Hidden Meanings:
Metaphor as Salvation in the
Gospel of Thomas

Peter Sturtevant

Department of Religion
Haverford College
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Advisor: Professor J. David Dawson
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ABSTRACT:

_The Gospel of Thomas_ provides a unique, independent representation of the figure Jesus, which warrants more attention to the idiosyncratic elements of this “gospel.” Jesus’ non-literal, image-based discourse in the _Gospel of Thomas_ can be generally categorized and understood as metaphor. Drawing on an “inter-animation” theory of metaphor, I aim to show how a reader, in interpreting and making sense of the _Gospel of Thomas_ as a whole, will extrapolate an overarching mythos that is suggested to them via metaphor. The reader is motivated to seek meaning within the sayings and recognize the immanent “light” of the “father” that lays hidden within each person. Coming to know this light and transforming one’s perception of reality leads one closer to the state of being called “the kingdom of the father,” and is enacted by seeking the “obscure” meanings of the sayings.
INTRODUCTION

The Gospel According to Thomas was only known in fragments of a Greek manuscript until 1945, when a full Coptic manuscript was unearthed in Egypt. The group of documents it was found with, now called the Nag Hammadi library, is significant not only archeologically, but also theologically. Most of the texts found represent Gnostic or other Christian sects that ultimately became heretical within Christianity; for it was precisely because early church fathers wrote against Thomas and made it out to be heresy that scholars today knew the existence of the gospel. Thomas is notable, among other things, for its complete lack of reference to the crucifixion.

Though it shares the name “gospel” with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, it takes a very different literary form. Thomas is comprised of 114 individual sayings, and after the opening sentence, the narration that follows rarely goes beyond the prefatory “Jesus said” before each logion. However, though Thomas is as a collection, it does put forth certain thematic understandings of Jesus’ nature and his purpose on Earth. The most immediate of these is Jesus’ imperative to “find the meaning” of his “obscure” sayings. Jesus in Thomas is above all a speaker, and the reader is directed to his sayings as a source for spiritual growth. Thomas is known for the opacity of it sayings, which are often stories or images with unclear referents, or wisdom cloaked in poetry and mystic language.

Naturally, because of its heretical status, most scholarship on Thomas has revolved around comparing it to texts in the Christian and Jewish canons. In this paper, I hope to present a new perspective on the text by focusing my analysis on the literary

1 Marvin Meyer, The Gospel of Thomas
dynamics within the gospel instead of taking a comparative approach. Jesus’ non-literal, 
image-based discourse can be generally categorized and understood as metaphor.
The chief literary structure that appears in practically all of the sayings is metaphor.
Even the most basic terms of his themes, like “father” and “kingdom,” have metaphorical 
meaning.

I will apply a theory of metaphor known as the inter-animation theory, as 
developed by Janet Soskice, to both locate its instances in Jesus’ language and explain 
how metaphor, by interpretation, has the ability to generate meaning about concepts 
beyond the scope of human perception. This creation of meaning is precisely how Jesus 
expresses the “kingdom of the father,” an imagined state of ideal existence, characterized 
by unity, light, and repose. The metaphors that constitute Jesus’ teachings encourage the 
individual to drastically transform the way he or she perceives reality, provided one seeks 
the obscure meanings of the sayings. The revolution of individual human perception and 
the worldwide realization of the “kingdom of the father” are parallel actions, both 
imagined states at micro- and macroscopic levels towards which the individual and the 
world must strive. Since metaphor is the mechanism by which this change in perception 
is to be enacted, and metaphor is located at the heart of Jesus’ language and language in 
general, metaphor becomes the catalyst for spiritual change. Metaphor provides the 
knowledge an individual needs, in an obscured form, to strive towards the kingdom of the 
father. This “salvation” through metaphor is the conception of a better, alternative reality 
within the individual, an altered view of reality where divine “light” and the “father” may 
be experienced directly, and in which the kingdom of the father reigns supreme, no 
longer obscured by apparent reality.
THE LANGUAGE OF JESUS

The Gospel of Thomas takes the form of a “sayings-source,” and naturally lacks narrative and biographical information on Jesus. However, the text’s formal similarity to the hypothesized “Q” and Hebrew wisdom books, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, does not necessarily relegate this text to that category. Rather, Thomas seems compiled with a certain overall structure in mind, and its collection of sayings suggests a story about Jesus, if not a narrative like the gospels of the New Testament. As Layton notes in his introduction, The Gospel of Thomas authenticates itself through the use of the wisdom book genre, which associates Jesus with well-known sages of the past, and the opening frames the text as a faithful transcription by the disciple Thomas of the “obscure sayings” of Jesus. The postscript of the Coptic manuscript labels this text a “gospel,” literally meaning “good news.” If Thomas is a gospel, the “news” it proclaims must be drawn from the sayings, since, unlike the New Testament gospels with which most people are familiar, there is no narrative to contextualize Jesus’ teachings. Unmediated by narrative or biography, his teachings and mystical insight are eternalized in text in a manner that resembles speaking. Considered within the milieu of all surviving sayings attributed to Jesus, Thomas’ selection emphasizes imagery, personal lifestyle choices, and esoteric wisdom, and is lacking in eschatological warnings and explicit reference to Jesus’ sacrifice and divinity that appear in other texts. GTh’s selection of sayings offers a

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2 Bernard Brandon Scott, Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2001), 22-23.
4 Layton, 376-7.
distinct representation of Jesus, with a distinct manner of speaking, which, I hope to prove, is fundamentally a metaphorical way of speaking.

**The Gospel of Thomas as Literature**

This collection of 114 sayings names itself a “gospel” in the Coptic manuscript, the only full, extant copy. To talk about this gospel in a literary way, I will approach the text as a reader engaging with a work of literature. Putting myself in the mindset of this reader, I will approach the sayings with a certain set of expectations, which may or may not be confirmed by the text:

- a) The sayings are all spoken by one character, Jesus, unless otherwise noted.
- b) He is expected to speak consistently and coherently in the sayings.
- c) Interpretation of the sayings should not have to depend on any other text but the text itself.

I will bring these expectations to the gospel so that, in applying them to *Thomas*, certain impressions the text may have on a reader will be more apparent. My interpretive lens, assuming the coherence of the text, will have to confront those instances where these expectations are frustrated, and explore those tensions. Considering *Thomas* a piece of literature allows me to seek a general story among the many stories that constitute its *logia*; it enables me to seek an intra-textual unity of meaning.

Many have located meaning in Thomasine sayings by identifying symbols from contemporaneous sources, or have approached GTh with a historical lens, drawing information from its historical context and its possible relationships to other relevant texts. ⁵ ⁶ Though I will draw on Christian and Jewish texts for the sake of comparison, it

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⁵ I take the abbreviation “GTh” from Bentley Layton, and I will employ it the course of this paper.

is only to highlight unique features of *Thomas*. I seek to avoid letting the pre-existing interpretive frameworks that accompany those texts inform my analysis, and deal mostly with the distinct ways in which Jesus is represented in GTh. In the course of this paper, when I use the name Jesus, I am referring to the figure represented in the sayings of GTh, and no other Jesus—to do justice to this particular representation requires a fresh perspective on the sayings unfiltered by the many and varied interpretations of the life and words of Jesus that exist, whether orthodox or heterodox. Though Thomasine logia often appear in variations in the New Testament gospels, I will be taking Thomas’ versions as authoritative. For my analysis, Thomas’ side of the story must be the “correct” one. By working outside the established interpretations of other Christian texts, the literary and poetic aspects of Jesus’ teachings may be fully appreciated.

**The “Obscurity” of the Sayings**

Rich in suggestion, sparse in explication, the sayings of GTh are known for their “hardness” and unyielding nature. The challenge of interpreting Jesus’ words comes from their “obscurity,” a trait ascribed to the sayings by the text itself from the very opening:

LOGION 1

These are the obscure sayings that the living Jesus uttered and which Didymus Jude Thomas wrote down. And he said, “Whoever finds the meaning of these sayings will not taste death.”

The sayings are described as obscure, but where does this obscurity lie? Since Jesus urges the listener to “find the meaning” of the sayings, it must be the meaning that is unclear. This imperative to “find” leads the reader onward past literal meaning, for to understand the literal meaning of these sayings is to only understand what is said, not what is meant. The ultimate reward—to “not taste death”—lies in making the meaning clear. The rhetoric of this opening creates a boundary, as it were, to understanding Jesus:
there are those who have found the recondite meanings, who have transcended death, and there are those who haven’t, and remain mortal. Interpretation of the sayings thus becomes driven by a desire to be a part of this privileged, inside group who do “not taste death.” Obscurity defines these sayings in a particular way, for, as the opening statement suggests, to the spiritually enlightened, this obscurity gives way to clarity and wisdom. The gospel suggests an anti-literal stance towards language with its rhetoric of obscurity, encouraging a deeper exploration of Jesus’ language with the promise of life. The meaning may be unknown or unclear from the language, but that is precisely where the revelatory nature of the sayings lies. Where Jesus’ words do not yield an easy interpretation, meaning must be found beyond the literal significance of the language.

Jesus’ message is obscure on two different levels: at the level of the saying and at the level of the entire book. When considering the entire text, certain sayings seem to contradict one another, and frustrate the agreement of the text as a whole. Thus, the meaning of one saying may be obscured by the language of another. For instance, take the following sayings:

LOGION 25
Jesus said, “Love your sibling like your own soul, look out for that person like the apple of your eye.”

LOGION 55
Jesus said, “Those who do not hate their fathers and their mothers cannot be disciples of me, and those who do not hate their brothers and their sisters and take up their cross like me will not become worthy of me.”

There is an interpretive challenge in the seemingly opposed language of 25 and 55. How could one love and hate one’s sibling at the same time? Why does Jesus say to love one’s

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7 Interestingly, logion 55 is the only instance in GTh where any mention of a cross is made. On the whole, the text is devoid of language about crucifixion and the orthodox Christian doctrine of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. I will return to this instance later in the paper.
family when he explicitly says later that hating the family is the way to follow him? Our reader, remember, expects Jesus to make sense, to agree with himself. The literal language puts forth a paradox, which frustrates any attempt to take Jesus’ words at face value. The task of the reader is to somehow account for this paradox, and draw a meaning that both makes sense and remains true to the language of both sayings.

Perhaps by “sibling” Jesus is evoking a notion of universal sibling-hood between humans, seeing humanity as a family, and perhaps his harsh words in 55 indicate the value of an ascetic, missionary-type lifestyle, one free from the attachments and worries that come from being part of a family or community. Perhaps he is trying to deconstruct normal ideas of family to encourage a familial kind of love towards all humans. The shock of a saying like 55 will inevitably deter the family-loving reader, but its opposition to logion 25 seems to indicate that Jesus means something different than what he actually says; to the imagined reader who expects Jesus to espouse a consistent point of view, this expectation comes into tension with the reality of Jesus’ language. To bridge the gap between these two statements, the reader is led to question Jesus’ use of the word “family,” and evaluate what he actually means by it. Two later sayings bring up the same challenge to the idea of family:

LOGION 99
The disciples said to him, “Your brothers and your mother are standing outside.” He said to them, “It is those who are here and who do the will of my father that are my siblings and my mother. It is they who will enter the kingdom of my father.”

LOGION 101
Jesus said, “Those who do not hate their [father] and their mother as I do cannot be [disciples of] me. And those who [do not] love their [father and] their mother as I do cannot be [disciples of] me. For my mother […] But my true mother gave me life.”

The tension between 25 and 55 is essentially the very paradox offered in 101. In 99, Jesus offers a perspective on family that helps the reader understand these sayings. He
makes the distinction between his biological family and another family, the one he claims is actually his. We may call this Jesus’ “true” family, taking up the word from 101, where Jesus speaks of his “true mother.” The people around him, who abide by the “father,” are his true family, the one that offers “life.” This life is presumably not the life of everyday reality—this must be the sort of life where one may “not taste death.” True family and true life seem to be somehow out of reach or not apparent, but Jesus’ words awaken the reader to this new idea of family and to a new life.

The reader’s interpretation becomes the site for confluence of meaning. The apparent discrepancies between Jesus’ words become a tension that generates new meaning, a new idea of “family” by which to understand 25 and 55 as parts of a harmonious whole. The process of “finding the meaning” is perhaps better described as the generation of meaning within the individual. This generation of spiritual knowledge, by searching for unclear meaning, is described in the immediately following logion:

LOGION 2
Jesus said, “Let one who seeks not stop seeking until that person finds; and upon finding, the person will be disturbed; and being disturbed, will be astounded; and will reign over the entirety.”

This evolution of emotion described hints at the difficulty of finding the hidden meaning of Jesus’ words. The process of finding is not a momentary revelation, but rather a lifelong pursuit—the “one who seeks” must never “stop seeking,” if they hope to find the wisdom in Jesus’ language. Even once found, the meaning will still “disturb” and “astound.” The contradiction of 25 and 55 is a type of disturbance—the way it forces the reader to deconstruct “family” disturbs his or her perspective on life. Logion 2 implies that, once that disturbance is understood and recognized, it gives way to amazement and sovereignty over the “entirety.” “Disturb” and “astound,” as well as the eventual “reign,”
suggest that finding the meaning is not a passive process, and that to do so is to undergo a significant self-transformation.

The intra-textual tensions of GTh are not the only locus of obscurity. Most often the meaning of a single saying is enough of a challenge. Jesus clearly favors image-based teaching and story telling to get his points across, but though he takes the role of teacher and privileged provider of sacred knowledge, his lessons are not easily perceived. Often what starts as a simple image becomes increasingly complex as Jesus extends it, such as in logion 7:

Jesus said, “Blessed is the lion that the human being will devour so that the lion becomes human. And cursed is the human being that the lion devours; and the lion will become human.”

So if a human eats a lion, the lion becomes blessed and human; and if the lion eats the human, the human is cursed and the lion becomes human. In both cases, the lion is transformed into a human, though if eaten the lion is blessed as well. How do we understand such a saying? Taking the lion as a literal lion, it could be speaking to humanity’s superiority over animals. Or, perhaps one could take the lion as a symbol for powerful forces in the world that an individual must confront in a lifetime, or powerful forces within the self. It is not clear how exactly this saying may fit with the others.

From what is provided by Thomas, at the very least we understand that the physical body of the human is somehow sacred and superior to the lion, and that the lion will always be subsumed into human-hood. Howard Jackson devoted an entire book, *The Lion Becomes Man: the Gnostic Leontomorphic Creator and the Platonic Tradition*, interpreting this saying, with recourse to a couple of mythic and symbolic currents common to other alternative Christian texts, especially Gnostic ones. Outside of such an exhaustive

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8 Layton, 381.
investigation, there is little context in the text itself by which to understand this saying, or any saying for that matter.

Images like logion 7 may become more puzzling with further investigation, due to the multiplicity of possible meaning that immediately arises. It seems best to focus not on the symbolic resonances of “lion” and “human,” but rather pay attention to the relationship described between them, for the relationship is what is most present and tangible in the text. While “lion” could have a variety of possible meanings, literal and non-literal, the relationship between “lion” and “human” gives the reader the tools with which to understand what sort of lion is being discussed. In general, when looking at the sayings, I will avoid interpreting Jesus through symbols. Though symbols may appear and be helpful to understanding the logia (indeed, Howard Jackson’s book has the most satisfactory explanation of logion 7 that I’ve encountered), identifying and validating the identification of symbols requires a depth of historical knowledge beyond my range as a scholar, and to rely on such interpretation sheds less light on the literary structure and mechanics of the sayings themselves. In the case of logion 7, deciphering a possible antecedent for “lion” still might not explain why, in this instance, the lion that eats the human becomes human. The complex relationship of consuming/becoming that Jesus sets up between human and lion begs more than just symbolic interpretation—finding the meaning requires a keener understanding of what is happening within the saying itself.

Jesus’ words can be obscure in many ways. Whether the words themselves do not make literal sense or the expected coherence of the whole text is challenged, the common feature is that a literal reading of Jesus yields only obscurity, while a non-literal approach allows more sense to be made of the text. The challenge of interpreting these non-literal,
unspoken messages stimulates the mind of the reader to challenge previously held categories and re-evaluate them. The promised rewards—“to not taste death” and “to reign over the entirety”—motivate the reader to “find the meaning” of the sayings, and frame the interpretation of the text as a spiritually transformative experience.

**The Importance of Jesus’ Words**

Jesus does not grant wisdom. By clouding his meanings in non-literal language, he coaxes it out of the self. To make an academic analogy, Jesus is no lecturer—his “classes” would be better described as discussion-based, except that the discussion is not between people but rather between text and reader within the self. The text prompts the reader to find its “obscure” meaning, and then the reader, when confronted with the obscurity of Jesus’ stories, must recognize them as non-literal and interpret them accordingly. The reader is motivated to do this by the text itself, both explicitly, with promises “to not taste death” and to “reign over the entirety,” and implicitly, in the way the text posits a group of “insiders” who have access to Jesus’ hidden teachings.

That these rewards are directly linked to finding the obscure meanings of the sayings displays that, for the Jesus presented in the gospel of Thomas, his words are of ultimate significance. Whereas in New Testament gospels, the clear, overriding message is that Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection are the keys to eternal life in the kingdom of God, in Thomas there is only one reference to the cross, in 55: “...and those who do not hate their brothers and sisters and take up their cross like me will not become worthy of me.” This reference to the cross is troubling, since the rest of the text makes no mention of crucifixion or the cross. Also, “living Jesus” allegedly spoke these sayings, as the opening indicates. Is Jesus here prefiguring his own crucifixion? In a text where there is
no other mention of a sacrifice on the cross? There are other, oblique references to Jesus’ death, though they do not mention a cross:

LOGION 12
The disciples said to Jesus, “We are aware that you will depart from us. Who will be our leader?” Jesus said to them, “No matter where you come it is to James the Just that you shall go, for whose sake heaven and earth have come to exist.”

LOGION 38
Jesus said, “On many occasions you have wanted to hear these sayings that I am saying unto you. And you have no one else to hear them from. Days will come when you will seek me, and you will not find me.”

There is a recurring theme in other sayings where Jesus draws attention to his presence, encouraging the disciples to listen to him while they can. It seems Jesus wished to impress upon his disciples his imminent departure, and awaken them to the opportunities of the present moment. Nowhere in Thomas does Jesus speak about how he will die, but some of the sayings, like 12 and 38, invoke his impending absence. As far as we know, the disciples only know that Jesus will leave them and nothing more.

Though there is the one mention of a cross, Jesus’ death is invoked in Thomas mainly as a wake-up call to the present, encouraging his disciples to listen to him while he is in their presence. Nowhere does Jesus mention any kind of sacrifice or crucifixion. Whereas in the theologies drawn from the New Testament gospels, Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross brings about salvation for humanity, Thomas suggests it is not Jesus’ death that is of ultimate significance, but his sayings. Jesus’ vocation, as presented by Thomas, is linguistic rather than sacrificial.

The Gospel’s Relation to Other Texts

Interpretation of the sayings should not have to depend on any other text than the gospel itself. In assuming this, I am implicitly creating distance from one of the major scholarly dialogues that surrounds GTh, that of whether the gospel is “Gnostic.” It is not
my purpose to answer that question, though by remaining cautious of understanding
Thomas via another text, I am placing myself in opposition to those who insist the Gospel
of Thomas belongs to the body of literature and tradition known as Gnosticism. If
Thomas were, with complete certainty, a Gnostic gospel, it would not only be helpful but
also quite necessary for a reader to engage with the iterations of the Gnostic mythos, such
as that found in The Gospel of Truth and The Apocryphon of John. My exploration of the
sayings, however, gives me reason to believe Thomas offers its own, unique vision of
reality that may share in gnostic concepts, but is not likely Gnostic in the proper-noun
sense of the term.

Bentley Layton, in his introduction to the text, claims the “Hymn of the Pearl,” an
allegorical story found in the Book of Thomas the Contender, should used as a mythic
framework for interpreting the sayings. As he writes:

Without recognition of their hidden meaning, Jesus’ sayings are merely “obscure.” The
interpretive clue to this hidden meaning was provided by references (especially in GTh 18, 29, 50)
to a Hellenistic myth of the heavenly origin, fall, incarnation, awakening, and return of the soul.
The structure of the myth was known in a more coherent form in another work of Thomas
scripture, HPrl [Layton’s abbreviation for the Hymn]. Once the myth had been recognized or
reconstructed by the ancient reader it would have provided a framework within which the other,
more traditional sayings could be interpreted. 9

I find Layton’s explanation too easy and too convenient to be convincing. Why would an
ancient reader have to have known this other myth? More importantly, the clues Layton
refers to, 18, 29, and 50, do not seem overtly “Gnostic.” They are among the more
esoteric, mystical sayings of the gospel, and they all speak somehow about the dualism
between body and soul, which is certainly a prominent element of Gnostic myth but is not
exclusive to it. I think many align Thomas with Gnosticism (rightly so, for they have
much in common) because it is a convenient and tempting category for it. But I think to

9 Layton, 376.
assume the *Gospel of Thomas* must be allegorized is to shut off its sayings from their full range of meaning. My sense is that Layton is right in saying the ancient reader would have constructed some sort of mythic framework to interpret the sayings, and indeed my analysis will search for one, but I think to claim GTh requires the specific myth of another text to make sense does not give enough credit to how much meaning is hidden in the language of *Thomas'* Jesus. The abstruse, non-literal words of the gospel are brimming with possible meanings and implications, and labeling it Gnostic, I fear, detracts from the multivalency of the sayings.

**Obscurity in Metaphor**

Jesus rarely speaks explicitly about what he means. He favors the use of storytelling and images over direct address to convey his messages about human action and the relationship of God to the world. There are many non-literal types of language that appear in religious literature, including symbol, allegory, and metaphor. How would one characterize the literary method of the *Gospel of Thomas*? To put the question another way, is there a distinct, non-literal way of speaking that characterizes the sayings of Jesus? Let us return to the opening statement, specifically Jesus' words: "Whoever finds the meaning of these sayings will not taste death." The very construction of this sentence imagines an alternative type of life, where death is something that can be tasted, or refused to be tasted. By suggesting that a person, searching the sayings for Jesus' hidden meanings, may be able to refuse to partake in death envisions a transcendent process, whereby the reader surpasses the mortality of his/her body and becomes master over their fate.
This literary mechanism, by which Jesus re-invests the term death with the associations of “taste” and transforms its meaning, is, I believe, characteristic of Jesus’ sayings. I will describe this manner of speaking as metaphorical. Jesus uses poetic language, like “tasting death,” and imagery to raise new ideas about the world and change the way the reader perceives it. In using the term metaphor I am drawing on Janet Soskice’s theory from her book *Metaphor and Religious Language*, in which she gives the following working definition: “metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.”

To use the above example, Jesus speaks about death in terms that seem suggestive of food, specifically the word “taste.” Soskice expands her definition with a few claims. The first is that metaphors are not mental events, but acts of language. The reception of a metaphor and the grasping of its meaning by a reader is surely a mental event, but the metaphor itself is strictly linguistic. Second, metaphor takes no particular syntactic form, and often it is the whole utterance, not specific words or images, that constitute the metaphor. She uses the classical “substitution” theory of metaphor as straw man, taking a strong stance against the idea that metaphor in a text may be substituted by plain, direct language without loss of meaning. She does so to emphasize that metaphor should say something that cannot be said in any other way. If Jesus had simply meant that the finder of his obscure meanings would be given eternal life, he would have said it that way. The image he gives the reader instead, “to not taste death,” carries with it a broader, more complex range of meaning. It suggests a new way of perceiving death to be interpreted and taken

11 Ibid., 16.
12 Ibid., 18-19.
up by the reader. It is metaphor's unique ability to speak in ways of which direct, non-metaphorical language is not capable, and to create new categories of experience—these make metaphor an apt linguistic method for Jesus to intimate his original perspective on the world to his listeners/readers. 13

Proceeding from the working definition she lays out in the first chapter, Soskice reaches an “inter-animation” theory of metaphor. 14 The particular advantage of this theory is the way it understands metaphor as an act of language that is generative of meaning, through the inter-animation of the elements of the metaphor. She distinguishes two elements of a metaphorical utterance: tenor and vehicle. To use the words of her own definition, the tenor is the thing being spoken of, and the vehicle is the term or terms being used that are suggestive of something else. For an example, take the line from Hamlet’s monologue referencing his “sea of troubles.” He is talking about all of the troubles he faces in his life at this point, so that would be the tenor, and he describes it as a sea, giving us the vehicle. Both tenor and vehicle carry with them a network of associations and possible meanings. We take Hamlet partially to mean that he has many, trying challenges to face, incorporating the connotations of sea (that it is large, can be dangerous, and would be hard to travel in Hamlet’s time, for example) into the meaning of troubles, and arriving at a combination of meaning that describes Hamlet’s plight. Although the reference of the metaphor is singular (in Hamlet’s case, the metaphor clearly refers to his life), the meaning and significance of it is more nebulous. Hamlet, by describing his life as a “sea of troubles,” can suggest a number of different things about his situation. The meaning of his words cannot be said to be one thing in particular; it is

13 Ibid., 8-10.
14 Ibid., 44.
not "trouble" or "sea," nor is it simply that his troubles are large like the sea. Rather, the meaning is a confluence of all these implications into an image that can only be understood by both terms actively animating one another.

Soskice uses the scientific term "gene" as an example for how meaning of metaphor is fluid while its referential nature is static and singular: when the term gene was first coined, it referred, as it still does, to that biological entity that passes on traits. The naming of the "thing which passes on traits" is the creation of a metaphor. However, when genetic theories were still in development, a gene was considered to pass on acquired traits, that is, traits acquired by an organism in a lifetime. Later, when the gene was better understood, gene came to mean the entity that passes on inherited traits, the result of mutations in genetic material that manifest in offspring, not the result of adaptations made during a lifetime. So, the term "gene" provides a good model for how an utterance may have a fixed referent yet a changing meaning. Soskice also turns to a quotation of Churchill to elaborate this distinction between meaning and reference:

We conclude that the metaphorical vehicle is not used to pick out a second subject, or another referent, but to describe the referent picked out by the whole of the utterance. When Churchill described Mussolini as 'that utensil', the reference of the metaphor was fixed by Churchill, but the significance of the metaphor was given in considering Mussolini in terms of the associative network 'utensil.' It is in this way we get Dr. Johnson's "two ideas for one", a unity of subject-matter and a plurality of associative networks, and this is what we intended to mark by defining metaphor as a speaking about one thing or state of affairs in terms which are suggestive of another. This particular aspect of Soskice's theory, where metaphor has at once a "unity of subject-matter and a plurality of associative networks," makes it particularly useful to the student of religious language because it allows metaphor to refer without making unrevisable claims of truth. Though "gene" originally denoted the mechanism by which

15 Ibid., 126.
16 Ibid., 53.
acquired characteristics were passed on, the scientific discovery that the gene in fact carried inherited characteristics did not change the reference; however, the word “gene” wasn’t bound to the concept of acquired traits, and its definition was revised to be more truthful.

This aptitude of metaphor to refer to, describe, and evoke that which is unknown or unknowable—to, in the scientific world, refer to things while allowing the truth about those things to be changed and adapted—is especially helpful for the linguistic predicaments that can arise when one talks about a god that is simultaneously transcendent and immanent, a singular entity and a presence shared and experienced by humanity, as Jesus does in the Gospel of Thomas. Much in the way scientific truth is constantly in flux, constantly being changed and added to so that its truths become more truthful and perfected to explain the world, spiritual truth is imagined and added to through metaphors, which, with each image, provide deeper knowledge of the divine.

Metaphors may not provide facts, per se, but they provide poetic images of movement and relation, causes and potentialities. Through the combination of multiple sayings and the collision of their metaphorical terms, they offer new ways of perceiving things. Understanding a metaphor is fundamentally an act of imagination, a creation of meaning within the reader that is not apparent in the text. The cognitive experience of metaphor encourages the reader to invest their world with new meaning by suggesting new ways of understanding the world.
THE MEANING WITHIN THE SAYINGS

The Gospel of Thomas promises the sayings provide access to an exalted state of existence. I have argued that these sayings are non-literal, and best described as metaphorical. To abstract the gospel, the “good news” this text wishes to spread, from the 114 sayings that constitute it, I will seek the themes that Jesus expresses in his metaphors. Taking the sayings as ultimate authority, I will attempt to construct the worldview expressed by the whole of the text, extrapolating Jesus’ alternate, “truer” vision of reality from his metaphorical utterances. Going by Soskice’s inter-animation theory, the metaphors Jesus employs should, in interpretation, yield an idea of a spiritual reality as taught by the Jesus of GTh. The metaphorical nature of Jesus’ words is precisely what allows such an endeavor.

Some elements of Thomas’ language undoubtedly are familiar from other Christianities and carry over across traditions, especially the term “father” for God and the term “kingdom of God.” These terms are metaphorical, but over repeated use in Christian theology they have been fixed and have attained the status of symbol. To most people familiar with Christian texts, “father” is practically synonymous with God. The “kingdom of God” is a more nebulous concept, since it has at times been considered both the realm of heaven beyond the physical world and a potential, ideal state of existence in the world. The metaphor “father” is so deeply ingrained in the words of Jesus that it could be considered a “dead” metaphor (in the way the “arm” of a chair is a dead metaphor), yet considering that father refers to God, a being beyond human

comprehension, the metaphor remains active in its ability to describe an aspect of God’s relationship to humans. The “arm” of a chair is a dead metaphor since it refers to something we can see and account for; “father” is still active metaphorically because it creates meaning and understanding about a concept that we can not see or rationalize. In my analysis of the sayings, I plan to use “father” as a name or term for God, but will do so in the hopes of revivifying the metaphorical nature of the term. In short, I will take “father” as a metaphor that is still capable of generating meaning.

The “kingdom” is also a metaphor, but its reference is not so clear. “Kingdom” is invoked in many sayings, but rather than being a referential term, it is used as the subject of many other metaphors, with Jesus commonly introducing it with the phrase “The kingdom of God resembles…” The resemblances that Jesus gives help create an idea of what this kingdom may be, animating the tenor “kingdom” with images like a mustard seed and a woman baking bread. So we have metaphors, Jesus’ words, describing the kingdom of God, which is itself a metaphor with an unspoken reference. One must turn to the resemblances and make sense of their combination with “kingdom” to understand the unknown realm or state of being referred to by “kingdom.” By piecing together these metaphors, a more complete concept of the “kingdom” may be found.

In order to characterize the overarching mythos of Thomas, I will turn to the sayings to illumine four particular aspects of an individual’s experience of life that are described or referred to by the words of Jesus: the state of the world and humanity in general, the power and capabilities of the individual, the nature of the sayings/Jesus himself, and the “kingdom of God.”

The World and Humanity
The world in the *Gospel of Thomas* is a place of obscurity and delusion. One gets the sense that there is something "wrong" or misleading about the world of which only some people are aware. Like the obscure, non-literal nature of his words, Jesus presents the world as obscure, and not appearing as it actually is. The ontological status of everyday reality is brought into question by the dualism between the spiritual and the material that is put forth by the text. Take Jesus’ performative wonder at the disparity between body and spirit:

**LOGION 29**

Jesus said, "It is amazing if it was for the spirit that flesh came into existence. And it is amazing indeed if spirit (came into existence) for the sake of the body. But as for me, I am amazed at how this great wealth has come to dwell in poverty."

Jesus takes the stance of the privileged revealer of sacred knowledge. His simple turn of phrase, "but as for me,” creates a distinction between the amazement he shares with everyone in the first two sentences and his personal amazement at the existence of spirit within an inferior form. The two "if" statements at the beginning of the logion, which Jesus acknowledges are both "amazing," each suggest a different relationship of priority between spirit and flesh/body. It would be amazing, he says, if the body was created for the soul, or the soul for the body. His own amazement in the final line, however, lays out a distinctly different idea. Jesus’ amazement (which is somewhat performative, as indicated by the phrase “but as for me”) is directed towards the inequity between these two elements of the individual. What amazes him is not that spirit and body exist together, but rather that the spirit is so much more valuable.

This hierarchy of value is created through the metaphor of “wealth” “dwelling” in “poverty.” First considering spirit within the associative network of “wealth,” as opposed to flesh as “poverty,” we get the sense that spirit is more substantive and more valuable.
The body and the spirit are at either ends of a spectrum wherein flesh is not simply less spiritual, but rather is characterized as that which is not spirit. Jesus' metaphor suggests to the reader that what is truly valuable is the spirit, the invisible presence dwelling within the body. Jesus leaves alone the question of whether spirit came into being for body or vice versa, instead expressing his own amazement at the superiority of the spirit. The true marvel, according to Jesus, is that "the wealth of the spiritual realm lives within the poverty of the world."\(^{18}\)

The "wealth" of spirit is not apparent; something in the world obscures it. The most direct and comprehensive explanation of the world-as-is is offered by the following saying:

**LOGION 28**

Jesus said, "I stood at rest in the midst of the world. And unto them I was shown forth incarnate; I found them all intoxicated. And I found none of them thirsty. And my soul was pained for the children of humankind, for they are blind in their hearts and cannot see. For, empty did they enter the world, and again empty they seek to leave the world. But now they are intoxicated. When they shake off their wine then they will have a change of heart."

There are many specific instances of metaphor in this saying, but the chief conceit is that of intoxication. The aspects of human intoxication are as follows:

- **a)** None of the intoxicated humans are thirsty.
- **b)** They are blind in their hearts.
- **c)** They came to the world empty and seek to leave empty, but being intoxicated, they are full.

Jesus portrays human experience of the world as drinking wine or some other intoxicating beverage. Now the reader must draw an understanding of the world-as-such by perceiving it the way one perceives wine. The world, then, becomes pleasant in its immediate experience, as one enjoys alcohol—but alcohol is in fact a toxin and does harm to the body. "Consuming" the world as is, without challenging material reality, is

\(^{18}\) Valantasis, 104.
like imbibing wine; it pleases but does not nourish, and in fact can cause harm. The more
the “intoxicating world” is imbibed as truth, the more “drunk” one becomes, thereby
obscuring the message of 29, which places spirit as supreme over matter. Only when this
wine is “shook off” may the reader perceive the world as Jesus does, and escape his or
her own blindness. When they can “empty” themselves of this wine, this trust in their
apparent reality, then they may no longer be blind in their hearts.

None of the people are “thirsty” since they are full on the draught of the apparent
world. However, they are unaware of the place from which Jesus comes, when he stood
in the midst of the world before he was incarnate. When he becomes embodied, he is
able to speak to these “intoxicated” people and guide them towards true reality, which
transcends the embodied world. The world of the body and sense is alluring and inviting,
like a wine that promises pleasant satisfaction and inebriation, but the true follower must
shake off this wine to shake off spiritual blindness.

Jesus elaborates the disparity between the true realm of spirit and the material,
intoxicating world in other sayings. At times his language is quite forceful:

LOGION 56
Jesus said, “Whoever has become acquainted with the world has found a corpse, and the world is
not worthy of one who has found the corpse.”

This saying is nearly identical to logion 80, except that in 80 “body” replaces the word
“corpse”. This near-repetition creates intertextual meaning between the two sayings,
suggesting that a body is almost synonymous with a corpse. Within each saying, these
terms are conflated with the world itself. The body is destined to perish, so ultimately it
is a corpse, and the world is somehow like a corpse/body, if one becomes “acquainted”
with it. The one who “becomes acquainted with the world” will find the same
impermanence and mortality of the human body, which suggests a parallel between body
and world. If we extend this parallel, it suggests the world, like the body, has some invisible spirit within it. There must be a hidden wealth dwelling in the world. Since acquaintance with the world will only bring death, acquaintance must be sought with something else, something living as opposed to dying. Hence Jesus’ advice in logion 42: “Jesus said, ‘Be Passersby.’” This terse, enigmatic phrase sums up what 56 implies: don’t become acquainted with the world, for there is a superior reality. To be a passerby is to have a completely new attitude towards life—to view the world as a passerby is to be aware of its transience, and of some other place or reality that lies beyond this world. Recognizing the death of the body and the impermanence of the world becomes a way to escape death to a more promising, more ultimate reality lying obscured within an apparent reality.

For a positive indication of this obscure, ultimate reality, take one of the more esoteric sayings found in the gospel:

LOGION 83
Jesus said, “Images are visible to human beings. And the light within these images is hidden by the image of the father’s light: it will be disclosed. And his image is hidden by his light.”

Here Jesus draws a distinction between visible image and true light within the images, though the precise relationship this saying posits is very complex and requires careful attention to the syntax. This statement can be separated into a series of claims:

a) There is light within images.
b) Humans can see images (but not light).
c) The light within images is hidden by the “image of the father’s light,” or the father’s image.
d) The light within the image of the father will be disclosed.
e) Once disclosed, the father’s image will be hidden by his light.

In the course of Jesus’ utterance, there is a movement from hidden light buried in images to light being revealed and in turn obscuring the images. There is also a general
progression from the level of images and humans to the father and his image—from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic. What this logion envisions is a great transformation in the relationship of humans to the father and the world, catalyzed by Jesus’ declaration “it will be disclosed.” Picking up the language of obscurity that is applied to the sayings themselves in GTh, a sea change in human perception is predicted, resulting in the true presence of the father when his light bursts forth from and obscures his image. Jesus promises a reversal of the world-as-is, in which “light” triumphs over image and true wealth is recognized living within poverty.

Is this saying metaphorical? It is hard to qualify it completely as a metaphor. “Light” for instance would seem to be the vehicle, offering a model for the true, hidden sort of light Jesus is talking about. But what is that exactly? The fact that the light is obscure, hidden by images, reflects a similarity between light/images and spiritual wealth/corporeal poverty. This “light” must be associated with the spirit, and cannot be understood simply as light. “Light” seems to connote the essence of spirit within the world that is obscure. We only know it through Jesus’ invocation of “light.” This is maybe not a typical metaphor, but it conforms to the sort of primal metaphor that Nietzsche discusses in his essay “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense,” the kind from which he imagines language was built. As Nietzsche writes:

The “thing in itself” (for that is what pure truth, without consequences, would be) is quite incomprehensible to the creators of language and not at all worth aiming for. One designates only the relation of things to man, and to express them one calls on the boldest metaphors. A nerve stimulus, first transposed into an image—first metaphor. The image, in turn, imitated by sound—second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one.19

Using “light” to refer to the essence within images is one of these bold metaphors.

Naming and describing this essence by way of the image of light is, as Nietzsche

19 Nietzsche, 3. (how to cite for original citation???)
describes, an "overleaping" from one sphere into a completely new one, in which the
term light receives an entirely new meaning in the context of this highly structured image
of how light, images, humans, and the father are in relation to each other. If we match
this saying with 56 and 28, we can align the metaphor "wealth" with "light," as they both
refer to an obscured, more valuable essence within matter, and judge them both to refer to
things that are truly living, unlike the world and the body, which are destined to be
corpse. The metaphors of these sayings all refer to something beyond the physical
world, and give the reader a purchase on what that something is like. Though the reader
may not have direct experience with the realm of the spirit, by describing it in terms
familiar to human life ("wealth," "light," not a "corpse") he or she may have a sense of it,
and be able to seek it and recognize it.

The general movement of reversal in logion 83 is epitomized by the final
statement wherein the father’s light becomes apparent and obscures his image, flipping
the initial dichotomy where light was hidden from humans by images (which are the
images of the father’s light). Reversing the status quo is a hallmark of Jesus’ teachings,
often voiced in aphoristic, chiasmic paradoxes, such as these:

LOGION 54
Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of heavens.”

LOGION 66
Jesus said, “Show me the stone that the builders rejected: that is the building stone.”

LOGION 68
Jesus said, “Blessed are you whenever they hate you and persecute you. And wherever they have
persecuted you, they will find no place.

LOGION 81
Jesus said, “The one who has become rich should reign. And the one who has power should
renounce.”

Saying 54 and 81 actively work against existing social hierarchies. They threaten the
powers that be in slightly different ways: 54 promises power on the spiritual level ("the
kingdom of heavens”) to the poor, who are the powerless of society, while 81 states the powerful should renounce their power. Jesus refers to “the one who has become rich,” who *should* reign, which seems to be an inversion of his next sentence telling the powerful to resign. His use of the word “should” in both statements indicates this reversal in power structure he imagines is possible, but hasn’t happened yet. But who are the “rich?” The reader must take cues from sayings like 54, that offer an alternative to the powers-that-be, and 66, which indicates an inversion of value, where that which is rejected becomes necessary. In light of these sayings, it follows that Jesus must be describing a different sort of wealth. The word “rich” echoes the “wealth” from logion 29, and associates spirit with the idea of value. All of these sayings offer spiritual power to the powerless of the world. The alternative way of the world that Jesus imagines in his metaphors, thus, is a place where those without material wealth may “reign” by virtue of their spiritual wealth. Combining this message with logion 68 suggests that if those people can become authorities of the world, those who persecute will “find no place”—that is, the world may be transformed through the actions of those who are spiritually rich. One could also draw another message, which would not supersede the first: that the spiritually rich *should* have power, do not, but may find power in the spirit that they could not have in the world. They can “reign,” as logion 2 tells them, by finding the meanings of the sayings. Jesus’ words are ones of comfort and inspiration to the powerless members of society. They imagine a world where all the wrongs and inequalities between people are dissolved. Those who are “rejected” by society can find a sense of importance and motivation to change that society or, having become rich in
spirit, may find a source of personal power. Jesus’ words inspire thoughts of a better, possible world.

The Individual

The current state of the world, as Jesus portrays it, is one of disunion and obscurity. The true wealth of the spirit is not apparent to people in the world; the dualism of matter and spirit is an obstacle to human acquaintance with the spiritual realm in which they share a part. The question is how the movement from this dichotomy to Jesus’ imagined, potential state of the world is enacted. Here I turn to GTh’s understanding of the individual, for it is the individual that is motivated to understand this text from the very opening: “Whoever finds the meaning of these sayings will not taste death.” Immediately following is the imagined trajectory of one who seeks the hidden meanings:

LOGION 2
Jesus said, “Let one who seeks not stop seeking until that person finds; and upon finding, the person will be disturbed; and being disturbed, will be astounded; and will reign over the entirety.”

According to a footnote by Layton, the saying appears differently in one of the Greek fragments through which GTh was known before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts:

“and will reign over the entirety”: the Greek fragment instead has “[and] being astounded, will reign; and [reigning], will [gain repose].” The last two words are partly preserved in the Greek.20

The implication is simple: if one seeks the hidden meanings, the discovery of them will bring about a great change in the person, a “disturbance” in the self leading to astonishment. To be “astounded” is to be surprised and enlightened by seeing something never seen before, or seeing something in a new way, which suggests that the transformation of the individual, through finding the meaning of the sayings, allows that

20 Layton, 380, note 32f.
person to see the world in a new way, and change they way they approach it. This saying offers a potential future, a state of "repose," to motivate the individual to seek meaning in the sayings. Other sayings contain more direct exhortations to action. Take the following story Jesus tells:

LOGION 8
And he said, "What human beings resemble is an intelligent fisherman who, having cast his net into the sea, pulled the net up out of the sea full of little fish. The intelligent fisherman, upon finding among them a fine large fish, threw all the little fish back into the sea, choosing without any effort the big fish. Whoever has ears to hear should listen!"

The intelligence of the fisherman is shown through his choice of the large fish. Choosing the large fish over the smaller ones is a value judgment—his intelligence, then, is characterized by proper discernment of what is most valuable. His subsequent rejection of all the other, smaller fish, however, is puzzling, and unexpected of an ordinary fisherman. Normally a fisherman's catch becomes more valuable with quantity, i.e. the more fish there are, the more there is to sell. However, this "intelligent" fisherman, who resembles human beings, keeps only the "fine, large fish" from the many he hauls out of the ocean, for he recognizes that it is the only one he needs.

This story seems to exemplify a type of discernment that is "intelligent." This could, possibly, be describing the way one should approach the sayings themselves. The metaphorical obscurity of Jesus' words can make their meanings unclear. The reader is like the fisherman, drawing up meanings from the depth of the text. Jesus' metaphors can evoke a range of possible interpretations—it is up to the reader to find the one most worth keeping. Jesus' closing admonition—"Whoever has ears to hear should listen!"—emphasizes the importance of listening to his words and paying attention.

The reader is responsible for interpreting the sayings, but must also harmonize his or her lifestyle to what one has learned from the sayings. "Finding the meaning" does not
stop at interpreting the words, but involves matching one’s actions to the spiritual knowledge that is uncovered. Jesus’ emphasis is on the sincerity of the individual’s actions:

LOGION 6
His disciples questioned him and said to him, “Do you want us to fast? And how shall we pray? Shall we give alms? And what kind of diet shall we follow?” Jesus said, “Do not lie, and do not do what you hate. For all things are disclosed before heaven. For there is nothing obscure that will not be shown forth, and there is nothing covered that will remain without being disclosed.

LOGION 14
Jesus said to them, “If you fast, you will acquire a sin, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give alms, it is evil that you will do unto your spirits. And when you go into any land and travel in the country places, when they receive you eat whatever they serve to you. Heal those among them who are sick. For, nothing that enters your mouth will defile you. Rather, it is precisely what comes out of your mouth that will defile you.”

Jesus’ rejection of ritual actions such as fasting and praying is provocative and polemical—in doing so, he is not simply dismissing the importance of these actions, but rather trying to emphasize something else about them. “Do not lie,” he says, disregarding the specifics of their questions—fasting, prayer, and diet—in favor of more general counsel. As long as their actions aren’t “lies,” they will be acting correctly. “Do not lie” may be construed metaphorically via Soskice: the tenor, which could generally be called “action” or “actions that are spiritually beneficial,” is to be seen in terms suggestive of lying. The resulting image, fasting-as-lying, engenders an entirely new way by which the disciples may govern their actions. If they fast simply because they are told, and they “hate” it, their fasting will be a lie because it is dishonest to their true feelings. Their actions should be true to their intentions. Instead of worrying about what sort of diet they will have and what sort of regimen they should live by, Jesus encourages the disciples to govern their actions by the spirit within them, as opposed to an external set of guidelines. Jesus’ response directs the disciples to the self as authority, rather than doctrine or the
proscriptions of others. Correct action, he implies, is justified within the self, not without.

The self, in Jesus’ sayings, is a source of power. That is why he tells them to listen to what they feel, recognize what they “hate” and what feels like “lying” and avoid those actions. Actions should be guided by the spirit, and directed outward:

LOGION 70
Jesus said, “If you do not produce what is in you, what you have will save you. If you do not have what is in you, what you do not have will kill you.”

“Producing what is inside of you” provides another guideline for correct action. To do so, Jesus claims, is to save oneself. Yet, if the person does not “have” what is within them, what they do not have will kill them. Jesus’ words indicate that, yes, there is something within everyone, but not everyone possesses it in a way that allows them to “produce” it. If one can’t have and produce what is inside of oneself, all else will “kill” them; life, without possession of the self, is bound for death. Matching this saying with logion 1, it follows that to produce what is within leads the person to a life where they may “not taste death.” Finding the meaning of Jesus’ sayings, thus, helps the person grasp what is within them, and helps them live truly in the way Jesus imagines.

Jesus seems to trust that people are ultimately capable of governing their own actions, and can find the good on their own, provided they seek the hidden meanings of his sayings. But this trust of the self seems predicated on understanding the innate, human potential to “not taste death” and to “reign over the entirety.” He says, in a passage that is quite explicit for its obscure, mystical discourse:

LOGION 50
Jesus said, “If they say to you, ‘Where are you from?’ say to them, ‘It is from the light that we have come—from the place where light, of its own accord alone, came into existence and [stood at rest]. And it has been shown forth in their image.’ If they say to you, ‘Is it you?’ say ‘We are its offspring, and we are the chosen of the living father.’ If they ask you, ‘What is the sign of your father within you?’ say to them, ‘It is movement and repose.’”
Here Jesus returns to the metaphorical terms of logion 83, “light” and “image.” In this saying, which matches the esotericism of 83, Jesus is quite generous with explanation in comparison to his other sayings, which come shrouded in imagery and story telling. Though they are perhaps more literal, they are nevertheless just as obscure. Jesus offers direct answers to fundamental questions of spiritual identity, but what precisely he is referring to by “light,” “father,” “movement,” and “repose” must be discerned by the spiritual seeker.

Helping the reader clarify these obscure terms is saying 83, which also employs “light” and “image.” If the world, as 83 claims, is a place of misleading senses, in which the true essence of the world, called “light,” is hard to perceive, then in 50 Jesus is equating the human spirit with this light. Humans, like the world as described in 83, are “shown forth” as image, which, though it is the image of the true light, is only an image and subordinate to the essence of light. Humans come from this light, and have an element of it within. They are its offspring, for the light is their father. He invites the listener/reader to adopt this identity, to view themselves as offspring from the realm of the true “light” that is obscured by images. Essentially, he is providing the reader metaphorical terms with which to understand his or her living, invisible spirit, effectively putting words into his or her mouth by framing this identity as answers to questions that will be asked. Valantasis notes in his commentary how this saying both exalts the elect status of the seekers, “chosen” out of and questioned by an unenlightened “they,” and subordinates them to the primordial light of the father as children of it.21 The combination of the metaphors “father” and “light” yields a claim about the status of the

21 Valantasis, 128.
human spirit. It seems to collapse a humanist viewpoint on the one hand, alleging a divine light within every person, and a theist viewpoint, clarifying this light makes us like the father, but still his children. The sayings overall seem to encourage and motivate the seekers to recognize the presence of the father’s light within them, and act upon that knowledge.

**Jesus and his Sayings**

Jesus exalts the spirit of the individual, and encourages his readers to look for that living element of the father’s light inside them. His sayings contain the knowledge to lead the individual to that, and so throughout the text he re-emphasizes his sentiment in logion 1—that the sayings provide the way to new, transformed, improved life:

**LOGION 108**

Jesus said, “Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I, too, will become that person, and to that person the obscure things will be shown forth.”

Every individual has this potential within them, only needing to be awakened by the words of Jesus. If one “drinks” from the mouth of Jesus—not simply listens, but ingests—one can actually become like Jesus. Not only that, but Jesus himself will become that person. A person may become similar to Jesus, may resemble Jesus, but the wondrous part is that in doing so Jesus becomes one with them. The reader and the speaker become one and the same, and the obscurity of the text is overcome by knowledge. Then the reader, the seeker of Jesus’ hidden meanings, is initiated into the spiritually elect group of people who do “not taste death.” As stated in the last section, every human shares this potential to be a part of this group, but only those who seek Jesus’ meanings become members. In Valantasis’ words, “The living Father, like the living Jesus who speaks in these sayings, has produced elect children who are entitled to
find the Kingdom.” As for the sign of the father, “movement and repose,” this suggests a dynamic that characterizes the journey of the “light” within human beings. Humans are born from the light, and inherit some of its power. Since the world masks this, Jesus comes with the knowledge of this light to awaken it within his listeners. Coming from the light into the world of matter, the life of the seeker necessitates movement—he must always be listening, seeking, and interpreting. He must constantly seek to “have” that light within him, and strive towards union with the father and Jesus, a state of “repose.”

“Repose” connotes an end-goal, a final release from “seeking” into a state of pure being. In logion 50, the “light” “stands at rest,” and in 28 (the “intoxication” metaphor) Jesus describes himself as “standing at rest in the midst of the world” before he is “shown forth incarnate.” Rest or repose thus must describe the realm of light—the place of the father and Jesus. Repose, as well as “not tasting death” and union with Jesus, characterize the ideal reality Jesus suggests to his readers metaphorically. Finding the meaning of his sayings is the journey towards repose, and this is often characterized as a process of integration:

LOGION 106
Jesus said, “When you make the two into one you will become sons of man, and when you say, ‘O mountain, go elsewhere!’ it will go elsewhere.”

Great power is promised simply by “making two into one.” The human becomes a “son of man” and his or her word has command over physical reality. Simply by telling the mountain to move, it will do so. “Moving a mountain” is a metaphor—the reader may not literally be able to tell mountains to move, but what this image conveys is that the reader gains some kind of authority over physical reality. The permanence of reality, it suggests, fades when the person makes “the two into one,” though what “two” Jesus is

22 Ibid.
talking about is unclear. However, a possible referent could be the dual nature of the human as spirit and body, the “wealth dwelling in poverty.” If one comes to know one’s own nature, and recognizes that “wealth,” that could be described as making the two aspects of the human harmonious. Or perhaps what the “two” is does not matter as much as the general concept of unity and integration as a powerful thing.

Integration is a desirable quality belonging to the father and Jesus, and by extension is associated with the place where the “light, of its own accord alone, came into existence and stood at rest. (Logion 50)” This state of unity is where the human spirit originates, as saying 50 professes. The impetus toward unity expressed in GTh evokes the language Soskice’s theory of metaphor. As said before, metaphor has a unified referent, but is referred to in two distinct elements, tenor and vehicle, whose meanings overlap and inform each other to create a new, singular concept. While Jesus seems to advocate overcoming dualities in a general sense, that is the same type of movement that one cognitively makes in interpreting a metaphor: one overcomes the seeming incongruity of tenor and vehicle and thus arrives at a new idea. The over-riding spiritual end-goal, for both interpreting the language of Jesus metaphors and living by his teachings, is integration.

Jesus directly references his origin in the realm of the father, which he calls “that which is integrated,” when talking to the woman Salome. See in the following saying how Jesus explains himself:

LOGION 61
Jesus said, “Two will repose on a couch: one will die, one will live.”

Salome said, “Who are you, O man? Like a stranger you have gotten upon my couch and you have eaten from my table.” Jesus said to her, “It is I who come from that which is integrated. I was given some of the things of my father (...) “I am your female disciple.” (...).
"Therefore I say that such a person, once integrated, will become full of light; but such a person, once divided, will become full of darkness." 23

Jesus, like the human being described in logion 50, comes from the light, the place of integration. When he says, "I was given some of the things of my father," it is unclear whether to take this as placing Jesus as superior than humans, privileged with these "things," or as an extension of birth from the father that is shared by all humans. But to try to see a value relationship between Jesus and human beings is a misleading thought. Jesus in his sayings provides a model of integration for which the seeker can strive. Jesus is privileged with direct knowledge that he comes from "that which is integrated," and in conveying this to humans, awakens the realization within them that they, too, came from that which is integrated, and should seek to return to it.

I call Jesus' knowledge "privileged" for it is unique to him. What Jesus knows, and the things he has from the father, are obscure to human beings:

LOGION 17
Jesus said, "I shall give you what eyes have not seen, what ears have not heard, what hands have not touched, what has not come upon the human heart."

Jesus, by his own admission, is privileged with knowledge beyond the realm of sense. This knowledge comes from the father, and is passed on in Jesus' words. It takes the human imagination to draw concepts from his obscure statements, drawing interpretations of new meaning by the inter-animation of language via metaphor. Jesus' sayings provide access to his sacred knowledge and ultimate truth, but since it lies beyond the capabilities of human senses (unseen by eyes, unheard by ears, untouched by hands) and has not "come upon their hearts," he must express it indirectly and non-literally through metaphor.

23 The ellipses (format from Layton) indicate where words are inadvertently omitted from the manuscript.
Jesus’ inclination to speak in images and stories is apparent throughout the whole gospel. In logion 13, one of the more narrative sayings, Jesus turns the tables on his disciples and asks an image of them:

LOGION 13
Jesus said to his disciples, “Compare me to something and tell me what I resemble.”
Simon Peter said to him, “A just angel is what you resemble.”
Matthew said to him, “An intelligent philosopher is what you resemble.”
Thomas said to him, “Teacher, my mouth utterly will not let me say what you resemble.”
Jesus said, “I am not your teacher, for you have drunk and become intoxicated from the bubbling wellspring that I have personally measured out.” And he took him, withdrew, and said three sayings to him.
Now, when Thomas came to his companions they asked him, “What did Jesus say to you?”
Thomas said to them, “If I say to you one of the sayings that he said to me, you will take stones and stone me, and fire will come out of the stones and burn you up.”

Jesus, whose saying are often prefaced by statements taking the form, “What [...] resembles is [...]” asks the disciples to come up with a resemblance for him. His request is almost a challenge, as if Jesus is inviting them to try doing what he does and speaking the way he does. Simon Peter and Matthew, it seems, are not as capable of imagery as Jesus—their responses are completely ignored, and strike one as unsatisfactory. “Angel” and “philosopher” are generic images of wise and holy beings, suggesting only a status of spiritual elevation, and lacking the metaphorical detail of Jesus’ speech.

Thomas does not give an image, but Jesus nonetheless rewards his answer. Thomas claims his mouth “will not let him” describe his “teacher” with a resemblance. While that may sound like avoiding the question, Thomas’ response actually indicates a much deeper understanding of Jesus than the other two disciples. He suggests something about Jesus is beyond description, or at least beyond description of which his mouth is capable. Remembering what Jesus told Salome, that he comes “from that which is integrated,” “given some of the things” of the father, perhaps Thomas understands Jesus’ mysterious origin better than Peter and Matthew. By not offering a resemblance, he
recognizes a more significant presence in Jesus than "angel" or "philosopher" could connote. Thomas' answer shows he has attained a higher level of understanding, and he must be closer to "integration" because Jesus refuses his respectful address of "teacher."

What is more interesting, though, is the way Jesus invokes "intoxication." Here he inverts his use of the term in logion 28 ("I found them all intoxicated"). Instead of using intoxication to describe spiritual blindness, he uses it to describe Thomas' engagement with his sayings. Jesus portrays himself as a "bubbling wellspring," from which Thomas has drunk so deeply as to be intoxicated. "Intoxication" here is metaphorical praise for Thomas, indicating he has been listening well to the words of his "teacher." Jesus' esteem for Thomas in this passage results in him giving Thomas three secret sayings, which remain secret in the logion. This saying functions as an authentication of the gospel itself, providing a story that contextualizes the opening: "These are the obscure sayings that the living Jesus uttered and which Didymus Jude Thomas wrote down." It validates Thomas' status as a spiritual guide and eponymous gospel title by providing a story in which Jesus proves his understanding of Jesus and becomes uniquely entrusted with the obscure sayings in GTh by Jesus himself.

Jesus emphasizes the importance of his sayings repeatedly, portraying their power in fantastical ways:

LOGION 19
Jesus said, "Blessed is that which existed before coming into being. If you exist as my disciples and listen to my sayings, these stones will minister unto you."

Notice the transition from language ("listen to my sayings") to physical action (of the stones). The sayings have the power to animate and inspire, as indicated by the image of stones, static, lifeless objects, brought into activity. And not just any activity—they will subordinate themselves to the one who listened truly, for that one has reached the state of
understanding, or repose, that is variously referred to as the light, integration, or the kingdom of God. The final image of stones evokes the closing sentence of logion 13, in which Thomas, having been granted three secret sayings by Jesus, warns the other disciples when they ask him to share the secrets: “If I say to you one of the sayings that he said to me, you will take stones and stone me, and fire will come out of the stones and burn you up.” Thomas’ image of rocks expands upon the affective impact of the sayings as described in 19. In 13, the stones express the disciple’s would-be-rejection of Thomas’ three secrets; Thomas doesn’t share them because he thinks the disciples would reject him, but rather because in rejecting what he says, they would be punished for their own lack of knowledge. His response picks up the rhetoric of the “elect” that runs through some of the sayings. The general idea expressed is that only the spiritually worthy are capable of seeking the hidden meanings of Jesus’ words. Thomas can’t share his secret sayings because they are too dangerous, too powerful, for uninitiated listeners. Language has the power to express Jesus’ acquaintance with the realm of light and the father, but it must be used in the right way—it has to be twisted to the point where it stops to make apparent sense in order to generate meaning about these incomprehensible categories. I locate this power of language primarily in metaphor, which in its function seems to be at the heart of the genesis of language. Metaphor has the ability to generate meaning about an unknown or unclear referent without making “unrevisable claims of truth,” to use the words of Soskice. Here by “truth” she means the theistic truth referenced by religious metaphors. The ideas engendered by Jesus’ metaphors, subsequently colored and focused and by further metaphorizing, lead the individual towards acquaintance with the self, “light,” the “father,” “repose,” and Jesus himself.
The overwhelming sense is that Jesus is unique among humans for his access to the father, his keen wisdom and his power of expression. He is not the father, but he shares in his transcendent-immanent qualities, and at times seems to identify with the father:

LOGION 77
Jesus said, “It is I who am the light (that presides) over all. It is I who am the entirety: it is from me that the entirety has come, and to me that the entirety goes. Split a piece of wood: I am there. Lift a stone, and you will find me there.”

Here Jesus equates himself with the flight, which is in everything, obscured by images. Jesus is at times identified by his sayings, and at other times identified with the father. Though the relationship between Jesus, the father, and light shifts and is redistributed in different images, it is always clear that all three come from the realm of light. One cannot quite parse them from each other as distinct elements; rather, they are best understood as aspects of a transformational dynamic experienced or being experienced by the world, which can be summarized narratively thus, building on the extrapolations made earlier from logion 83:

- There is light within images.
  - The world and the body are images, but they contain light.
- Humans can see images (but not light).
- The light within images is hidden by the “image of the father’s light,” or the father’s image.
- The light within the image of the father will be disclosed.
  - Jesus comes to disclose the light.
  - He does so through his sayings.
- Once disclosed, the father’s image will be hidden by his light.

The disclosure of light and the revelation of what was obscure seem to describe a reinvention of the world, a new understanding of the nature of one’s reality.

The Kingdom of the Father
So how does the kingdom of the father, frequently referred to by Jesus in images prefaced with “What the kingdom of the father resembles is…” fit into this schema? One can only turn to the sayings for elucidation:

LOGION 3
Jesus said, “If those who lead you say to you, ‘See, the kingdom is in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. But the kingdom is inside you. And it is outside of you.

“When you become acquainted with yourselves, then you will be recognized. And you will understand that it is you who are children of the living father. But if you do not become acquainted with yourselves, then you are in poverty, and it is you who are the poverty.”

The kingdom, we are told, is everywhere, inside and outside the self, pervading all reality. It is not perceivable or locatable in any tangible sense—rather, it exists, like the “wealth” within each individual, as an obscured, potential state of the world. Realization of the kingdom is here tied to the idea of becoming acquainted with oneself. The kingdom seems to refer to a possible state of existence, that can spurred on by an individual’s transformed perspective. To know oneself is to know one comes from the light, and to act in accordance with that is to approach reality in an altered way—to be a “passerby,” seeking the true light hidden within all images.

There are many metaphorical “resemblances” offered by Jesus describing the kingdom of the father—too many to deal with all of them in this paper—so I will draw on two that are particularly interesting for different reasons. First, one of the more unexpected, potentially shocking images:

LOGION 98
Jesus said, “What the kingdom of the father resembles is a man who wanted to assassinate a member of court. At home, he drew the dagger and stabbed it into the wall in order to know whether his hand would be firm. Next, he murdered the member of court.”

The violence of the image can be startling to one not familiar with the Gospel of Thomas. Is the reign of the father really being described in terms of an assassination? However, considering this saying in the context of 81 (“The one who has become rich should reign.
And the one who has power should renounce”) clarifies the intentions of Jesus’ image. An assassination of a politician would precipitate an effective change in his community. This assassination is a threat to the status quo, like logion 81, and promises to bring about a change in power. All of this is not even to mention Jesus’ peculiar creation of this image. His story is not simply a political assassination, but rather about an assassin who ensures his success by testing the firmness of his hand first.

The man’s preparation before the assassination seems to model the immanent nature of the kingdom. For people to realize the kingdom, they have to first realize it is all around them, immanent and waiting to be recognized. Then they will be sure of the firmness with which they commit themselves to this new vision of reality. Jesus expands this idea of the kingdom as something existing unnoticed in everything:

LOGION 109
Jesus said, “What the kingdom resembles is a man who possessed a hidden treasure in his field without knowing it. And upon dying he left it to his son. The son was not aware of the fact. He assumed ownership of the field and sold it. And the person who bought it came plowing, found the treasure, and began to lend out money at interest to whomever he wished.”

Carrying on the repeated discourse of hidden-ness and obscurity, the kingdom here is referred to as a field with a buried treasure. The treasure is inherited, unbeknownst to the benefactor and his son. They only need to plow the field, dig into it, to uncover the treasure. The son does not do so, and sells the field, unwittingly leaving the treasure for someone else to find. Digging up hidden treasure seems to model the way one seeks the obscure meanings of Jesus’ words; meaning must be sought or “dug up” out of the sayings. However, the image is affixed to the kingdom at the beginning of the saying. Jesus expresses the kingdom in language reminiscent of the ways he advocates finding the meaning of his sayings, which implies that realization of the kingdom and discovery of Jesus’ obscure meanings are parallel actions. “Treasure” can also be related to the
"wealth" of the spirit living within the body, and so this story could also describe the way one comes to know the self through Jesus’ sayings. The kingdom is also characterized by the concept of “integration” in other sayings:

LOGION 22
Jesus saw some little ones nursing. He said to the disciples, “What these little ones who are nursing resemble is those who enter the kingdom.” They said to him, “So shall we enter the kingdom by being little ones?” Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one and make the inside like the outside and the above like the below, and that you might make the male and the female be one and the same, so that the male might not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye and a hand in place of a hand and a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image—then you will enter the kingdom.”

The disciples try to interpret Jesus literally, asking if they should “be” little ones. Jesus responds with a succession of images expressing integration and transformation. For them to enter the kingdom, they have to make an “image” in place of an “image.” Since the kingdom of the father is one of light, obscured by image, this suggests that in getting into the kingdom, the disciples have to imagine it first without direct access to it. They have to possess the “image” of the kingdom before they can actually “enter.” To enter this kingdom must be to recognize it on earth, to replace a previous reality with a transformed perspective on the world, in the way Jesus suggests to make an “image in place of an image.” The ideal future state of the world, wherein all human beings are brought into acquaintance with themselves and the father, is what Jesus refers to as the kingdom of God. This ideal state of “kingdom” is attainable within the individual on earth, if one listens to the sayings and finds their meaning, for to do so is to welcome a new way of looking at the world. Though exactly how one makes “a hand in place of a hand” is unclear, the empowerment of individual of action is the most apparent message of Jesus’ words. Individuals, by changing themselves, can help change the reality of the word around them, because humans have the innate potential to share in the eternality and power of the father:
In the image of the earth and heavens rolling up before the seeker, the destructive, destabilizing nature of the promised kingdom of the father is again expressed. The phrase “living out of the living” challenges the normal understanding of the categories life and death. Jesus suggests only some of the living are truly living, and those people are worthy to enter the kingdom. They live without death. Death becomes something that can be “seen” or “tasted” (to bring back the image from logion I), but not a necessity of existence. The spiritually worthy are capable of denying the inevitability of death.

In summary, the kingdom of the father is the ultimate, idealized state of the world that is imagined in the teachings of Jesus. This is developed by way of metaphor, wherein the inter-animation of the terms of these metaphorical utterances creates a plurality of meaning within one referential image. The Gospel of Thomas’ worldview can be arranged loosely into a mythic framework in which the world, place of obscurity and images, has the potential to be re-imagined and bettered by humanity, who have the unique, spiritual capacity to find the hidden meaning of the sayings of Jesus’ teachings, to realize the kingdom of the father on earth. The kingdom refers to the realization, through individual thought and action, of the alternative reality Jesus presents in his words, framed as a potential inherent in human beings and the world.

24 The italicized portion is likely a marginal note by a reader that was later mistakenly included in the manuscript, according to a footnote by Layton.
METAPHOR AS SALVATION

Many Christianities attach great significance to an ultimate form of salvation that Jesus brings, the prime example being the Jesus of the New Testament. The four gospels, in conjunction with the other texts of the New Testament and a distinct interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, establish the crucifixion of Jesus as his ultimate act of salvation, in which he sacrifices himself for the sins of mankind. The Gospel of Thomas, I believe, promises something akin to this idea of salvation. Though perhaps not as apocalyptic as the N.T. Jesus, some of Jesus’ words in GTh promote a vision of a new world order that is an immanent potential and metaphysical reality. This alternative view of life is constructed through metaphor in the sayings, but not by metaphor; the reader must seek the hidden meanings of Jesus’ to draw out these concepts. In logion 28, the situation Jesus describes humans in is one of oblivion and helplessness. They are foolishly intoxicated, and are “blind” in their hearts because they cannot perceive the light that is within the images of everyday reality. The ultimate realization of Jesus’ vision, the “Kingdom of God,” is a state of salvation from this spiritual blindness. It is a transition and transformation that is productive as it is destructive, an entire revolution in the way the world works. It is a state beyond death, beyond dualities, and beyond comprehension, all of which are subsumed by the individual’s acquaintance with the self and the father. When I speak of the “salvation” promised by Thomas, or the “salvific” power of the sayings, I am referring to power the sayings have to engender within readers visions of a better reality, towards which they may direct their actions. There is no crucifixion in Thomas, no resurrection from the dead, and no mention of Jesus as the Son of God—but what is there, and what is emphasized by the text as spiritually transformative, is the
imperative to “find the meaning of these obscure sayings.” The sayings themselves are where the salvation lies; and this salvific change in perception is enacted primarily through metaphor.

But why metaphor? It is possible I overestimate the importance of metaphor. There are plenty of other interesting linguistic aspects of Jesus’ words, such as the performative nature of his words, and the types of images he draws from. These are essential to the way that GTh creates an alternative vision of the universe, and arguably have as much of a cognitive impact. However, I think because metaphor is often defined by contrast with other literary tropes like simile and synecdoche, it tends to lose its primacy, that scholars like Sallie McFague have revivified:

Far from being an esoteric or ornamental rhetorical device superimposed on ordinary language, metaphor is ordinary language. It is the way we think...conceptual or abstract language is metaphorical in the sense that the ability to generalize depends upon seeing similarity within dissimilarity; a concept is an abstraction of the similar from a sea of dissimilars. Thus Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest is a high-level metaphorical exercise of recognizing a similar pattern amid an otherwise incredibly diverse set of phenomena.25 (16)

The abstract nature of metaphor makes it fundamental to language for McFague. I also find the way Nietzsche positions metaphor at the genesis of language in his essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” very compelling:

It is this way with all of us concerning language; we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities. In the same way that the sound appears as a sand figure, so the mysterious X of the thing in itself first appears as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound. Thus the genesis [Entstehung] of language does not proceed logically in any case, and all the material within and with which the man of truth, the scientist, and the philosopher later work and build, if not derived from never-never land, is least not derived from the essence of things.26

Language, in its primal state, is entirely metaphorical according to Nietzsche. But at a later time, these metaphors become solid and take on stable meaning. Nietzsche argues this process is necessary for the individual’s sense of stability and reality:

Only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor can one live with any repose, security, and consistency: only by means of the petrification and coagulation of a mass of images which originally streamed from the primal faculty of human imagination like a fiery liquid, only in the invincible faith that this sun, this window, this table is a truth in itself, in short, only by forgetting that he himself is an artistically creating subject, does man live with any repose, security, and consistency.\(^\text{27}\)

I want to focus on Nietzsche’s phrase describing the human being as “an artistically creating subject.” He describes an individual’s subjective experience of reality as an artistic, creative process. The point I want to take from Nietzsche is the idea that metaphor is a process that generates one’s own experience of reality, and that thus, the metaphors of GTh similarly seek to create an understanding of reality as do the mechanisms of perception. But Jesus’ metaphorically imagined reality is a revision of a previously existing reality, and as a result his words seek to break down existing notions of reality to engender new categories of experience within the individual’s mind. Jesus wants to awaken this artistic quality of life, awaken the individual to the malleability of their reality. Jesus cannot simply come down with fire and brimstone and impose the kingdom upon people. He has to inspire within them thoughts of an alternative reality, so they may direct their spirits and actions towards it. This alternative, the kingdom of God, lies obscure within the world. To imagine it is a work of abstraction from the sayings of Jesus. I understand the term abstraction in the way Rudolf Arnheim, in his book Visual Thinking, does. In his chapter titled “What Abstraction is Not,” he argues how abstraction is not simply an extraction of certain traits; abstraction works by drawing something essential from the specific. If one is abstracting from a set of traits or

\(^{27}\) Nietzsche, 5.
descriptive elements, one must “combine the...data into an organized whole.” He gives the following example:

Some years ago an essayist, John A. Kouwenhoven, wrote a book on "what is American about America" by asking himself what such symptoms as the following had in common: the Manhattan skyline, the gridiron town plan, the skyscraper, the model-T Ford, jazz, the Constitution, Mark Twain's writing, Whitman's Leaves of Grass, comic strips, soap operas, assembly-line production, chewing gum. In this personality profile of our country, each symptom may be a legitimate abstraction ("the land of Mark Twain," "the land of skyscrapers"), but together they are a jumble of information until they are welded into unity. In the present case, this was accomplished by a further abstraction, which brought forth a trait common to all twelve symptoms, namely "a concern with process rather than product." If this diagnosis is valid, the abstraction has yielded an enlightening concept by revealing something essential of the thing abstracted. 

Jesus doesn’t offer definitions—to do so would be both contradictory to the self-empowering nature of his teachings and unsuited to the subjects he might define. He describes concepts like the kingdom of the father through metaphors because if he tried to give a concrete definition, something would be lost in the process, not least of which the whole host of meanings and implications generated by metaphor. So, in order to “define” the kingdom for the reader, he appeals to imagistic metaphors to create relationships of movement and power among the metaphysical concepts governing his vision of the world—“spirit,” “light,” “father,” and “kingdom.” Arnheim later expands on the idea of definition in relation to abstracted concepts:

Spinoza has said that "if a definition is to be called perfect, it must express the innermost essence of a thing and must prevent us from taking particular properties for the thing itself."

One can express this also by saying that in order to produce a sensible abstraction, a concept should be generative. It should be possible to develop from the concept a more complete image than that offered by the concept itself.

This section seems hard to apply to the “definitions” of GTh’s own metaphysical concepts. In fact, the way GTh constructs meaning through metaphorically referring to concepts without concretely describing them would seem to make the arrival at Spinoza’s perfect definition an impossible task. How could one express the essence of something if

29 Arnheim, 174.
all one possesses is a collection of metaphorical passages? However, the concepts of GTh ("kingdom of the father" being the primary one) are unique in that they are actually cognitively built through metaphor, unlike the concept "American," which is built from observation and interpretation. Sallie McFague, in her book *Metaphorical Theology*, portrays a metaphor as describing something that is "lesser-known" in terms of something that is "better-known."\(^{30}\) In the case of the kingdom, that something is practically unknown, as the only access we have to it is through the metaphors. Each successive metaphor adds further clarity to the concept of kingdom: by combining all these metaphors into a cohesive unity, the individual reader can abstract what Jesus means. Arnheim describes this influx of meaning into concepts:

> In human thinking, every concept is tentative, subject to modification by growth. This may be illustrated by the manner in which someone's view of another individual, or a psychologist's theory of a type of personality, changes through new evidence. Peter has acquired an idea of what kind of a person Paul is. This idea is not automatically confirmed or altered by the mere number of times Peter has occasion to observe Paul. Certain particular situations, however, will provide a test, which either confirms the concept in its present shape or calls for a modification. The picture may become richer, or some of its features may be revealed as artifacts. The new evidence may affect the overall structure of the concept by displacing accents, revealing accidentals as essentials, changing power ratios. In some cases, an initially unitary concept splits up into two or three.\(^{31}\)

Since there is little by which to judge the concept of the kingdom, it doesn't seem likely that within the Gospel of Thomas certain views of the kingdom will win out over others. Each new image is necessary to understanding the full implications of the "kingdom of the father." Metaphor's fluidity of meaning, wherein multiple meanings are assumed by single referent, allows these sayings to be extended and to generate new interpretations. Since Jesus' metaphors, because they refer to concepts beyond the range of human experience, are engaged in an active genesis of meaning, one could draw the following analogy: where orthodox Christianity believes in a living Jesus, who resurrected from the

\(^{30}\) McFague, 6.

\(^{31}\) Arnheim, 187.
dead and dwells in eternity, the theology of GTh suggests the sayings themselves are the active, transformative legacy of Jesus' ministry. The sayings, in effect, are the "living" Jesus. The sayings are where salvation lies for the readers of Thomas.

GTh's language, to a modern reader, still has the capacity to shock, surprise, and motivate. The obscurity of its metaphors in turn keeps them more "active" and generative of meaning. One could argue that over time it becomes an impossible task to understand much older texts as they would have been understood in their historical context. Indeed, there is a lot of truth in that idea. For example, Jesus' story of the assassin in logion 98 might have seemed more natural in a time when violence was a more common, accepted way of influencing politics. Another saying uses the image of a woman baking bread, and perhaps, since relatively few bake their own bread in contemporary times, some of the more poetic details of such an action are lost to modern human experience. However, take Shakespeare for example. He wrote at a time when English was markedly different than it is today—to make sense of his words and catch all of his puns, one needs notes or a glossary to learn the meaning of certain words or idioms that only existed in his time. Nevertheless, Shakespeare is performed probably thousands of times across this country every year. And not only are his plays performed, but they are heavily adapted; some directors set the plays in new places or historical times, some change up racial or gender roles to tweak the meaning of the play, and some insist on producing Shakespeare as accurately as possible to the context in which the plays were written. The dated-ness of Shakespeare's language pales in comparison to the generative power of his themes. The themes are what have remained universal and recognizable.
through modern day, for they remain relevant to the most basic of human emotions, interactions, and relationships.

The Gospel of Thomas’ sayings, though spoken many, many years ago, gathered together around a hundred years after that, and subsequently added to, translated, and transcribed multiple times afterwards, have the same constant relevance that Shakespeare has because they speak to basic human experiences of reality and consciousness. Their metaphors remain active because what they describe can be expressed in no more suitable way. If one can see the primacy of metaphor in the creation of language and meaning, one can appreciate how Jesus’ words inspire radical, new visions of reality within readers. This text, often invoked as an independent witness to the Jesus tradition, is unique within the Christian tradition. I have described it as cohesive, metaphorical, and to some degree performative in the way the non-literality of its language mimics the non-literality of the world that it expresses through the dualism of spiritual and bodily. The Gospel of Thomas’ Jesus is living through his sayings—the sayings retain their metaphorical influence over individuals and, consequently, the world. The discovery of the full, extant manuscript at Nag Hammadi was a blessing, no doubt; one that curiously resembles the man’s discovery of the treasure buried in his field from logion 109. I only hope by illuminating what are the distinctive, inimitable characteristics of the Thomas to keep this gospel alive for modern times and all possible seekers as a source of wonder and spiritual wisdom.
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Layton, Bentley. *The Gnostic Scriptures: a New Translation with Annotations and Introductions*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. This is one of my main translations of Thomas that I will be using. In particular, Layton’s notes and references to other texts, such as parallels in the synoptic gospels, will be very helpful.


