A COMPLEX OF PARABLES: GTh 96-98

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Towards the end of the Gospel of Thomas cluster three parables of the Kingdom of the Father. Scholars have considered GTh 96-98 as authentic: Davies states that all agree that 96 derives ultimately from Jesus and probably 97 and 98 as well.¹ Higgins² and Stead³ find no difficulty with 97 although Stead wavers on 98 in contrast to Hunzinger who strongly claims 98 as authentic.⁴ Recently Craig Blomberg argued that 96 is post-synoptic, but that 97 and 98 "lay as much claim to authenticity as any of Thomas’ logia, although they too may have been retouched slightly by Gnostic redaction".⁵ As even this quick overview shows, the primary concern in looking at the parables in Thomas has been to investigate their authenticity, to see whether they are pre- or post-synoptic, whether they preserve an independent tradition or not. The parables have attracted little literary attention and almost no effort has been made to read them in and of themselves.⁶

⁶ Marcello Craveri (I Vangeli Apocrifi [Torino: G. Einaudi, 1969] 501 n. 4) makes one connexion between GTh 96 and 97: "La parabola, che manca nei sinottici, forse vuol alludere alla potenza estensiva del Regno (si diffonde insensibilmente come la farina perduta lungo la via dalla donna), mentre quella precedente ne indicava la potenza intensiva (un pizzico di lievito che fa crescere la farina)." Such an interpretation of GTh 97 has nothing to do with the narrative line which concentrates on the woman's awareness. A. Lindemann ("Zur
Jesus [said]: The Kingdom of the Father is like a woman, she took a little leaven, [she hid] it in the dough, she made big loaves. He who has ears, let him hear.

The first parable is similar to Mt 13:33/Lk 13:20-21 yet there are striking differences. In the Synoptics, the emphasis is on the role of the leaven: the kingdom is like leaven. The action of the woman is described by a participle and a verb—labousa enekrupsen "taking she hid," and the parable quickly moves to the emphatic ending that the whole was leavened. The thrust of the parable is on the unseen, hidden yet indispensable role of leaven. The unseen action of the leaven is juxtaposed to the mysterious advent of God's reign. In Thomas' version, the emphasis is on the woman: the Kingdom of the Father is like a woman. Even with all methodological caution against comparing unilaterally the Kingdom with the first character of a parable rather than with the whole parable, this first juxtaposition as used in a patriarchal society alerts the reader to be on the look-out for further incongruities. In contrast to the synoptics, the woman is the subject of three verbs—she took, she hid, she made. The woman is the predominant actor, not the yeast. One cannot dismiss this "change" as a mere "transmission-variant" as McL. Wilson does—it is a significant variation in emphasis. The contrast of little leaven-big loaves resonates with other small/big contrasts in Thomas: 8—small fish, large fish; 20—small mustard-seed/large branches; 107—the 99 sheep, the largest sheep, but as used in this parable it highlights the ability of the cook who knows how to make bread properly. The emphasis in Thomas' telling is on the practical know-how of the good baker.

Gleichnisinterpretation im Thomas-Evangelion ZNW 71 [1980] 214-243) treats each separately and is mainly concerned not with their literary aspects but with showing that they are gnostic in theology. The same is true of the treatment by L. CerfauX ("Les Paraboles du Royaume dans l'Evangile de Thomas" Le Muséon 70 (1957) 307-327).

