“WHO WILL BE OUR LEADER?” AUTHORITY AND AUTONOMY IN THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

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A feature that has often invited comments in Thomasine scholarship is the juxtaposition of sayings on James’ leadership in Gos. Thom. 12 and on Thomas’ “wordless confession” in Gos. Thom. 13:

The disciples said to Jesus, “We know that you are going to leave us. Who will be our leader?” 2 Jesus said to them, “No matter where you are, you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.” (Gos. Thom. 12)

Jesus said to his disciples, “Compare me to something and tell what I am like.” 2 Simon Peter said to him, “You are like a righteous messenger.” 3 Matthew said to him, “You are like a wise philosopher.” 4 Thomas said to him, “Master, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like.” 5 Jesus said, “I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended.” 6

And he took him, and withdrew, and told him three things. 7 When Thomas came back to his friends, they asked him, “What did Jesus say to you?” 8 Thomas said to them: “If I tell you one of the things he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me, and fire will come from the rocks and devour you.” (Gos. Thom. 13)

The appearance of the two figures is indeed striking. James and Thomas are elevated in two sayings which follow each other, but the question of how exactly the authority of these figures should be related does not receive any explanation and is left for the reader to decide. According to one influential interpretation, Thomas’ special position in saying 13 serves as something of a corrective to the claim about James’ leadership in the previous saying. 2 This, however, opens

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1 Transl. modified from R.J. Miller (ed.), The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version (Revised and expanded edition; San Francisco: Harper, 1994), which is the basic English translation of the Gospel of Thomas used in this article.

2 H. Koester has argued in several publications that in Gos. Thom. 13 James’ authority is “surpassed” or “superseded” by that of Thomas; see “GNOMAI
up a number of further questions. Why is James’ authority retained in the first place, if Thomas’ position as the recipient of the special revelation and the guarantor of the gospel tradition (cf. prologue) supersedes that of James? Is *Gos. Thom.* 12 a fossilized remnant of an earlier phase of the tradition, which still appealed to the authority of James? Or is the cluster of sayings 12 and 13 an example of a subtle irony used by the author of the gospel to undermine the “ecclesiastical” authority represented by James? Or should James’ and Thomas’ positions be regarded as parallel or supplementary rather than competing ones?

1. *Apostles as Symbols*

A common presupposition behind many interpretations of *Gos. Thom.* 12–13 is that they take the figures of James and Thomas in the text as representatives of specific groups or traditions in early Christianity.  

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7 These alternatives are not of course exclusive since group-identity must have been heavily dependent on the idea of a common tradition.