THOMAS-GOSPEL AND THOMAS-COMMUNITY:
A NEW APPROACH TO A FAMILIAR TEXT

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While the Gospel according to Thomas has been the object of much scholarly attention, calling forth a wealth of secondary literature and exciting numerous controversies, it still remains a puzzle in many ways. Major strides have been made in placing the text in time and space ¹), and much has been done by way of tracing the origins of many of the sayings ²). Redactional criticism


²) Most importantly, see Quispel, Makarius, Das Thomas-evangelium und das Lied von der Perle, op. cit.; Oscar Cullmann, "The Gospel of Thomas
has helped to establish the relations among the four different versions of Thomas that have come down to us 3), and to a certain extent, the central ideology has been laid bare 4).

What does seem to be lacking, though, is a sense of the way in which this text was used and the intentions of those who composed it. Perhaps this question has seldom even been raised, due to the very nature of Thomas. Its 114 Sayings show little in the way of structure, continuity, or internal coherence. The disparity or heterogeneity of the contents has often been noted, and this has led some to abandon any hope of understanding it as a unified document 5). Others have tried to establish a doctrinal background for the Gospel, usually by comparing its tenets to those of groups already known from other sources. Thus, some have seen it as Gnostic 6), some Encratite 7), and some Jewish-Christian 8). Each


7) Thus Quispel, in all the publications cited above; Dom Aelred Baker, “Pseudo-Macarius and the Gospel of Thomas”, Vigiliae Christianae, 18