MIRRORS, NOT WINDOWS:
SEMIOTIC APPROACHES TO THE GOSPELS

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Review article

"New Testament studies are in danger of forfeiting their place in the academy by failure to keep up with current discourse about religion" (Burton Mack: in Kloppenborg/Vaage 1992 p. 37).


GERD THEISSEN, The Gospels in Context. Social and Political History in the
Progress in academic studies depends on identifying and solving problems not only on purely theoretical considerations. If new data or aspects require scholars to revise their scientific tools will methodology itself merit scholarly reflection. This at least was the view put forward by Max Weber.¹ In the present situation it is worthwhile recalling his opinion. Issues of theory and method are currently highly valued in religious studies. But there is an inclination to deal with them regardless of their benefit for historical and anthropological investigations. Therefore we should carefully pay attention to cases in which problems of understanding and explaining religions force a revision upon scholars.

That the study of early Christianity could stimulate this revision will meet with surprise—certainly among European historians of religion. Many of them have removed Christianity from their primary concern and regard it more or less as an exterritorial area. They do not expect methodological or theoretical progress by studying the Christian religion. But an exciting discovery and a shift in the dominant point of view in the study of the Gospels contradict this expectation. Today scholars of the New Testament have placed questions of method high on their agenda. If students of religion listen to them they will find themselves involved in reflections relevant also for their discipline.

The discovery of a new Gospel

Theology and ethics were diverse already in the very early history of Christianity, as Walter Bauer had amply demonstrated 60 years ago. The findings of old Christian texts in Nag Hammadi and elsewhere have justified his view. In 1945 a whole library with thirteen codices containing 52 tractates was found near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. The codices had been concealed there in the fourth century A.D.² Among the tractates a Gospel of Thomas was found: a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus. Its existence in earlier times is assured by fragments of the text on papyri of the 2./3. century A.D. and by quotations of the church fathers Hippolytos, Origenes und Eusebius. After the discovery the entire book was available, though in a Coptic translation from a Greek original.

In 1964 James Robinson compared this Gospel of Thomas with the Sayings Source called Q that Matthew and Luke had used together with Mark when writing their own Gospels. He discovered that both belonged to the same literary genre.³ Sayings of the Lord (logia kuriou) were mentioned by Papias (Eusebius, historia ecclesiae II 39,1) as a tradition of its