

Jesus said, "I am the light that is over all things.
I am all: from me all has come forth, and to me all has reached.
Split a piece of wood; I am there.
Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."
-- The Gospel of Thomas, Saying 77

When Paul was evangelizing the Greco-Roman world, he had no Bible, no gospels, no accepted-as-authoritative letters of Paul. There were Scriptures, though not necessarily the same Old Testament scriptures we know (the Jewish canon wasn't settled until 150-250 CE). But the gospels, the place where we go today to see what Jesus had to say, had not yet been written. What they had were teachings handed down from his followers and, we believe, collections of the Master's sayings. After a generation or two, people wanted to know more about the man from whom these teachings originated, and the gospels appeared, stories about Jesus wrapped around the teachings which had been passed down.

Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel both quote heavily from the Gospel of Mark. Ninety percent of Mark's gospel is copied into Matthew's version, and about 50% of Mark's gospel is quoted directly by Luke. Matthew and Luke also quote from another common source which we no longer possess. Scholars refer to this lost source as "Q" (from the German, *Quelle*, which means *well* or *source*). Q is believed to have been a collection of teachings and sayings, much like the Gospel of Thomas.

The Gospel of Thomas was not an alternative gospel. There is no story line. It contains no stories about Jesus, just a collection of teachings purporting to be from him. It was from collections like this that our Gospels were formed. (Papias of Hieropolis (CE 60-139), an early bishop and contemporary of the gospel writers, tells us that Mark got the material for his gospel from Peter, but that he got events in the wrong order!). Thomas may however be source material for our actual gospels. Many if not most of its 114 sayings can be found in the gospels we do possess, though in a different presentation. One is tempted to believe that the gospels were presentations for public consumption, while the same teachings in Thomas push us quickly into a deeper, more spiritual place of contemplation.

It is wrong to think of such early Christian writings as alternative versions of Christianity. Modern publishers certainly find it sells better when presented as "banned scriptures". But, for the most part, it is more accurate to think of most of them as early Christian fan fiction, though that may not be true of Thomas. Thomas may, in fact, be a collection of Jesus' actual teachings written down, collected, and passed around. It did not make it into the Bible, but that does not mean that it isn't what it says it is, a collection of Jesus' own words. Nor does it establish that it is.

There is scholarly debate about the authenticity and date of the Gospel of Thomas. When I was in college in the '70s, most thought it was probably a later document, possibly second century, because of its "more developed" theology. (The same was said of John's gospel, though it turns out that John more accurately describes places and practices of Jesus' time than the later

gospels.) Today more and more scholars believe that the Gospel of Thomas may actually be a collection of Jesus' actual teachings.

The best reason for reading early Christian writings outside of the biblical canon is that they frequently help us interpret and understand things found in scripture as the early Christians did. Thomas is no exception. In Thomas' collection of Jesus' sayings, we find familiar teachings in a new light, often illuminating things hidden from a more public presentation. It's worth a look. Don't think of them as "banned", "forbidden", or "secret". They are what they are. Some of them may indeed have been secret and intended for only a few, but, as the Gospel of Thomas says (Saying 6), "For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed, and there is nothing covered that will remain undisclosed."

Go and study.