the gospel. Indeed, according to ancient notions, as stated by such writers as Aristotle, Philo, and Galen, “the male body was viewed as the perfected, more complete body when compared to the female ... ‘Female’ is a non-category apart from its definition as imperfect male.”\(^72\)

The male as (ideally) perfect and the female as (truly) incomplete helps explain Philo’s frequent use of the terms to signal higher attributes (spiritual, intellectual, nonmaterial) as “male,” while “female” denotes materiality and irrationality, a usage which can bleed into a critical application of the terms in a moral sense.\(^73\) Baer relates Philo’s language to a process of “becoming male”:

In view of Philo’s strongly disparaging attitude towards women and the female as well as his glorification of the male, but more particularly in the light of his identification of the female with sense-perception and the material world, and the male with the rational soul, it is not surprising to find that progress in the moral and religious life involves forsaking the realm of the female. Although Philo does not himself use the exact expression, this process might well be described by the phrase “becoming male.”\(^74\)


\(^{71}\) Valantasis, *Gospel of Thomas*, 195.


\(^{73}\) According to Baer, “The male-female polarity in Philo’s writings is part of the mortal sphere of the created world” (*Philo’s Use of the Categories*, 18), and further, “the irrational soul of man participates in the categories male and female, whereas the rational soul does not share in the realm of the sexual” (32).

\(^{74}\) Baer, *Philo’s Use of the Categories*, 45.
With reference to Gos. Thom. 114, requiring that females be “perfected” (made into Living Spirits) via transformation into males, spiritually or otherwise, would fit comfortably within this widespread view.

Is there another way to rescue the text, if that be so desired? The suggestion of Johanna Brankaer that Jesus is speaking ironically here is attractive, and I myself have viewed other statements in the gospel in a similar light. It would be lovely, but unlikely, to conclude that Jesus is dismissing Peter with snarky misdirection. Another tack sometimes taken is to suggest that statement 114 was added secondarily to the gospel at some later, less egalitarian moment in the text’s development. And to be sure, there is a well-documented tendency in early Christian circles to move from a pattern of idealized gender equality to one of actualized female submission to male authority—look to Paul and his imitators if nowhere else (as when we contrasted the formula of unification in Gal 3:28 with 1 Cor 12:13—see fn. 52 above—which omits the third term, “there is no male and female”; cf. also Col 3:11). But suggesting that we can exonerate the text by relegating parts of the gospel that especially offend us to some later intervention smacks of avoiding the difficulty altogether.

I see an opening to a more constructive, trans-centred reading of the passage when we note that Jesus draws a small but clear pronominal distinction between himself and his male disciples: Mary will become a Living Spirit, resembling “you males,” says Jesus, and he specifically and notably does not include himself among the “men.” This wording offers an opportunity to consider how Jesus may somehow transcend gender difference more completely in Thomas, as the Living One, the one who came as Light into our dark world (cf. Gos. Thom. 1, 24, 52b, 59, 77); in this sense, Jesus differs from his disciples, male and female, who still operate within the confines of material existence, and therefore remain as yet marked and divided by gender. Transgender hermeneutics necessarily pays close attention to pronouns, and so Jesus’ distinction between himself and his male disciples is potentially quite significant, despite its brevity. Could we then modify Valantasis’ suggestion of a “third gender,” in which males become female, and females male, and say instead that Jesus (and other Living Spirits) may stand apart from, or outside, gendered difference?

77 Also noted by Valantasis, Gospel of Thomas, 195.
I would question, while using a transgender lens, whether the Jesus of *Thomas*, or of any of the gospels, inhabits an altogether stable masculinity (apart from grammatical gender). For this potential reconfiguration of the gender of Jesus, I am drawing on current applications within biblical studies of the notion of “queering” gender. As described by Sean Burke:

Queer theory provides a new and productive way to read ambiguities in identity ... I define “queering” as the employment of a variety of strategies in order to deconstruct and to denaturalize identity categories ... In the language of queer theorist Judith Butler, [the] goal in queering identity categories is to make it possible for more bodies to matter—for more bodies to be recognized as fully human.

Or as Rhiannon Graybill states:

There is no single notion of what such a “queering” looks like, just as queer theory itself resists tight definition. However, it generally entails abandoning authorial intention or “reading with the grain.” seeking instead to uncover what queer possibilities may be found in a text. While a queer approach has continuities with a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” it is less interested in exposing the text as problematic than in offering playful new readings. Queer readings can be provocative, even outrageous; playing with style and pushing boundaries are both features that characterize queer reading.

There has been considerable recent interest in portrayals of Jesus’ gender in the New Testament gospels, specifically his somewhat ambiguous or even fragile masculinity. Jesus weeps publicly at the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35); agonizes in the garden before his arrest and trial (Mark 14:32–36 // Matt 26: 36–39); and sweats blood.

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78 And so, perhaps ironically, I use grammatically male pronouns for the Jesus of *Thomas* in this article.


and begs for divine intervention to spare him, if we follow some manuscripts of Luke 22:44. His body was pierced and maltreated during his trial and execution in ways that ancient Mediterranean cultures interpreted as deliberate and terrifying violations of manhood; these were extreme enough to degrade the status of a freeborn, autonomous male to resemble that of a slavish, feminized object. As Coleen Conway puts it, "the body lacked stability; there was no certainty that a masculinity earned was a masculinity saved. The specter of lost manliness, of a slide into effeminacy, was frequently raised before the eyes of the literate male audience."  

Less noticed, to my knowledge, is how Jesus displays no gendered anxiety about speaking with, touching, and healing women and girls not related to him, nor in being approached or touched by them. Nor does Jesus show any interest in demonstrating his masculinity through marriage and reproduction. This last and striking aspect of Jesus’ personality is quite pronounced in Thomas, which, as noted above, exhibits caution or even hostility to conventional ancient family life, including, implicitly at least, marriage and reproduction. On the other hand, Conway has named the turn toward asceticism in early Christian traditions a form of “hypermasculinity”:

For example, the sayings of Jesus that suggest an ascetic detachment from the household or family structures do not put him the mainstream of masculine deportment, but they emphasize his masculinity nonetheless. His instructions to his disciples to embrace a life of simplicity sound much like a Cynic philosopher in search of virtue.  

Akin to Conway, Deryn Guest notes that "there are a number of ways in which masculinity becomes more visible. It is noticeable 'when something goes wrong or when it goes into excessive overdrive.' Examples of performances in which it is absent/present

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83 Some of the examples are culturally startling. Consider the case of Salome, who says she has shared a dining couch with Jesus (Gos. Thom. 61); the woman with the twelve-year vaginal flow of blood (Mark 5:24b–34); the seemingly dead twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:22–24a, 35–43); the "sinful woman of the city" who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and kisses them with her mouth (Luke 7:38); the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4); the sister pair of Mary and Martha of Bethany (Luke 10:38–42 and John 11); cf. the Syro-Phoenician woman with a daughter sick to the point of death (Mark 7:24–30).

84 Cf. Punt, "Queer Theory," 334, where he summarizes Stephen Moore’s insights: "Free-born males ruled the roost and asserted their masculinity through (sexual) activity, by penetration, in contrast to being soft and being penetrated, which was a role reserved for those lower down on the social ladder, regardless of their sex."

85 Conway, Behold the Man, 179.
to excess, would be in the effeminate man or the body builder.  

Jesus’ stress on being a “single one” and living a solitary life may be an example of restraint or absence “in excess,” that is, of an unusually unstable masculinity.

An important signal of gendered identity and status in Mediterranean antiquity was one’s physical appearance and presence. Drawing on the work of Maud Gleason, Conway makes the following point: “[O]ne’s masculine status had to be constantly maintained and proven through a demonstration of manly deportment. In her words, ‘Manhood was not a state to be definitely achieved but something always under construction and constantly under scrutiny’.”

But the Gospel of Thomas almost never comments on or even alludes to the appearance, vocal qualities, moods, or bodily comportment of its characters, male or female. Thus we are given few if any clues as to whether or how Jesus’ appearance, posture, or voice position him on the ancient matrices of gender and status. His behaviour appears, as already noted, strangely abstracted from the ordinary restrictions of ancient gender norms. Jesus is seemingly removed from the divisions represented by and responding to the gendered, material body. And yet in the world of this gospel and of those in the canon, the narrators and other characters seemingly read him as male, because they fail to notice his specific norm of “gendered embodiment.” Thus, from a trans perspective at least, Jesus’ gender is queered, since those around him (and the narrator, too!) consistently misread his gender. In the language of Yee and Graybill, my reading “abandons authorial [surface] intention.”

A reading that employs an explicitly trans-centred hermeneutic might allow us to see the gender of Jesus and of other Living Spirits as queered away from vectors of bodily difference, which could then provide a more intriguing and hopeful way to read Gos. Thom. 114. Though perhaps still “resembling males” in this earthly realm of material existence, the Thomas Christian might yet seek and find “salvation” when seen in a more authentic, spiritual, internal perspective, and be assimilated to Jesus in a manner that transcends bodily (sexual) and perhaps other difference. Despite its many aspects that speak so strongly to gender playing a new and less oppressive role in the long-awaited

88 There is a partial exception in Gos. Thom. 4, which features a person “old in days” being instructed by an infant only one week old.
89 Yee, “The Author/Text/Reader and Power”; Graybill, “Surpassing the Love of a Woman.”
Kingdom of God, in the end, if we were to continue to read the Jesus of Thomas as unequivocally male, it would remain a text like most from the formative years of Christianity: a gospel that would ultimately be unable to escape its masculinist as well as its body-centred ideologies. But a trans-centred reader can instead find much encouragement here: once we notice that the final statement in the Gospel of Thomas expresses an ungendered identity for Jesus (a “theory of embodiment” as the Living One that is neither male nor female), even if only through a pronominal hint, we are offered a model for everyone—men, women, and the nonbinary—to seek to find themselves, come to know themselves, be known by others, and thus live their true and authentic lives.

Bibliography


