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April 22, 2004
RELI E-1426: Apocryphal Jesus & Noncanonical Apostles

The Gospel of Thomas Logion 75: Exhortation or Metaphor?

*Jesus said, "There are many standing at the door, but
those who are alone will enter the bridal suite."
- Gospel of Thomas, Logion 75*

Unlike most other gospels, both canonical and noncanonical, the Gospel of Thomas has no narrative. It consists simply of a series of statements attributed to Jesus. Many of these seem cryptic, not unlike a Zen koan; they can be interpreted in many different ways. One particularly enigmatic saying, or logion, is the 75th. It is only one short sentence, and yet scholars have been engaged in a vociferous debate for over forty years about what it means. Some argue that it is a blunt prohibition against marriage, stating that those who marry will not achieve salvation. Yet another group agrees with the philosophical interpretation of the first group of scholars, but feel the reference to the bridal chamber was not just a prohibition, but actually referred to a chaste ritual that took place in which celibates were brought closer to Jesus. Another party of scholars believes that the bridal suite is shorthand for a ritual that utilized sexual intercourse to bring believers closer to Jesus. Many other scholars view the bridal suite as a metaphor, but even within this school of thought, there is significant disagreement as to what the bridal suite would be a metaphor for. Some see the bridal suite as a metaphor for salvation, while others view the sentence as a further extension of the philosophy of solitude as a path to salvation that is expressed throughout the *Gospel of Thomas*, and still others think the phrase refers to an attempt to return to a sexless, androgynous state such as Adam had

before Eve was created. Some of these metaphorical interpretations, in turn, link in to the concept of an actual ritual performed in a bridal chamber. Many of these views on the *Gospel of Thomas* have been affected by other texts that have become available over the past 40 years, and the texts that writers use as a window onto *Thomas* have a great influence on how they interpret Logion 75. Interpretations such as these are extremely important in order to develop a history of early Christianity. The *Gospel of Thomas* is referred to and debated by Christians of the second and third centuries, and it was lovingly, carefully preserved in a jar with many other texts toward the end of the fourth century, so it is apparent they were vitally important to a group of early Christians. Unfortunately, despite our knowledge of their existence, it is not clear what the interpretation of the document was, or how it was used; contemporary texts from outside the group of worshippers who may have used this document do not necessarily paint an objective picture of the sect. Our understanding of this document, and of the group who considered it most important, will help us understand why it fell out of favor and was rejected from the canonical Gospels. A detailed overview of the varying interpretations of this logion, as well as an assessment of where the debate stands today, seems to be in order.

In 1961, Bertil Gärtner wrote,

“The negative attitude to the world often focuses in Gnostic circles – as well as in many others – on marriage and the sexual life...The same point of view...holds good for the *Gospel of Thomas*, where we have a number of logia expressing this theme...” (249-250)

Gärtner’s views are in part fueled by a reading of the text alongside the *Acts of Thomas*.

The *Acts of Thomas* was never lost, and had been preserved by the church. It was not included in the Bible, possibly because of its apparent use in an early form by the end of the fourth century by the Manichean sect (as attested to by St. Augustine) and by the Encratites (as attested to by Epiphanius). The Encratites believed that to be pure, one must be vegetarian, avoid alcohol, and avoid marriage (and possibly sex), and used *The Acts of Thomas*, in part, as the basis for this philosophy. Other groups felt the Encratites were heretical because of this theory; they felt that by rejecting these things as evil, they were rejecting the work of God. (Other ascetic groups did not share this taint, as they rejected food, for example, on the grounds that it was too good for them, instead of not good enough.)

The *Gospel of Thomas*, as well as several other texts, had, when Gärtner began writing, only recently been discovered in their entirety. Some feel the *Gospel of Thomas* may actually predate the canonical Gospels; fragments can be found dating to the second century. Any reading of the *Gospel of Thomas*, during the initial years after its discovery, was likely to be interpreted in terms of existing, previously studied works that seemed to be linked to it. At its core, the *Acts of Thomas* is anti-marriage and anti-procreation, and a reading of the *Gospel of Thomas* with the *Acts of Thomas* in mind is likely to lead to the interpretation that the *Gospel of Thomas* is meant to further promote an anti-sex, anti-marriage agenda. In his book on the *Gospel of Thomas*, Gärtner notes in particular a passage in the *Acts of Thomas* in which Jesus tells a princess and her new husband to “avoid sexual intercourse, which will only bind them both to what is mortal.” (251) Working from this basis, *Gospel of Thomas* 75 is, much like several other logia, a statement to encourage the devout to avoid marriage.

Risto Uro feels the bridal chamber is a metaphor, but agrees that the *Gospel of Thomas* is fundamentally an ascetic text. He supports his view by reading Logion 75 in parallel with Logion 16; stating that the passage:

Jesus said: Perhaps men think that I am come to cast peace upon the world, and know not that I am come to cast divisions upon the earth, fire, sword, war. For there shall be five in a house; there shall be three against two, and two against three, the father against the son and the son against the father, and they shall stand as solitaries.

has a very clear meaning: “only virgins can remain faithful.” (224) In this light, he says, there is one interpretation of Logion 75: “only the person who is unattached or single can enter the bridal chamber,” and through that entry, become closer to Jesus. Uro states, however, that he does not necessarily agree with those who feel that the bridal chamber was a literal place, in which an initiation rite was performed to bring worshippers into an inner circle of believers.

There is no indication of a specific sacramental interpretation of the symbol in *Thomas*, and that renders uncertain the suggestion that we are dealing with an initiation rite (baptism?) through which only celibate persons could enter the community. (225)

He feels that his interpretation of this logion actually leaves one with an ambiguous meaning, and is unwilling to state with any certainty whether or not such a bridal chamber ritual occurred.

PHEME PERKINS, in her 1994 essay “The Gospel of Thomas”, is not entirely certain that this particular gospel is part of an ascetic tradition. She points out that, due to the “radically encreatic theology” espoused in the *Acts of Thomas*, many scholars have determined that the *Gospel of Thomas* must also espouse the same ideas and be part of the same tradition, although perhaps in less direct language, because both works are

supposedly from the same apostolic source. (538) During the early Christian period, various regions would base their philosophy on texts that supposedly came from the same apostle, and thus each text used as their foundation would have the name of the apostle as its author. While Perkins may not feel that the *Gospel of Thomas* was a fundamental text of an ascetic tradition, she does believe that a primary message of the text is that “[t]o attain wisdom, women must assimilate to the pattern forged by male ascetics.” (539) She does not take Logion 75 literally, determining instead that it is “an image for salvation” (553), and a metaphor of Valentinian origin. Her interpretation of the bridal chamber as a Valentinian metaphor may be affected by the text of *The Gospel According to Philip*, a gospel which had only recently been discovered in Gärtner’s day but in the decades since has been available for study. As Martha Lee Turner writes in her 1995 “On the coherence of *The Gospel according to Philip*,” one of the major themes of that particular gospel is “the bridal chamber with its rich web of associations.” (246) Turner says that the repeated citation of the bridal chamber in this text is a Valentinian metaphor, much as Perkins regards the bridal chamber in *The Gospel of Thomas*, a shorthand for “salvation and, perhaps, the sacramental mediation and/or depiction of salvation.” Valentinians felt that Jesus did not disclose his teachings explicitly in his public sayings; he spoke in metaphor, and gave his disciples the keys to those metaphors. Their leader, Valentius, said he had received these teachings in a direct line from Jesus. Anything that was passed on in writing by the sect was also done in metaphor; one would have to learn from enlightened members of the sect what the metaphors stood for. As Valentinians believed in an ascetic philosophy which required them to remain distanced from things of this

world, a teaching in which one remains alone, even in the bridal chamber – thus remaining pure for God – seems very logical.

Not everyone feels that the Logion 75 requires a woman to become male. In *The Historical Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan links *The Gospel of Thomas* Logion 75 to Logion 22, which states:

When you make the two one ... and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female ... then will you enter the Kingdom.

Crossan writes that Thomas' author

derided the idea of looking into the future for apocalyptic salvation. Instead, it advocated looking back to the past, not only to an Edenic moment before Adam and Eve sinned but to an even more primordial moment before they were split into two beings. Its gaze was not on a male but on an androgynous Adam, image of its Creator in being neither female nor male. This theology, which is the basic unifying vision of the *The Gospel of Thomas*, can be seen in all those sayings ... about being or becoming one, a single one, or a solitary. (267)

Becoming a solitary did not just entail a life of aloneness; it also required one to reject one's sex. Crossan felt to become a "solitary" was not just a self-motivated process; it required a very specific act. This conversion was accomplished via a baptismal ritual, detailed, Crossan says, in Logion 37, in which

"the initiate, reversing the saga of Genesis 1-3, took off 'the garments of shame' (Smith 1965-66) mandated for a fallen humanity and assumed 'the image of the androgyne' (Meeks)." (267)

In Crossan's eyes, the solitary was not considered primarily male; he or she was considered a genderless being.

Kathleen E. Corley supports Perkins' theory that the *Gospel of Thomas* calls for women to take on a male identity in order to achieve salvation, but also agrees with Gärtner's view that the text encourages the devout toward a life of celibacy. She singles out "*Thomas*' general proclivity for following an ascetic lifestyle, which would include, although not be limited to, abstention from sexual relations." (91) There are several logia which can be interpreted this way, including Logion 28, which refers to people throwing off their wine, and Logion 37, which tells followers to throw off their garments and trample upon them. From this view, obviously, one would enter the bridal chamber alone.

Richard Valantasis, in his 1997 book *The Gospel of Thomas*, does not feel that the *Gospel of Thomas* encourages only celibacy; he thinks it proposes that the reader should lead a solitary existence. To him the bridal chamber is also a metaphor, but the metaphor relates not to celibacy, but to the pervasive general theme of solitude throughout *Thomas*, most explicitly stated in Logion 49: "Jesus said: Blessed are the solitary and the elect, for you shall find the kingdom; for you came forth thence, and shall go there again." Valantasis feels this theme of solitude is the primary thrust of Logion 75.

The saying gives substantial definition to the few by identifying them as the solitaires (*monachos*) who will enter the bridal chamber...[it] affirms the entitled status of the solitary. (153)

Valantasis, however, is quick to point out the issue with the bridal chamber as a location only the solitary is able to penetrate: a bridal chamber is traditionally the venue where two people are joined together rather than a place where one person remains alone. He has a solution to this apparently contradictory metaphor: according to Valantasis, the solitary does not remain alone in the bridal chamber, either:

The bridal chamber here carries a surplus of meaning: it is the right place for the solitaries and the wrong place for those who simply stand at the door. The bridal chamber or suite signifies the place where those who have become solitaries gather...[it] occupies a communal place similar to the language of the Kingdom of God...it is the place that mediates salvation, union, spiritualization and life (see Valantasis 1995b), but it remains a place for very few, because only the solitaries may enter it. (154-155)

In Valantasis' view, Logion 75 means not only that the path to salvation lies via a reclusive, chaste lifestyle, but also, paradoxically, that only solitaries may become truly spiritually united with others.

Michael Fieger agrees with Valantasis that Logion 75 brings out the opposition between the many who are not solitaries and the few who are.

Für das Bild vom Brautgemach ist der Gegensatz: viele – wenige prägend. Die Einsamen sind die wenigen, die in das Brautgemach Einlaß finden. Die vielen dagegen stehen nur an der Tür des Brautgemachs.

Genauso wie in den Log 16 und 49 wird auch in Log 75 der Monachos „der Einsame, der einzelne“ hervorgehoben. (208)

While this may seem a rote repetition of Valantasis' view, even utilizing some of the language Valantasis uses in *The Gospel of Thomas*, Fieger extends it and states that the passage presents a clear choice that the reader, one of the many who stands at the door, must make: whether to give up the passions of this world in favor of achieving salvation. (209)

Others view the bridal chamber verse itself as a veiled reference to some sort of specific Gnostic purification ritual, the details of which are lost to us. Funk and Hoover write:

In later practice among some gnostic groups, the 'wedding suite' appears to refer to an established ritual, although the procedures and significance attached to it are not known. In the Gospel of Philip, a Christian gnostic instruction manual of the third century C.E., the 'bridal suite' plays an important role. Only 'free men' and 'virgins' can enter it; 'animals' (in human form), 'slaves' (those who commit sin), 'and defiled women' (those who have participated in sexual intercourse), may not. Since the Gospel of Philip is oriented to sacramental practice, it is likely that the 'bridal suite' falls into this category. (The Five Gospels, p. 514)

Stevan Davies, however, does not concur.

The comments found in several sayings that advocate people "make the two one" or celebrate the solitary monachos may refer to the union of the sexes characterizing humanity in Gen 1:27 and Gos. Thom. 22. References to a bridal chamber in sayings 75 and 104 may also be references to this primordial union of the sexes. There are no grounds in Thomas to presume that the references are to an actual bridal chamber ritual.

Corley stands with Davies on this matter. In her eyes, the theory of a bridal chamber ritual was a weak prop to support the idea of *The Gospel of Thomas* Logion 61, an interaction between Jesus and Salome, as taking place in a bridal chamber. She specifies that a word normally translated as "bed" should be viewed as "dining couch" (86-87) and that in this case Logion 61 does not refer to the theoretical bridal chamber sacrament, but instead "the growing Hellenistic practice of including women in ancient communal meals." (89) By becoming solitary – entering the bridal chamber alone – a woman could become accepted as a near equal to the community, and thus be allowed to eat at a table on an equal footing with men.

A new dissenting voice has recently written another theory about the sacrament of the bridal chamber. While Mary A. Sharpe of Cambridge University also believes that the bridal chamber, as referred to in both *The Gospel of Philip* and *The Gospel of*

Thomas, refers to a Gnostic ritual, she feels that the ritual was not a metaphorical one, but in fact a very real coupling between a man and a woman. Sharpe cites Irenaeus' description of the bridal chamber ritual, included in one of his texts written against the Gnostic sects, in which he said that some initiates became pregnant. "This certainly seems to suggest that the activity was real and not purely metaphorical," says Sharpe (52). Sharpe feels the point of the bridal chamber ritual was not to abstain from sex, but merely to restrain oneself from ejaculation. (53) By abstaining from ejaculation, sect members were able to prove that they had risen above the needs of the flesh and thus develop a closer bond with the Lord.

Sharpe's work is based in theories stated by Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley in *Female Fault and Fulfillment in Gnosticism*.

Solitariness does not automatically imply asceticism, however...Sexual abstinence, the prohibition of procreation and marriage, is never mentioned in the gospel. What the text demands is no less than the unification of the separated sexes. Paradoxically, "to make the two one" explicitly invites interpretation along "sexual" lines. (102)

Many Gnostic sects had the idea of balance, of a female and male counterpart being necessary in order to produce something of worth. Buckley thinks that women were required to go through a two-step process to achieve salvation. She agrees with Perkins and Conley that women were required to transform themselves into men in order to achieve salvation. However, Buckley does not think this transformation happened through fasting or other means, as Perkins and Corley have determined. Instead, she feels the initiates enabled this transformation through something completely counter to a puritanical lifestyle; they did so through a ritual of a sexual nature. In this ritual, the female and male would combine in order to create something of value – the

transformation of the female into a male. After this step, women were able to take the second step that would allow them to become “solitaries”. Men, on the other hand, only required one step to become “solitaries”, because while the goal was to become an androgynous being, the goal was to become an androgynous male figure rather than an androgynous female figure; even in their neutered state, according to Buckley, there was still the possibility of vestigial gender. As Buckley notes, though Adam was theoretically neuter before Eve was created, he was still considered to be male, albeit a male in a neuter state. Because the first human was initially created in a male-neuter state, this state would theoretically be the purest state a person could exist in, and every person’s goal should be to return to that state. This step to bring both men and women to this neuter-male state, as Buckley sees it, was taken via the bridal chamber – in plainer language, through sexual interaction.

Much like Crossan, Buckley says the *Gospel of Thomas* “deplores the division into genders”, and seeks a way to bring both genders back into a gender that is male and yet not, one that has no duality to it, via the bridal chamber ritual. Buckley also relates the *Gospel of Thomas* to the *Gospel of Philip*, which she says also exhibits the desire to bring the genders together through a similar ritual, but to balance them, not to abolish them.

(134) She feels that the *Gospel of Philip* states that earthly marriage was required for one to advance to the metaphorical bridal chamber where one would join with Christ. (121)

While Sharpe’s theory is based on Buckley’s, she goes further, and suggests that the gospels of Thomas and Philip were suppressed because they ran counter to the Old Testament command to “be fruitful and multiply.” The message of both gospels, she

says, was not that one should avoid sex, but rather that one should learn to “control his sexual impulses.” (53)

Sharpe’s conspiracy theory may be somewhat recent, but her idea that the bridal chamber ritual was a real, carnal act is an old one. Elaine H. Pagels recently detailed the debate between those who feel that Philip called for actual marriage, with sexual congress, and those who feel that all references to the bridal chamber and marriage in those texts are metaphorical, and that Philip was actually very much against sex. After thoroughly investigating the points that each side raises in its favor, and enumerating every argument each side has developed regarding the opposite side’s position, Pagels emphatically states:

If those on either side of the argument were right – that is, had the Valentinians insisted either on actual marriage, sacramentally interpreted, or upon celibacy (including celibate marriage), and if this fact (whichever you prefer) were central to their religious understanding, why is it that *not a single one of the extant texts states this clearly?* ... [H]ow have the texts managed to be *so* unclear as to have generated two totally contradictory interpretations? (446)

Pagels is not criticizing the clarity of the writing in the Gospel, however; she is pointing out the weak spots she sees in the arguments of both sides of the debate. It is no surprise that she has yet another theory to describe the use of the bridal chamber in *the Gospel of Philip*:

I suggest...that the author of the *Gospel of Philip* has deliberately refused, on the basis of his understanding of the ambiguity of language and his consequent rejection of dualistic patterns of thought, to answer a question posed in terms of such a putative opposition (celibacy versus marriage)...The message of the passage [regarding keeping marriage from being exposed] becomes obvious: Just as ordinary women keep their intimacies private, so one who

“lives with the son of God”(78,21) is not to display the intimacies of that relationship in public. (447, 451)

Interestingly, however, she does not take the same view of the bridal chamber reference in Thomas. In fact, she feels the *Gospel of Thomas* has clouded many people’s view of the *Gospel of Philip*. Pagels states that the *Gospel of Thomas* “rejected marriage and advocated celibacy.”

Pagels has a solid point when she states that there is no clear interpretation of the reference to the bridal chamber. Unfortunately, there is simply not enough known about the period and the society surrounding the *Gospel of Thomas* to be sure what was originally meant by the text. The use of other texts as a way to interpret how the book was received by the reader is necessary, but as is illustrated above, wildly different interpretations can stem from the Logia depending on what text one chooses to accompany the *Gospel of Thomas*. We have no way to truly ascertain how the texts were received; we have no marginalia to refer to, few writings about the text from other writers, and little contemporary writing from the particular society that focused on this volume. We also do not know the intention of the original writer; it is not clear that the group who read this volume did, either. If it was a Valentinian text, it is very likely that the meanings of the metaphors were handed down orally and in secret. While we can guess at what these teachings may have been, it is impossible to be sure. Because so many of the Gnostic sects were negatively viewed by the Catholics, many of the texts of leading Gnostics were destroyed, and the existing texts about these sects portray them in a negative, rather than objective, manner, making it hard to weed out what was true about these sects and what was merely baseless rumor, exaggerated and passed on. With so little concrete knowledge to guide us, it is possible that any of the above philosophies

could be true. It is also possible that none of them are true, and the author of the *Gospel of Thomas* chose to write about one entering the bridal chamber alone for the same reason the Zen koans utilize contradictions; he wished to use the seemingly impossible statement as a means to shock the reader into enlightenment.

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