

Thomas Texts

Sayings from the *Gospel of Thomas*

The Gospel of Thomas records "secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and that Didymos Judas Thomas recorded. And He said, "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death." "

Uproot yourselves, give away all you own, seek, travel until sight loses you, make each day its own Sabbath, then ask a child about your place in the great creation and marvel at what you have lost.

You ask what I am truly like. A lion, a fish, a sage, a fool, a drunkard? I am the one who releases the falling knife, who tensions the string when you nock the bow, who is both flight and steadfastness.

The builders of this earth will cast me aside as misshapen stone that does not fit the pattern, mortar that will not hold. But know this, I am the level, the keystone, I bind both lime and silica.

They will lay down palm leaves before me, sing me hosannas, even celebrate my donkey in verse, then they will flog me and kill me. My death will be reborn and become a psalm for the ages.

The world gladly worships a smile, while you have chosen a path of fire and whip. Things will be done to you in my name, so that you will grow to hate me. Indulge this enmity. It will be the measure of your love.

"To Pass By"

"He said, Become passersby," Gos. Thom. 42.

In the voice of Thomas.

The Book was unwritten, we were its pages, we wore them as tunics, wrapped them as shawls, while the dead were forced to dwell beyond the city walls, alongside tracks that climbed towards vantage, trails that marched to settlements unmeasured by our not-to-scale maps: on foot, everywhere reeked of distance. Though the stone plaints and histories of the unseen read like gossip of a kind, they called us to pity, to piety. He counselled us to stopper our ears, to reserve each footprint for the homeward path, to stand outside even the walls of this life. At times I wanted to bite Him, to know the taste of salvation; other times, to pass Him by.

Three Songs from the Acts of Thomas

The Flute Girl's Song

A Jewish girl entertains guests at the wedding of the daughter of the king of the city in which Thomas and his merchant master take rest on their way east. Thomas sings this song in Hebrew after she has played.

As she brushes her hair, a glister of sun escapes a knot
of cloud. Strands of light loop her flute like a clef: the scythe
of morning, dusk winnowing into night, her breath's simoom
and zephyr as the scale commands. Speech has no purchase
for our garlanded senses. There is a melody beyond the ear,
a grace note more than ornament.

The Urging of the Wild Asses

*Wild asses yoke themselves to Thomas' cart after his charges tire.
When they reach their destination, he orders one of their number
to call forth a demon that has possessed a mother and her daughter.
The ass becomes impatient with Thomas when he parleys with the
demon rather than completing the exorcism.*

Are you a mere helver, or can you wield that axe?
You cavil with the beast while it shreds innocence?

Mercy does not whisper into flame in the angle of the sun
through glass. It shrieks a cascade of fire at the strike
of the flint. Incant as you have been taught, restore the woman
and her daughter to the light. There are other battles to be fought.

The Hymn of the Pearl

Thomas remains silent when King Misdaeus questions him on his identity and the authority by which he preaches. The king imprisons Thomas who intones this hymn before his fellow inmates.

I awoke to the letter pleating my lips and the wing-surge
of the messenger eagle as it fled the stoped trench

and sump of companions I'd fallen in with:
"climb up, cut yourself free; the coat begotten

of sapphire, amethyst, diamond and mirrored glass;
the unfilled claw of gold hewn into the left pectoral,

your pledge to restore to its rightful place the pearl
lodged in the poison sac of the asp of Egypt".

On its return

the palace doors burst open, a revelry of trumpets and drums,
my father's arms spread wide as a delta, the coat hung

in greeting for me, alive with kingship; but I bequeathed it
to a nameless other, content now with these windows and walls.

Two Postscripts

I am not John

The Gospel of John mentions the “disciple whom Jesus loved” in many places but does not identify him nor her. This disciple has received much exegetical attention over the years. Schenke has suggested Thomas as the model for the Beloved Disciple. Charlesworth goes so far to identify him as Thomas.

I’ve seen them, even from this remove, scour the catacombs like stoats, pore over the bone piles, sniff the possibility of a random trochanter matching the fragment of femur they hold before them, then resort to the lathe to sculpt

the long shafts that will advance their arguments.

It has not been given me to know whether John wrote

the gospel that makes us beg his name, whether it was in Patmos,³ as they say, nursing the oil scalds that preceded his exile, that he absorbed the Koine script of the text (not the Aramaic we spoke) and where the brief spells

he could endure outside the cavern-made-hermit-cell as he healed transformed light into the ecstasy he injected

into his memory of the Saviour. Even less do I know of the beloved disciple who slouched on Christ’s shoulder as we ate that last night, who stood and bartered fame for care of His mother as He mouldered on the bloody cross.

Three days later the doe-eyed one immediately discerned the portent – after Magdalene’s alert – of the bare crypt

but neglected to convey its import to us. And I was cast as a termite drunk on the necessity of wood! But still I was the first to proclaim the words that became our creed: we seek for the eternal whorl that will gather

us into the sacred thread, so that we are all loved, there is no need for a Thomas, nor for a John.

³ Tertullian reports that the Roman emperor, Domitian, banished John to Patmos after sentencing him to be plunged into burning oil.