

Jesus in Johannine Tradition

Edited by  
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## John Rivals Thomas

*From Community Conflict to Gospel Narrative*

APRIL D. DECONICK

This article is not the first attempt to discuss the relationship between the Gospels of John and Thomas. There is already a formidable amount of literature on the subject, most of which tries to establish direct literary dependence between the two books or the use of common sources (see DeConick 2001). The present essay, however, will explore the connection between these two texts on the community level rather than the source level. The Fourth Gospel (FG) and the Gospel of Thomas (Gos. Thom.), like other religious texts, address the particular needs of their respective communities and express special theological and soteriological positions. As community documents, each has its own *Sitz im Leben*: its own geographical location, its own community history, and its own religious traditions. Moreover, like other religious texts, both were written with the express purposes of polemicizing, persuading, and propagating a particular belief system.

### **Traditio-rhetorical Criticism: A Method for Studying Traditions**

To approach this topic, I will appeal to a theoretical model which I call "traditio-rhetorical criticism," a model that defines the territory that allows us to examine the relationship between texts on the community level. It is a historical-critical approach to literature that focuses on reconstructing the exchange

and modification of religious traditions as they were discussed, evaluated, and textualized by the communities that used them.

The hyphenated prefix "traditio-" refers to the traditions that express the self-understanding of a community of people: their sense of the past, their system of religious belief, and their manner of conduct. These traditions are transmitted from generation to generation in the form of stories, sayings, myths, creeds, liturgical statements, and hymns. At certain moments in the history of the community, their traditions may be textualized, moving this material from an oral environment to a written one. This process solidifies the community's traditions at a historical moment, which means that the written texts will reflect one particular stage in the development of the community's overall ideology. The suffix "rhetorical" defines the way in which the language of the text creates and communicates this traditional ideology. As Robbins has noted, the term "ideology" "concerns people's relationship to other people. But, ideology does not just concern people; it concerns the discourse of people" (Robbins 1996, 110). Taken together, traditio-rhetorical criticism is a hermeneutic that seeks to understand the discourse that elicited both the creation and modification of a tradition and also the textualization of that tradition as a new ideology. It attempts to understand the ways in which a particular author developed a particular ideology through dialogue with other ideological positions, how a community's traditions were modified by this dialogue, and how the extant texts reflect this process. In terms of early Jesus traditions, it seeks to identify conflicts between Christian communities and the textualization of these conflicts as gospel narratives.

Three horizons or contexts are defined in the traditio-rhetorical model: the "religio-historical context," which is the general religious environment in which the author and his community lived; and the author's and the opponent's "traditio-religious contexts," the Christian heritages of the communities engaged in discourse with one another. For example, in a study of the Johannine tradition, one might consider a) the broad religious environment of the Greco-Roman world in which the Johannine Community lived; b) the specific heritage and faith traditions of the Fourth Evangelist (FE); and c) the specific heritage and faith traditions of FE's opponents, for example, the "Antichrists" of 1 John 2:18-19. These three horizons meet at the "point of discourse," the problem that occupies the center of the dialogue between the two communities. The actual point of discourse may not be explicitly stated in the extant texts, since it is often articulated on a symbolic level. In other words, the author of a text may choose to address issues in the conflict with her opponents indirectly, without specifically naming the opponents or the issues themselves. This means that features of the intercommunity dialogue may appear in the text as symbolic acts and events.

The individual author's response to this intercommunity dialogue can be varied. In writing a text, an author might choose to ignore or condemn her opponent's position while defending her own ideology, or might simply build a case to maintain the status quo. The author might also try to conceal material that would support the opponent's position. The author might attempt to reinterpret her previous position and construct a synthetic endpoint, a newly fashioned ideology that brings some resolution to the conflict. As will be seen, in the case of FG the last option seems to have been adopted: some of the peculiar features of FE's ideology seem to have developed in reaction to an opposing ideology that must have been similar to that promoted by the author of the Gospel of Thomas.

Actual conflicts between religious communities of the past were often fictionalized and recorded as dramas rather than related in terms of verbatim dialogue. This means that stories of conflict in the gospels can be viewed as dramas created to represent and record actual dialogue between later religious communities. The record of an intercommunity dialogue may therefore appear in the form of a hidden rather than an open controversy, in which case the author will not explicitly mention his ideological rival (Hirshman 1996, 126). Given this situation, we must examine religious texts thoughtfully, recognizing that some portions may contain valuable information for understanding the development of the author's theology in relation to other contemporary religious texts. In other words, the characters and situations in the texts may reflect events from the author's own experience of ideological conflict rather than actual "historical" events involving those characters.

### John and Thomas: A Mystical Conflict

Elsewhere I have argued at length that the Gospel of Thomas contains logia that reflect a knowledge of Jewish mystical traditions, especially sayings 15, 27, 37, 50, 59, 83, and 84 (see DeConick 1996; DeConick and Fossum 1991). The presence of these sayings suggests that the community that produced Thomas advocated a mystical experience of God. This belief is most evident in statements such as Gospel of Thomas 59, in which Jesus specifically commands the reader to seek a vision of God: "*Look for the Living One while you are alive, lest you die and seek to see him and you will be unable to see [him]*" (my translation and italics). The vision quest promoted by this saying is a premortem one, an experience that may anticipate death or an eschatological journey but which must be achieved in the believer's lifetime.

What happens to the believer during these premortem spiritual journeys? The answer appears in various forms in the Jewish mystical texts. She ascends

through layers of heaven, encountering angelic guards along the way who interrogate the soul (cf. Ascen. Isaiah 10:28–29; Apoc. Ab. 13:6; 3 En. 2, 4, 5). Because these angels were believed to administer life-or-death tests to the seeker, she needed to memorize passwords and hymns in order to appease the guards and ensure her unencumbered journey to God's throne (Apoc. Ab. 17–18; *Hekhalot Rabbati* 1:1; 2:5–5:3; 16:4–25:6). Such beliefs set the broader religious context against which the sort of questions and answers found in Gospel of Thomas 50 should be understood (“If they say to you, ‘Where have you come from?’ say to them. . . . If they say to you, ‘Is it you?’ say. . . . If they ask you, ‘What is the evidence?’ . . . say. . . .”). Sayings of this kind most likely represent the fragments of Christian ascent lore, in which Jesus instructs the believer regarding her anticipated interrogation during the heavenly journey. The etiquette for these ecstatic visionary experiences is found in Gospel of Thomas 15: “When you see the one who was not born of woman, prostrate yourselves on your faces and worship him. That one is your Father.” Such advice is consistent with the Jewish mystical portrayals of the divine throne room, in which God's manifestation or *kavod* is often depicted as seated on a throne in the midst of an entourage of angels. It is common in such literature to find descriptions of the mystic entering the throne room and prostrating himself before the divine King (cf. 1 En. 14:24; 2 En. 22:4).

The Thomasites lived a severely ascetic lifestyle in preparation for this ecstatic encounter, repudiating the body so that the spirit could ascend to God. In order to receive a vision, one had to purify oneself by withdrawing from the world and by observing the sanctity of the Sabbath: “If you do not fast from the world, you will not find the Kingdom. If you do not observe the Sabbath as Sabbath, you will not see the Father” (Gos. Thom. 27; see DeConick 1996, 126–143). According to logion 37, a vision of Jesus cannot happen until the believer has stripped off her human body and “tread upon it,” thereby renouncing it (DeConick and Fossum 1991, 123–150). The Thomasites believed that the mystical ascent and vision of God was a transformational experience. Note, for example, Gospel of Thomas 108: “Jesus said, ‘Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to him’” (see also 19b, 22, 84).

Paradoxically, FG is sometimes characterized as the “mystical” gospel in the New Testament, yet it clearly condemns the Thomasine notions of heavenly ascent and celestial vision (John 1:18; 3:13; 5:37; and 6:46). In fact, FG includes several statements in which Jesus explicitly proclaims that his disciples will *not* be able to follow him to “the place where I am going,” heaven (7:33–34; 8:21; 13:33; 13:36). These sayings climax in John 14, where Jesus explains that he is leaving to “prepare a place for you”; only then will he “come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (14:3). Yet

remarkably, while on the one hand FE carefully crafts a polemic against pre-mortem mystical ascent and vision, on the other hand he frequently appropriates Jewish mystical concepts into his own ideology (Dunn 1983; Kanagaraj 1998). He seems particularly well versed in the mystical concepts of heavenly ascent and the *kavod*, the enthroned manifestation of God that often bears God's divine name (cf. 1:1–18; 1:51; 2:11; 11:40; 12:23, 28; 13:32; 17:4, 15, 20–26). This paradox suggests that the Fourth Evangelist was in some way connected with Jewish mysticism: we may say that this was one of his religio-historical horizons. At the same time, he appears to have been aware that other Christian groups had appropriated Jewish mystical traditions into their ideologies to construct their views of Jesus and discipleship.

FE, however, could not accept the position of those who advocated a pre-mortem ascent and visionary experience of Jesus as the heavenly Glory. This conflict is reflected in the narrative of FG in two ways: in FE's emphasis that the character Thomas misunderstands Jesus; and in FE's attempt to characterize the Thomasine view of soteriology as a competing traditio-religious horizon that must be corrected (DeConick 1997, 2001). According to John, the disciple Thomas misunderstands Christian soteriology, believing that it is necessary for one to seek the “way” to Jesus as a path of ascent to heaven (John 14:3–7) and a vision of Jesus (20:24–29; cf. 14:20–23). FE's criticism of Thomas specifically among the disciples is probably not arbitrary given the fact that the Gospel of Thomas promotes a type of vision mysticism. Following the tenets of traditio-rhetorical criticism outlined above, it is likely that FE's stories about Thomas are dramatizations of an actual dialogue in which the Johannine Community was engaged with the Thomasine group. The point of discourse seems to have been whether or not the ascent and visionary experiences were salvific or even necessary for Christians. From the Johannine perspective, the answer to both of these questions was “No.”

### The Johannine Response: Constructing a Synthetic Endpoint

As noted earlier, in some instances the author of a religious text responds to conflict by modifying a previously held position and then constructing a synthetic endpoint that represents her revised position. In the present case, FE's conflict with the Thomasine perspective has forced him to revise and reconstruct his own theory of mystical experience. In so doing, he creates a new theology. But what can we discover from the Fourth Gospel about FE's new theology, his interpretive trajectory? First, he argues that faith replaces vision as the vehicle of transformation: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet

believe" (John 20:29). In this way he salvages the basic underpinnings of vision mysticism but also transfigures them into something of value for his community: a salvific mystical experience centered on faith rather than ecstatic vision. Second, FE retains elements of the visionary experience but limits this experience to a special moment in history, the moment when Jesus as the preexistent Glory descended to earth and was witnessed by human beings. This ideological synthesis has in turn had a significant impact on FE's presentation of Christ.

#### Pretemporal Existence of Jesus

In the Prologue, FE stresses not only that Jesus was "with God" prior to his incarnation (John 1:1) but also that Jesus "has seen God" while he was with the Father in heaven (1:18). Hence, "no one has ever seen God" except the Son who was in "the bosom of the Father" (1:18; 5:37; 6:46). It appears that here FE is articulating his own christological views while distancing himself from the ideology of his broader religio-historical horizon. He writes of a pre-existent Logos figure who cohabited with God and was given the sole visionary experience of that God. This pretemporal visionary experience makes this entity, Jesus, special. Jesus is not only the only one who has truly seen and known the Father (1:18); he also participates in and embodies the deity: "the Word was God" (1:1).

#### Jesus as the Historical Manifestation of Divine Glory

Once the Logos has descended from heaven (John 3:13; 3:31-32; 7:29; 8:23; 17:5) and "tabernacled" with humans (1:14), he, as Jesus, can claim that "the Father and I are one" (10:30) and can urge people to "believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me" (14:11). As the *kavod*, the divine Glory, he has been given God's name and thus is one with God (17:11; see Fossum 1995). Such statements reveal FE's strategy for creating theological synthesis in the wake of his conflict with Thomasine mysticism. In FG, the Jewish mystical traditions about the Glory enthroned in heaven have been merged with traditions about the historical manifestation of Jesus. The Johannine usage of *doxa* ("glory") is notable here. The glory of Jesus is visible in his person (1:14), his signs (2:11; 11:40; 17:4), and his crucifixion (12:23, 28; 13:32; 17:1, 5). In 1:14, for instance, FE claims that "we have seen his Glory, the Glory as of the only-begotten from the Father." Clearly here the mystical background of the term "glory" has been historicized by connecting it to the historical Jesus, who is the visible manifestation of God (1:18). FE elsewhere further implies that Isa-

One of the best-known passages in FG claims that God sent his son to earth out of love, so that the world might be saved through encountering him (John 3:16-17). This theme is expanded in 17:20-26, where Jesus is identified with the Glory who has been sent to earth out of God's love. By seeing Jesus the Glory, the disciples will experience a mystic union with the Father through him, because the Glory is the Father (17:21). This Glory or divine essence can then be transferred to the disciples: "The Glory which you have given to me, I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one" (17:22-23). Such a transformation is possible through the mechanism of the visionary experience. Thus Jesus prays for the disciples "to see my Glory which you [the Father] have given to me in your love for me before the foundation of the world" (17:24). As God's Glory, the human Jesus makes the Father known to the world and makes available the opportunity for union with him (17:25-26).

In the Johannine tradition the deity has been manifested historically. Ascent to heaven and visions of God are unnecessary for personal transformation and the achievement of life, because the divinity has come to earth and has brought this mystic experience with him. FE emphasizes that the vision of Jesus on earth substitutes for the vision of the Father in heaven (John 14:9), and that those who see Jesus shall live (14:19). This revelation of Glory was completely achieved at Golgotha (12:32). FE thereby challenges the Thomasine interest in flights to heaven by insisting that such mystical experiences can only be achieved in the historical encounter with Jesus.

#### The Absence of Jesus and the Continuing Vision

FE's theological synthesis of tradition and Glory was functional for those who actually witnessed Jesus while he walked on earth. But if God's Glory was manifested in the historical Jesus, how could those who did not see Jesus gain the divine vision and, thereby, eternal life? FE develops several themes in response to this question.

First, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, replaces Jesus in his absence (John 14:17; 14:22-26; 15:26; 16:7, 16; see Draper 1992, 14). Although the experience of the Spirit is not a theophany per se (it cannot be because the Spirit does not have a visible form), the community will "know" him nonetheless. The Paraclete will be manifested as the divine love of Jesus for his followers, a love that is mutually shared between the members of the Johannine Community. Furthermore, the true disciples of Jesus will be identified by this mutual love: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34-35). This means that the fulfillment of Jesus' command to love is the visible evidence that Jesus as the Paraclete dwells within the Johan-

able to "see" Jesus, they will be able to "know" him as the Paraclete, who will mediate God to them. Visionary ascents are not necessary because the Paraclete has come down to earth in Jesus' absence.

Second, FE responds to the problem of Jesus' absence by repetitively linking the concept of faith in Jesus to the visionary experience. In this way he communicates with his broader religio-historical horizon by preserving the trappings of vision mysticism while simultaneously distancing himself from this horizon by transforming the visionary experience into a faith experience. Faith and vision thereby become correlative concepts: vision accomplishes nothing unless accompanied by belief. It is therefore possible to eat miraculous bread yet not "see signs" of divine glory (John 6:26; see also 1:34, 45-51; 6:36, 40; 11:40; 19:35). In some instances the faith experience entirely displaces the visionary experience. Noteworthy is the allusion to the story of the serpent in the wilderness at John 3:14-15. According to Numbers 21:8, those who *look* will live: Moses is instructed by God to "make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." In FG the image has shifted: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever *believes in* him may have eternal life" (my italics). By making such an alteration, FE suggests that faith has replaced vision. Similarly, in the climactic story about Thomas in John 20, Jesus blesses those who believe without having seen (20:29). Before the redactional addition of chapter 21, FG ended with the statement "and that [by] believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). According to FE, then, the person of faith need not worry about achieving the sort of mystical visions advocated in the Gospel of Thomas.

Finally, the faith mysticism FE develops to accommodate the absence of Jesus from the community has influenced his presentation of the sacraments. I support the position that the encounter with the Spirit, according to the Gospel of John, is available through the sacramental experience, initially through baptism and continually through the Eucharist. In John 3:5, Jesus speaks of being reborn "of water and spirit" in order to enter the Kingdom of God. There must be a baptismal reference behind this statement, for the Nicodemus dialogue is immediately followed by a story that discusses the baptismal activities of Jesus and John the Baptist (3:22-36). It is plausible that 3:5 reflects the idea that the baptismal experience brings the initiate into the presence of the Spirit. This experience is one of birth into the sacred: "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:6ff.). The heavenly mystical encounter has been brought to earth first through Jesus' descent and historical presence, and then for believers after his ascent through the sacramental encounter with the Spirit. Thus Jesus stresses to Nicodemus that only the Son of Man has descended from and ascended into heaven (3:13) so that eternal life can be

given to the believer (3:15). Through baptism, Jesus as Spirit becomes present to the faithful.

This initial encounter with the divine presence is perpetuated by participating in the Eucharist meal. In John 6, Eucharistic references are behind Jesus' claim to be the "bread of life" who has "come down from heaven" (6:35, 41, 51). This bread is his "flesh" and if the faithful consume it, they will live forever (6:51). The reference is then expanded to include Jesus' blood, which must be drunk by the faithful in order to obtain life everlasting (6:53-55). Participation in this ritual brings about a mystical encounter with Jesus and eternal life because the incorporation of the sacred food allows the believer also to incorporate the person of Jesus: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (6:56). FE makes clear that Jesus is not speaking of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of his historical body but of an action made effective through the presence of Jesus' Spirit in the elements (6:63). Thus the faithful can encounter Jesus through their participation in the Eucharist even though Jesus is no longer physically alive.

In conclusion, it appears that ascent and vision mysticism was a popular soteriological scheme in the late first century. The mystical approach was apparently advocated by that community out of which the Gospel of Thomas grew. The Fourth Evangelist shows an awareness of the Thomasine position (whether or not he was actually aware of Thomas or the Thomasine Community) and polemicizes against it. This polemic was achieved by altering and expanding the Jesus traditions from FE's own community in response to the type of soteriology represented in the Gospel of Thomas. In so doing, FE creates a new understanding of salvation that may be called "faith mysticism," and he develops a new Christology in which Jesus is seen as the earthly *kavod*, the manifestation of God's Glory in history.