

BOOK REVIEW

Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas: The Other Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007). xii + 160 pp. Pbk. US\$24.95.

This work is an abbreviated account of the author's published dissertation, *Thomas and Tatian: The Relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and the Diatessaron* (SBL; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002). According to Perrin, as stated in the preface, this book was written for two reasons: (1) 'because there needs to be a scholarly yet accessible treatment of what researchers have been saying lately about the *Gospel of Thomas*' and (2) because 'in North American discussions there is an unsettling homogeneity within Thomas scholarship' (p. vii).

The book consists of an introduction followed by two main parts. In the introduction, Perrin delivers an engaging re-telling of the discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas* and a general discussion of dating and provenance. In Part One, Perrin provides a brief survey of modern scholarship by focusing on three individuals—Stephen J. Patterson, Elaine Pagels and April D. DeConick (Chapters 1, 2 and 3, respectively). In Part Two, Perrin explores the *Gospel of Thomas*'s language of composition and its relationship to the *Diatessaron* (Chapter 4), its theology and historical milieu (Chapter 5), and its portrayal of Jesus (Chapter 6).

In Chapter 1, Perrin reviews the work of Stephen J. Patterson. Here, Perrin describes Patterson's position as an 'assault on the argument for dependence' (p. 21). Though the striking similarities between the *Gospel of Thomas* and the canonical Gospels have prompted many to hypothesize that there existed a literary dependence between them, Patterson's work challenges the status quo by viewing them as 'autonomous'. Patterson builds on this theory by adopting the work of Gerd Theissen on the historical Jesus—which characterizes Jesus' movement as 'wandering radicalism'—in order to locate the starting point of Thomas Christianity. While Perrin agrees with Patterson on issues such as the identification of Thomas Christians being truly ascetic, the view

that the *Gospel of Thomas* presents an ‘actualized eschatology’, and resemblances to early Syrian Christianity, he takes issue with his concepts of literary independence and his theory of the beginnings of Thomas Christianity. Perrin’s contention vis-à-vis Patterson’s view of literary independence is that his methodology—form criticism—does not ‘issue a decisive verdict’ (p. 30) simply because it merely supports his own assumptions. Perrin’s final point of dissent concerns Patterson’s appropriation of Theissen’s take on the historical Jesus for the discussion of the origins of Thomas Christianity. Perrin claims that the kind of strict asceticism for which Theissen argues is not clearly visible in early Christianity, and further that ‘there is in fact no compelling evidence that Thomas Christianity took up the practice in the same way’ (p. 35).

Perrin moves next to Elaine Pagels (Chapter 2), whose work on the *Gospel of Thomas* has received much attention from specialists and non-specialists alike. Through Perrin’s review of her, it becomes clear to the readers what Pagels is trying to achieve in her study of the *Gospel of Thomas*—‘to return to a pre-Nicene Christianity, primitive and pristine faith without the elaborate theological formulations and constraining canons’ (p. 39). Pagels accepts the view proposed in earlier works that the Gospel of John was written to counter Thomasine Christianity. Her arguments are hinged on the assumption that ‘John’s gospel directly contradicts the combined testimony of the other new Testament gospels’ (p. 39). Perrin claims, and rightfully so in my opinion, that there is no justification for this assumption, and that it ‘does not mean that the Synoptic writers would have found John’s characterization of Jesus or the Nicene definition at odds with their own’ (p. 44). Pagels goes further to describe John’s model of soteriology, namely, belief in Jesus, as being unique to John. Perrin is correct in noting the obvious problem with this notion, since belief in Jesus is an idea that is present in almost the whole of the New Testament. Perrin ultimately disagrees with the thesis that claims John was written to counter the *Gospel of Thomas* for several reasons, the strongest of which is, in my opinion, the fact that Thomas is portrayed as a hero in John. It would, therefore, make little sense to view John as countering Thomasine Christianity.

Perrin concludes Part One by considering the views of April D. DeConick (Chapter 3). DeConick understands the *Gospel of Thomas* to be analogous to a view advanced by William McKane, who claimed

that Proverbs and Jeremiah were ‘predominantly orally based collections snowballing and accruing sayings over time’ (p. 54). Using McKane’s ‘compositional process’ as her starting point, DeConick attempts to get back to the ‘kernel’ of the *Gospel of Thomas* by stripping away all the things that could possibly be considered later additions. Perrin vehemently disagrees with DeConick’s view that the *Gospel of Thomas* derives purely from an oral tradition. This is so important to Perrin because his central thesis, which he introduces in Part Two, is that the *Gospel of Thomas* was first *composed* in Syriac and also has *textual* affinities to the *Diatessaron*. Perrin of course does not deny that some of the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* have oral origins. But he does emphasize the fact that DeConick ultimately sells herself short in defining what is early material and what is late material. In order to make a better argument, DeConick should have, according to Perrin, linked the Thomas tradition with Jesus himself (p. 65).

Part Two begins with a chapter (Chapter 4) that analyzes the original language of composition of the *Gospel of Thomas*. While the majority of scholars argue for a Greek original, Perrin argues for a Syriac one. To begin the discussion, Perrin notes that many things inherent in the Gospel itself point to Syrian provenance. Next, Perrin notes the strong affinities between the *Gospel of Thomas* and Tatian’s *Diatesseron*, which was more than likely written in Syriac. All of this sets the stage for Perrin’s main study: catchwords in the *Gospel of Thomas*. In Perrin’s reconstruction of the Syriac *Gospel of Thomas*, he concludes that there are a total of 502 catchwords, far outweighing the catchwords in the Greek and Coptic texts. To Perrin, this suggests the Gospel’s editor intentionally connected these sayings. And as a result, no isolated sayings exist. The way in which Perrin explains the divergence of sequence and arrangement from the Synoptic material is that the author of the *Gospel of Thomas* used Tatian’s Gospel harmony. Finally, Perrin shows the remarkable similarities in ascetic practices between the Tatian and Thomas communities: opposition to marriage, opposition to wealth, and opposition of the consumption of meat. To complement his point, Perrin notes that these practices are at odds with Jesus and his followers, which suggests that the Tatian and Thomas communities were ‘challenging the apostolic line’.

Chapters 5 and 6 are closely related, as they deal primarily with the theological structure of the *Gospel of Thomas*. In Chapter 5, Perrin looks at how the *Gospel of Thomas* opposes the Synoptic tradition and

why this opposition matters. In *Gospel of Thomas* 13 there is a fascinating dialogue among Matthew, Peter and Thomas. Thomas is cast as the more important character when Jesus tells him ‘three words’ in private while Matthew and Peter are denigrated. Perrin claims that the characters Matthew and Peter represent the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and that the author of the *Gospel of Thomas* ‘recoils against the portraits of the first gospels’ (p. 114). It is Thomas who is privy to the true identity of Jesus, and this ultimately grants authority to the Thomas community. Perrin next discusses the doctrinal similarities between Tatian and Thomas, the most important of these being soteriology. Salvation for both requires strict asceticism and a purification of the body and soul. ‘Salvation in essence is returning to one’s true self as it was found in Adam’ (p. 120). The final chapter (Chapter 6) paints a picture of the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas*. To do this, Perrin, indebted to DeConick on this point, brings to the fore the role of Hermeticism within Thomas Christianity, and how and in what ways Jesus conforms to it. Perrin argues that, in Thomas, Jesus is the one whom others are to imitate. By becoming Jesus’ ‘twin’ (that Thomas means ‘twin’ is, according to Perrin, not insignificant), one receives salvation. This imitation, for the *Gospel of Thomas*, would require abstinence from marriage, sex, meat and wealth.

This book has a number of important strengths. First, Perrin does a remarkable job in reviewing and interacting with the works of Patterson, Pagels and DeConick. Perrin’s book would have lacked much had he not informed the reader of the work that is being done in current Thomas scholarship. While Perrin is critical of all three, he is also very sympathetic at times, and his scholarship is to be commended on this count. Secondly, Perrin proposes a credible thesis that claims that, against the popular view, the *Gospel of Thomas* was not written in Greek, but Syriac. Perrin’s arguments are clearly and forcefully formulated and would hold up under scrutiny. I am personally convinced by Perrin’s claim that the perceived flaws in the *Gospel of Thomas* can be salvaged by considering the original language in which the Gospel was composed: Syriac. Thirdly, Perrin adeptly demonstrates the connections between the *Gospel of Thomas* and Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, and he also does well in placing these two texts within their socio-historical context—Syriac Christianity. Fourthly, couched in the whole of his argument, Perrin boldly gives a new date to the *Gospel of Thomas*—the last half of the second century. This is one major juncture at which

Perrin deviates from the majority of scholars. However, if others are willing to accept Perrin's thesis that Thomas used Tatian, then his re-dating of the Gospel is certainly viable.

I have two rather insignificant reservations. First, some of Perrin's arguments seem to be indebted to others, and I would like to have seen how he sees his arguments as building upon or departing from theirs. For example, he mentions that Quispel, Stroble, Schippers, Baker *et al.* drew comparisons between Thomas and Tatian (p. 82). It would have been nice for Perrin to express the ways in which he feels his contribution improves or surpasses those before him. This would only have made clearer his originality on the subject. Secondly, at one point Perrin states that the *Gospel of Thomas* 'certainly had other sources, both oral and written' (p. 97). Here, I would like to have seen Perrin treat, or at least speculate a little more on, what might constitute these other sources. Granted that his primary interest is in the Syriac original and the *Diatessaron*, these 'other sources' to which he refers would have perhaps added a broader perspective on the *Gospel of Thomas* as a whole.

In spite of the aforementioned reservations, it must be said that this book accomplishes much and establishes a wealth of knowledge on the origins of the *Gospel of Thomas*. Where many *Gospel of Thomas* books focus solely on the sayings themselves and the theology therein, Perrin digs deeper and asks the much harder question of how this book came to be written. Any student of the New Testament or early Christianity would benefit greatly from learning Perrin's side of the story—a story that is, in my opinion, quite convincing.

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