CHAPTER 10

The Religious Outlook of *Thomas*¹

A central problem for scholarship on *Thomas* has been to identify its theology or religious outlook. This question has elicited a number of answers, in part because of *Thomas's* enigmatic content, its form and its brevity. As Schröter has remarked, *Thomas* has been taken variously to be a document of Gnosticism, or of Jewish-Christian encratism, or of wisdom theology, or as an expression of social radicalism.² Others have summarised *Thomas* as focused upon ‘unitive mysticism’,³ or as a Valentinian product,⁴ or as ‘an “orthodox” text from early Syrian Christianity’.⁵ Scholars have often attempted to align *Thomas* with a particular school of thought, and have aimed to fill in the gaps with the help of literature from that school. The difficulty, however, is that *Thomas* does not fit neatly (or even approximately) into any previously known *hairesis*. It is therefore important, at least in the first instance, to look at *Thomas* as far as possible on its own terms, even if there are limits to this, as Uro rightly notes.⁶

The aim here is to identify, if not a tidy theology, then at least *Thomas’s* central

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concerns as well as its more ambiguously articulated themes. The rough sketch here is of course dependent upon various points of interpretation argued for in the commentary below.

10.1 Theological Framework

*Thomas’s* theology is fundamentally a soteriology: ‘Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death’ (GTh 1). It is not primarily about common wisdom, as alleged both by some members of the Jesus Seminar, as well as by one of their staunchest critics.⁷ For *Thomas*, the souls of the elect had their origins in the realm of light, the kingdom of the Father (GTh 49–50). *Thomas* provides instruction in how to return to that kingdom of the Father.

**The Father**

The Father is in one respect a prominent figure in *Thomas*, being mentioned 21 times.⁸ On the other hand, it is striking that he is hardly a *character* at all; he is not identified as an agent in any significant way, in contrast to Jesus. The most that can probably be said is that he is characterised by ‘motion and rest’ like the elect (GTh 50), as well as having an ‘image of light’ in GTh 83. He evidently has a ‘will’ (99), and of course a Son (GTh 61; 64; 99), but especially a kingdom (GTh 57; 76; 96–99; 113).

**The Kingdom**

Although the Synoptics talk of the kingdom as ‘prepared’ (Mk 10.40; Matt. 25.34; cf. Mk 10.40; Matt. 20.23), *Thomas* goes further, envisaging the kingdom as a pre-existent, paradisal realm of light.⁹ It is certainly not a geographical location.

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⁷ See e.g. H. Taussig, ‘The Gospel of Thomas and the Case for Jesus the Teacher of Common Wisdom’, *Forum* 10 (1994), 31–46, and on the other hand Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus*, 29: ‘the main difference is that, whereas the canonical gospels are *news*, “Thomas” and the others are *advice*’ (although Wright is correct that *Thomas* is not principally concerned with events).

⁸ Including GTh 101, but excluding 105.