

Ivan Miroshnikov, *The Gospel of Thomas and Plato: A Study of the Impact of Platonism on the “Fifth Gospel”*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 93, Boston-Leiden, Brill 2018, 324 p., ISBN: 978-90-04-36728-9

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The Gospel of Thomas is a very controversial early-Christian, non-canonical writing. Compared to the official Gospels, the Gospel of Thomas conceptualizes redemption as possible through the understanding of the (secret) sayings of Jesus Christ. Its very discovery places it within a gnostic frame as part of the Nag Hammadi Codex II, even if its relationship with the rest of the writings, such as the *Apocryphon of John* or the *Gospel of Philip*, remains unclear. But at the same time, the Gospel of Thomas doesn't seem to be gnostic: for it makes no mention of any Aeons, Evil Demiurge, Archons and their accompanying mythology. The very reference to it as a Gospel is questionable since it lacks any narration and mention of crucifixion and resurrection, which are features essential to the canonical gospels. Nevertheless, one cannot place it elsewhere than next to them, as more than half of its sayings do resemble those of the canonical gospels. But what makes things even more complicated is that substantial parts of the Gospel of Thomas are rich in philosophical content.

This last aspect is thoroughly analyzed by Ivan Miroshnikov in the book *The Gospel of Thomas and Plato: A Study of the Impact of Platonism on the “Fifth Gospel”*, based on his doctoral thesis defended in 2016 at the University of Helsinki. As the subtitle specifies, one should not conjecture that the author of the Thomasine sayings (*logia*) was a reader of Plato, but there is a strong resemblance between Middle Platonist philosophy and some of these sayings. The pioneers who have advanced the idea of a relationship between Platonism and the Gospel of Thomas are Howard M. Jackson¹ and Stephen J. Patterson.² The book develops this further by following a clear structure that draws not only on the Coptic text, but also on the Greek prototype of manuscripts P.Oxy. 1.1, P.Oxy. 4.654, and P.Oxy. 4.655. These sources are the basis for an elaborate philosophical exegesis, underpinned by

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¹ Howard M. Jackson, *The Lion Becomes Man: The Gnostic Leontomorphic Creator and the Platonic Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

² Stephen J. Patterson, “Jesus Meets Plato: The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas and Middle Platonism,” in *Das Thomasevangelium: Entstehung – Rezeption – Theologie*, eds. Jörg Frey, Enno Edzard Popkes, and Jens Schröter (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 181–205, republished in Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins: Essays on the Fifth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 33–60.

some valuable philological alternative reconstructions for corrupted parts of the Coptic text. Another focal point of the volume lies in the translation from the Greek *Vorlage* to Coptic, an issue that still puzzles scholars today.

The book is conceived in nine chapters, out of which seven are strictly dedicated to the evidently philosophical influences in the Gospel of Thomas. The first chapter, “Setting the Scene”, is dedicated to the scholarship of Middle Platonism, and its relationship to early Christianity. From the outset, one must say that the term Middle Platonism is problematic and that, to the questions on whether a Middle Platonist tradition actually existed, Miroshnikov prefers to answer by reviewing the terms of the debate, and by eventually siding with the scholars who think that the term is appropriate and useful. The chapter also offers an overview of contemporary scholarship which places the chronology for the contacts of early Christianity with the philosophical schools of the time, back to the period in which the New Testament was being written, therefore before the spread of Christian Platonism. Out of several competing schools around the beginning of the Christian era – such as Stoicism or Cynicism – Platonism had the eventual upper hand and a greater impact, especially on the Gospel of Thomas.

The second chapter, “The Gospel of Thomas and the Platonists on the World”, focuses mainly on sayings 56 and 80, which apparently are duplicates of the idea that the world is basically a corpse and a body. The author argues that these two sayings nevertheless show two different features of the material world. The metaphors of corpse and body are Platonic, and have ramifications in Philo (the σῶμα-σῆμα formula, p. 56) or in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (7.2), where the human body is understood as “the portable tomb” (ὁ περιφόρητος τάφος) and “the sentient corpse” (ὁ αἰσθητικὸς νεκρός) (p. 57). But compared to Platonism there is a difference, since the Thomasine sayings do not endorse the idea that the world operates according to an intelligible model. To emphasize his point, Miroshnikov brings into discussion the saying 77.2–3, and links it with the saying 30.3–4. Accordingly, 77.2 (*Split a piece of wood, and I am there*) and 77.3 (*Lift the stone, and you will find me there*) are given the meaning that one can find a living Jesus even in lifeless material, and thus the world is not a mere ‘corpse.’ I find this interpretation stimulating and I would add that the saying might also envisage the action in itself, which would correspond to the philosophical action of ‘splitting’ or ‘lifting’ as metaphors for the search of Christ even where one would not expect to find him.

The third chapter, “The Gospel of Thomas and the Platonists on the Body and Soul”, is conceived as a prolongation of the previous one, and continues thus the exegesis on the Thomasine anthropological sayings that

deal with the human being and the natural world. The sayings analyzed here are: 29, 87, and 112. In what I find an interesting case, even if not fully convincing, the author argues against the tripartite anthropology elaborated by Patterson³ who identifies πνεῦμα with νοῦς. For Miroshnikov the potential use of πνεῦμα by Middle Platonists is not confirmed by the extant vocabulary, and “the only sort of πνεῦμα that belonged to Philo’s philosophical vocabulary is the πνεῦμα of Stoic physics” (p. 89, fn. 57). Thus, the classical tripartite anthropology (body – soul – spirit) does not have an echo in the Gospel of Thomas, since, according to Miroshnikov, it is unlikely that the Gospel would consider the soul to be an entity inferior to the spirit. For Miroshnikov, this Gospel does not differentiate between flesh (σάρξ) and body (σῶμα) on the one hand, and soul (ψυχή) and spirit (πνεῦμα) on the other. In the aforementioned sayings, ψυχή or πνεῦμα are synonymous, therefore the Gospel of Thomas goes for plain dualism. This synonymy (or, I would rather say, confusion), between spirit and soul, is to be found correspondingly in later Christian literature, so this should not come as a surprise. The Gospel of Thomas emulates thus the classical antagonism between soul and body from the *Phaedo*. The chapter concludes with the insight that in the Gospel the “understanding of human perfection is not much different from that of Alcinous and other Platonist and Platonizing authors” (p. 90).

In the fourth chapter, “The Gospel of Thomas and the Platonists on Oneness”, Miroshnikov challenges the idea that various sayings which encourage the reader to aspire towards “oneness as perfection” spring from a Jewish background. Beginning with A. F. J. Klijn,⁴ Thomasine scholarship identified the lineage with the Jewish tradition in the common portrayal of Adam as the initial androgyne. The Thomasine sayings would thus refer to the oneness of this primordial Adam. But Miroshnikov advocates for a Greek background for the Gospel. Accordingly, to “become one” is a product of the Platonist metaphysics. Even if Adam’s androgyny is confirmed by Philo, the author stresses that this is not the conception to which Philo adhered, but rather the Platonist idea that human perfection lays in oneness. The examples from Clement of Alexandria that further round out Miroshnikov’s argumentation are particularly convincing.

Chapter five, “The Gospel of Thomas and the Platonists on Stability”, focuses on the term “standing” (ἵστημι) that the author identifies in various sayings, such as in 16, 18, 23, or 50. This chapter is of particular importance, as “standing” – Miroshnikov argues – should be understood in its

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ A. F. J. Klijn, “The ‘Single One’ in the Gospel of Thomas,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 271–78.

metaphysical sense. A proof in this direction would be that the sayings 16 and 18 associate “standing” with “oneness”: an aim of the Gospel would be to achieve God’s “standingness”. “Oneness” and “standing” are understood thus as divine attributes that have their conceptual origin in Platonism as well. Miroshnikov provides instructive parallels, even if basic ones, to Plato, Alcinous, Philo, Numenius, and Clement, but he seems to be relying too much on Michael Williams’ view on the actual lack of stability of Plato’s intelligible realm.⁵ The passages quoted from the *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* or the *Sophist*, which raise several exegetical problems in Platonic scholarship, would perhaps deserve a more thorough consideration. This critique is not valid only to Miroshnikov, but also to Williams himself who resorts too easily to the unwritten doctrine when interpreting Plato.

Chapter six, “The Gospel of Thomas and the Platonists on Immutability and Indivisibility”, moves to the complicated saying 61, which poses not only interpretative concerns, but basic, philological ones as well. Since the text is relatively corrupt, there is a question of how much one can rely on it. The saying insists that becoming equal is the opposite of becoming divided, and, according to the author, the idea of excellence, as being equal, along with the idea of imperfection, as being divided, have metaphysical aims and an altogether Middle Platonist background (especially in Philo, Numenius or Clement). Miroshnikov highlights an ethical aspect as well, whose contents depend on the interpretative mindset of the receiver of the Gospel message.

The seventh chapter, “The Gospel of Thomas and the Platonists on Freedom from Anger”, focuses on saying 7 (“Blessed is the lion that a person will eat...”) which is also a corrupted text. In examining this unintelligible saying, Miroshnikov relies on the work of M. Jackson⁶ who argues that it should be interpreted depending on the *dramatis personae* of Plato’s *Rep.* 588b–592b. Following Jackson, and amending his interpretation, he argues that the lion stands for anger (the passion *par excellence*), and thus the aim is to fight against anger/lion, until its total annihilation and the absolute freedom from it. This annihilation would be consistent with the specific Thomasine understanding of human perfection as aiming towards *oneness*. Commenting on Plato’s theory of the soul, in the subchapter “Tripartite or Bipartite?”, the author rightly questions whether Plato was committed to a theory that professed a tripartite or a bipartite composition of the soul. He brings into discussion the classical study of Rees⁷ which stresses the tendency

⁵ Michael Williams, *The Immovable Race: A Gnostic Designation and the Theme of Stability in Late Antiquity*, NHS 29 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 39–42.

⁶ Jackson, *The Lion Becomes Man*.

⁷ D. A. Rees, “Bipartition of the Soul in the Early Academy,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77, no. 1 (1957): 112–18.

in Plato's late dialogues towards a bipartition of the soul, by taking the spirited and the appetitive parts together, as a unity, and thus opposed to the rational part. The main argument for bipartition, according to Rees, would be the political structure of the ideal state, as the *Laws* completely abandons the tripartite separation in the polis. I, on the other hand, would be inclined to think that the reason behind a tripartite soul is not political, but psychological.⁸ Miroshnikov appropriately points out that, starting with the Old Academy, the conception of a bipartite soul tends to gain weight, a position shared by some Middle Platonists too. Whether or not Plato himself had the same conversion to the more simplified model of the soul is still a matter of debate. But a more stark dissimilarity is perhaps that the Middle Platonists started to have a negative attitude towards anger, as the main opponent of reason, in contrast to Plato who thought that anger can be tamed. The struggle between anger and reason in Thomasine writing could have as results: a) the inner lion destroys the inner man, or b) the inner man triumphs. The author offers examples from Platonists such as Plutarch (*De cohibenda ira* and *Platonicae quaestiones*), Galen (*De moribus* and *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*) or Clement (*Stromata*) who argue that anger should be understood more as belonging to vices, than virtues. Their claims show that there was a tendency against Plato's remark that the inner lion could be disciplined and thus twisted into an ally. This challenging chapter also provides a good parallel with Didymus the Blind (*Comm. Ps.* 315.27–316.4), and therefore goes beyond Jackson's analysis,⁹ in order to demonstrate the chiasmic structure (specific and often used in the Gospel of Thomas) of the saying: "the lion is eaten by a man (7.1a); the lion becomes a man (7.1b); the man is eaten by a lion (7.2a); the man becomes a lion (7.2b)." For Miroshnikov this stands as a proof that the Coptic text erroneously translated the Greek *Vorlage*.

Chapter eight, "Thomasine Metaphysics of the Image and Its Platonist Background," is dedicated to the notion and the metaphysics of image (in the sayings 22, 50, 83, and 84) which, for Miroshnikov, is indispensable in philosophically scrutinizing the Gospel of Thomas. He points to another Middle Platonic variation on Plato's philosophy: the image is not only understood as an imperfect copy of the *idea*, but is assumed as the *idea* itself – hence, two types of images, one mundane and the other divine. Accordingly, at least for Philo and Clement, the divine image is treated in the context of Genesis, following the biblical line that relates the creation of man according to God's image. From here, the author points out that saying 83 refers

⁸ George F. Calian, "Plato's Psychology of Action and the Origin of Agency," in *Affectivity, Agency and Intersubjectivity*, ed. Peter Sajda (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2012), 9–22.

⁹ Jackson, *The Lion Becomes Man*.

to our mundane situation, in which, even if visible images have divine light, their light cannot be seen. This light becomes visible only in the future, when humanity regains its initial divine light. For the author, the semantics of image alludes thus to three ontological stages: the beginning/the past, the fall/the present, and the end/the future. The book ends with three appendixes, which, even if they barely touch on the philosophical issues of Middle Platonism, are important philological contributions to Thomasine studies. It also contains an extensive bibliography (274-308), and a very useful Index of Ancient and Medieval Sources.

Overall, Miroshnikov's book manages to convincingly argue for the most important platonic tenants of the Gospel of Thomas, by showing irrefutable parallels that exist between some of the Thomasine sayings and Platonist philosophical ideas. The volume contributes to the still underdeveloped, but growing, field of studies on the philosophical influences on early Christian writings. After reading through the volume one is left with an impression of a Jesus who resembles more the figure of a Greek sage than that of a Jewish Rabbi, and, probably not by chance, one of the sayings that are mentioned records the answers given to Jesus' exhortation to the disciples: "Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like" (13.3); one of the answers he is given – and which might be less surprising after reading this volume – is that of Matthew: "You are like a wise philosopher."

I find Miroshnikov's work an overall argument that might settle the disputes around the time of the composition of the text. The Thomasine Jesus, as portrayed by the analyzed sayings, is evidently more universal, and not circumscribed to Israel's God alone. But if this Gospel were indeed a proto-Gospel, anterior to the canonical ones, as some argue, Christ should resemble more the figure of a Jewish teacher. A Jesus depicted as a Greek sage, on the other hand, would hint at a composition date of a later stage, when the Christian message was more exposed to Hellenistic influences. There remains, of course, the intriguing possibility that these sayings would be a later addition.