

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN THE GOSPEL  
ACCORDING TO THOMAS

The composition of pl. 81,14–18 and pl. 83,14–27

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The problems which the so-called *Gospel according to Thomas* has raised are numerous. There are the problems about authorship and date, about sources and composition, about the origin and use of the Gospel, about its interpretation and tendencies, etc.

The following is to be regarded as a contribution to the answer to the problem which the modern reader of *The Gospel according to Thomas* will often encounter: do we possess the text of the Gospel in its original form, or is it possible to trace the present composition of the text back to a more original form?

We will take one of the passages in the Gospel according to Thomas where this problem is raised as soon as we read it, and look at this text. One of these passages is pl. 81,14–18.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> = plate 81, lines 14–18, in the photographic edition of the papyrus: Coptic Gnostic Papyri in The Coptic Museum at Old Cairo by Dr. Pahor Labib, volume I, Cairo 1956. – In the different publications about *The Gospel according to Thomas*, varying numberings of “logia” are used. These varying numberings are due mainly to the different interpretations of the text. The division into “logia” is natural and useful when used in a full edition or translation, because it can show *how* the editor has read or understood the text, and it can be part of an editor’s interpretation of the text. The numbering of the “logia”, however, is less useful for references in general, because the system of numbering is not uniform. I therefore suggest that references to the text should be given according to plate and line in the photographic edition by Dr. Pahor Labib.

Pl. 81,14 . . . . ἀγχιότῃ ἡ̅σι̅ νε̅μα̅θη̅ς  
 15 πε̅χα̅ γ̅ κα̅ς̅ γε̅ κ̅'ο̅υ̅ω̅σ̅τ̅ρ̅ι̅ν̅ι̅σ̅τε̅ρ̅ε̅  
 16 ἀ̅γ̅ω̅ ε̅σ̅τ̅ε̅ θε̅ ε̅να̅ψ̅λ̅η̅λ̅ ε̅να̅ψ̅ ε̅λε̅  
 17 ἡ̅μο̅ς̅ ὑ̅μ̅ι̅ν̅ ἀ̅γ̅ω̅ ε̅να̅ρ̅π̅α̅ρ̅α̅τ̅η̅ρ̅ε̅ι̅ ε̅ο̅υ̅  
 18 ἡ̅σι̅ ο̅υ̅ω̅μ̅'̅ πε̅χε̅ ἰ̅ς̅ γε̅ ἁ̅π̅ρ̅χε̅ σο̅λ̅ ἀ̅γ̅  
 19 ω̅ πε̅τε̅τ̅ἁ̅μο̅σ̅τε̅ ἁ̅μο̅ς̅'̅ ἁ̅π̅ρ̅α̅α̅ς̅ γε̅  
 20 σε̅σο̅λ̅π̅'̅ τ̅η̅ρο̅υ̅ ε̅βο̅λ̅ ἁ̅π̅ε̅μ̅το̅ ε̅βο̅λ̅  
 21 ἡ̅τ̅η̅ς̅<sup>2</sup> μ̅ἦ̅ ἁ̅λ̅α̅α̅υ̅ τ̅α̅ρ̅ ε̅ς̅ρ̅η̅π̅'̅ ε̅ς̅μ̅α̅ο̅υ̅  
 22 ω̅κ̅ε̅ ε̅βο̅λ̅ ἀ̅κ̅ ἀ̅γ̅ω̅ μ̅ἦ̅ ἁ̅λ̅α̅α̅τ̅ ε̅ς̅ρ̅ο̅ῦ̅ς̅ ε̅γ̅  
 23 κα̅σω̅ ο̅υ̅ε̅σ̅ῃ̅ σο̅λ̅π̅'̅ς̅'

In translation:

Pl. 81,14 “. . . . His disciples (μαθητής) asked Him,  
 15 they said to Him: “Do you want us to fast (νηστεύειν)  
 16 and how shall we pray, shall we give alms (ἐλημοσύνη)  
 17 and what diet shall we observe (παρκατηρεῖν)?”  
 18 Jesus said: “Do not lie,  
 19 and do not do what you hate, for  
 20 all things are revealed before Heaven.<sup>2</sup>  
 21 For (γάρ) there is nothing hidden that shall not  
 22 be revealed and there is nothing covered that  
 23 shall remain without being uncovered.”

In pl. 81,14–18 we have four questions from the disciples and in the following pl. 81,18–23 a saying of Jesus. It is clear from the common use of questions and answers in the Gospel according to Thomas that the saying may be regarded as an answer to these four questions.<sup>3</sup> But when we regard the contents of the four questions and that of the answer, we must admit that the questions are very detailed whereas the answer is very general. The answer may be regarded as an exhortation to a life in truth and righteousness: when the questions are about details as fast, prayer, alms or diet, the answer is that the will of their master is more profound and far-reaching and that their lives must be lived in

<sup>2</sup> The parallel in Ox. Pap. 654,38 has [τ]ῆς ἀληθείας. The Coptic ἡ̅τ̅η̅ς̅, therefore, is perhaps to be read ἡ̅τ̅η̅ς̅.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. pl. 90,7–12, and pl. 90,12–18.

truth and love. It is possible with this interpretation to take the saying as an answer to the four questions, although we must add that only this interpretation makes it possible to regard the saying as an answer to the questions, since it is impossible in pl. 81,18-23, to find any direct answer to the questions which are asked in 81,14-18. This is easily seen when the two parts of the text are compared:

pl. 81,14-18

His disciples asked Him,  
they said to Him:

Do you want us to fast?  
and how shall we pray,  
shall we give alms?  
and what diet shall we  
observe?

pl. 81,18-23

Jesus said:

Do not lie,  
and do not do what you hate,  
for all things are revealed before  
Heaven. For there is nothing  
hidden that shall not be re-  
vealed and there is nothing  
covered that shall remain with-  
out being uncovered.

We might expect more detailed answers to four such detailed questions, or at least answers which had a bearing on the problems posed in the questions. Each question covers its part of the religious life and the *praxis pietatis* as

fast  
prayer  
alms  
diet.

It would not be surprising if, instead of the general exhortation to a life in truth and righteousness, we should in the following have found answers which, correspondingly, covered each its part of the religious life, so that the disciples would have been told if they had to fast, how they had to pray, if they had to give alms, and what kind of diet they had to observe.

We do, in fact, have such answers in the Gospel according to Thomas, not in the immediately following passage, but two pages

further on in the papyrus, namely pl. 83,14–27. Before looking at this part of the text we will end our comparison of the contents of pl. 81,14–18 and 81,18–23 with the conclusion that although, through a very free interpretation, it is possible to regard 81,18–23, as a general answer to the questions in 81,14–18, it is more natural to admit that the saying in 81,18–23, does not apply particularly well as an answer to the questions in 81,14–18, but that it is more natural to regard the saying as an exhortation which could be said without the preceeding questions.

As mentioned above, the Gospel according to Thomas does include a saying which gives the answers to the problems about fast, prayer, alms and diet, and we shall now consider this text, namely pl. 83,14–27.

The text runs as follows:

Pl. 83,14 ..... περθε  
 15 ις καυ θε ететїшанїрннстете тетна  
 16 жпо ннтї пноунобе аγω ететїшд  
 17 шднд' сенаркатакрне .м.мотї аγω  
 18 ететїшанѣ елен.мосунн етендеї  
 19 ре ппоунакон пнет.м.пнѣ аγω ететї  
 20 шанѣок' ероун екад нм аγω птет.м  
 21 мооше рї пхора еушарпарадехе  
 22 .м.мотї петотнакаасу заротї оуомѣ  
 23 петшоне прнтоу ертѣерапеге .мо  
 24 оу петнаѣок сар ероун рї тетнта  
 25 про снажωρμ тнγтї ан' алла петї  
 26 ннγ еѣол' рї тетїтапро птоу пе  
 27 тнажωρμ тнγтї .....

In translation:

Pl. 83,14 ..... Jesus said  
 15 to them: When you fast (νηστεύειν), you will  
 16 beget sin for yourselves, and when you  
 17 pray, you will be condemned (κατακρίνειν), and  
 18 when you give alms (ἐλεημοσύνη), you will do  
 19 evil (κακόν) to your spirits (πνεῦμα). And when you  
 20 go away into any land and

- 21 wander in the regions (χώρα) and they receive  
 (παραδέχασθαι)  
 22 you, eat what they set before you,  
 23 heal (θεραπεύειν) the sick among them.  
 24 For (γάρ) what goes into your mouth  
 25 will not defile you, but (ἀλλά) what  
 26 comes out of your mouth, that is what  
 27 will defile you.

In the present form of the Gospel according to Thomas, this saying is not designated as an answer. There is no preceeding "The disciples asked Him . . . .". The saying is a clear statement concerning four of the most important problems in the religious life of man at the time of the Gospel. But as the present composition of the Gospel according to Thomas stands, it is not an answer to any particular question, but a statement which is absolute and independent of the immediately preceeding part of the Gospel according to Thomas.

When, however, we look at the contents of this statement, we notice immediately, that not only does this statement deal with the same four problems as the four questions which were put forward two pages earlier, but also that the statement does in fact give an answer to each of the four questions in pl. 81,14–18, about *fast, prayer, alms and diet*. We also notice that these answers are given in the same order as that in which the questions were put, namely concerning

fast  
 prayer  
 alms  
 diet.

When we remember that the answers which were given in 81,18–23 did not, in fact, apply particularly well as answers to the questions in 81,14–18, and having now seen that the statement in pl. 83,14–27, gives an answer to each of the four questions in pl. 81,14–18, we come to the conclusion that the passage which we have in pl. 81,14–18, in a more original form of the text,

was followed by the passage, which in the present form of the manuscript is found in pl. 83,14-27.

How well the statement in pl. 83,14-27, applies to the text in 81,14-18, as answers to questions, is easy to see when we compare the two texts:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| 81,14-18                                   | 83,14-27  |
| His disciples asked Him, they said to Him: | Jesus said to them:   |
| Do you want us to fast?                    | When you fast,  |
| And how shall we pray?                     | you will beget sin for yourselves.  |
| Shall we give alms?                        | And when you pray,  |
| And what diet shall we observe?            | you will be condemned.  |
|  | And when you give alms, you will do evil to your spirits.   |
|  | And when you go away into any land and wander in the regions and they receive you, eat what they set before you, heal the sick among them. For what goes into your mouth will not defile you, but what comes out of your mouth, that will defile you . . .! |

The contents of the three passages, 81,14-18; 81,18-23; and 83,14-27, have thus given us the idea that, in a more original form, the text began with the questions (at present in 81,14-18) and then, as answers to these questions, followed *not* the words which are at present found in 81,18-23, but the words which are now found in 83,14-27.

The opening words of the passage in 83,14-27 are  $\pi\epsilon\chi\epsilon\ \bar{\iota}\bar{\varsigma}\ \kappa\alpha\upsilon\ \chi\epsilon$  (*Jesus said to them*:). The word  $\kappa\alpha\upsilon$  which is translated *to them* indicates the presence of some persons to whom Jesus could speak the words. This can be the situation which we have in Pl. 82,25 ff. where, in 82,25, we read:  $\pi\epsilon\chi\epsilon\ \bar{\alpha}\bar{\mu}\bar{\alpha}\theta\text{-}\eta\tau\eta\varsigma\ \bar{\eta}\ \bar{\iota}\bar{\varsigma}\ \chi\epsilon$  (*The disciples said to Jesus*), in 82,30-31:  $\pi\epsilon\chi\epsilon\ \bar{\iota}\bar{\varsigma}\ \mu\eta\epsilon\tau\bar{\epsilon}\bar{\rho}\mu\alpha\theta\eta\tau\eta\varsigma\ \chi\epsilon$  (*Jesus said to His disciples*), in 82,32-33:  $\pi\epsilon\chi\alpha\varsigma\ \kappa\alpha\varsigma\ \bar{\eta}\bar{\sigma}\bar{\iota}\ \sigma\bar{\iota}\mu\omega\bar{\nu}\ \pi\epsilon\tau\bar{\rho}\varsigma\ \chi\epsilon$  (*Simon Peter said to Him*),

in 82,34–83,1:  $\pi\epsilon\chi\alpha\varsigma \pi\alpha\upsilon \bar{\iota}\sigma\iota \mu\alpha\theta\epsilon\delta\iota\omicron\varsigma \kappa\epsilon$  (*Matthew said to Him*), in 83,10–11:  $\pi\epsilon\chi\alpha\varsigma \kappa\alpha\gamma \bar{\iota}\sigma\iota \theta\omega\mu\alpha\varsigma$  (*Thomas said to them*). In this series of  $\pi\epsilon\chi\alpha\varsigma \kappa\alpha\gamma . . .$  or  $\pi\epsilon\chi\alpha\varsigma \kappa\alpha\varsigma$ , the  $\pi\epsilon\chi\epsilon \bar{\iota}\sigma\iota \kappa\alpha\gamma \kappa\epsilon$  could fit very well, but, on the other hand, if we place the text now in 83,14–27, as immediately following the questions of the disciples in 81,14–18, we see that the opening words of the answer  $\pi\epsilon\chi\epsilon \bar{\iota}\sigma\iota \kappa\alpha\gamma \kappa\epsilon$  fit in very well with the opening words of the questions  $\lambda\gamma\chi\iota\sigma\tau\upsilon\varsigma \bar{\iota}\sigma\iota \kappa\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha\theta\epsilon\eta\tau\iota\varsigma$ . There the disciples ask Jesus, and then the  $\kappa\alpha\gamma$  (*to them*) in  $\pi\epsilon\chi\epsilon \bar{\iota}\sigma\iota \kappa\alpha\gamma \kappa\epsilon$  signifies the disciples. Thus, if we place the text which is found in pl. 83,14–27, immediately after the text in 81,14–18, we have a clear correspondence in the contents of the two texts as well as a clear agreement between the opening words of the two texts.

Thus we have good reasons to suppose that the texts now found in 81,14–18 and in 83,14–27 have been a connected whole in a more original form of the so-called Gospel according to Thomas or of a source prior to it.

The questions will then naturally be: *why* was the order changed, and *when* did the change occur? I hope to treat the first of these questions together with other problems of the same kind elsewhere. Here it must be enough to deal briefly with the second question: when was the order of the text changed to its present sequence? With our present sources we can only say that already the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 654 has had the same composition as our version of the Gospel according to Thomas in this place. The Ox. pap. 654 is very fragmentary at the end, but it is clear that in lines 32–39 this Greek papyrus has had a parallel to the text in the Coptic papyrus pl. 81,14–23. The parallel to the Coptic text 81,14–18 has constituted the questions in the Greek 1. 32–36, and the following in the Greek text 1. 36–39 a parallel to the Coptic 81,18–23, and not to the text in the Coptic MS. pl. 83,14–27. Thus the present order in the Coptic text has existed already in the Greek text found in Ox. pap. 654, which is commonly dated to the third century.