QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO THOMAS

The composition of pl. 81,14—18 and pl. 83,14—27

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The problems which the so-called Gospel according to Thomas has raised are numerous. There are the problems about authorship and date, about sources and composition, about the origin and use of the Gospel, about its interpretation and tendencies, etc.

The following is to be regarded as a contribution to the answer to the problem which the modern reader of The Gospel according to Thomas will often encounter: do we possess the text of the Gospel in its original form, or is it possible to trace the present composition of the text back to a more original form?

We will take one of the passages in the Gospel according to Thomas where this problem is raised as soon as we read it, and look at this text. One of these passages is pl. 81,14—18.¹

¹ — plate 81, lines 14–18, in the photographic edition of the papyrus: Coptic Gnostic Papyri in The Coptic Museum at Old Cairo by Dr. Pahor Labib, volume I, Cairo 1956. — In the different publications about The Gospel according to Thomas, varying numberings of "logia" are used. These varying numberings are due mainly to the different interpretations of the text. The division into "logia" is natural and useful when used in a full edition or translation, because it can show how the editor has read or understood the text, and it can be part of an editor's interpretation of the text. The numbering of the "logia", however, is less useful for references in general, because the system of numbering is not uniform. I therefore suggest that references to the text should be given according to plate and line in the photographic edition by Dr. Pahor Labib.
Pl. 81,14 . . . . . ποινοντικεν
15 περιαγιαδζε αλγνι ερευνάτερεγα
16 αλγνι ερητε οι εναυμιλα επαγε ελι
17 αποκαλημεν αλγνι εναρπαρατηρει εογ
18 ποινοντικεν πεγα σε αλγνι επερεε σολ αλγ
19 δατενειμοντε εμνον φιπράδε με
20 εσελναν τηρον εβολ απεμετο εβολ
21 λεγε μη δανναν εμε αερεμε αμελεαμεν
22 εμε εβολ μη αναν αραν εμε ελονε εα
23 καλεσαν πεγα σελανεν

In translation:

Pl. 81,14 “. . . . . . . His disciples (μαθητής) asked Him,

15 they said to Him: “Do you want us to fast (νηστευειν)
16 and how shall we pray, shall we give alms (δελμασυνη)
17 and what diet shall we observe (παρατηρειν)?”
18 Jesus said: “Do not lie,
19 and do not do what you hate, for
20 all things are revealed before Heaven.²
21 For (γάρ) there is nothing hidden that shall not
22 be revealed and there is nothing covered that
23 shall remain without being uncovered.”

In pl. 81,14–18 we have four questions from the disciples and in the following pl. 81,18–23 a saying of Jesus. It is clear from the common use of questions and answers in the Gospel according to Thomas that the saying may be regarded as an answer to these four questions.³ But when we regard the contents of the four questions and that of the answer, we must admit that the questions are very detailed whereas the answer is very general. The answer may be regarded as an exhortation to a life in truth and righteousness: when the questions are about details as fast, prayer, alms or diet, the answer is that the will of their master is more profound and far-reaching and that their lives must be lived in

² The parallel in Ox. Pap. 654,38 has τρητης δανεσεως. The Coptic leptos, therefore, is perhaps to be read leptos.
³ Cf. pl. 90,7–12, and pl. 90,12–18.
truth and love. It is possible with this interpretation to take the saying as an answer to the four questions, although we must add that only this interpretation makes it possible to regard the saying as an answer to the questions, since it is impossible in pl. 81,18–23, to find any direct answer to the questions which are asked in 81,14–18. This is easily seen when the two parts of the text are compared:

pl. 81,14–18
His disciples asked Him, they said to Him:
Do you want us to fast?
and how shall we pray,
shall we give alms?
and what diet shall we observe?

pl. 81,18–23
Jesus said:
Do not lie,
and do not do what you hate,
for all things are revealed before Heaven. For there is nothing hidden that shall not be revealed and there is nothing covered that shall remain without being uncovered.

We might expect more detailed answers to four such detailed questions, or at least answers which had a bearing on the problems posed in the questions. Each question covers its part of the religious life and the praxis pietatis as

fast
prayer
alms
diet.

It would not be surprising if, instead of the general exhortation to a life in truth and righteousness, we should in the following have found answers which, correspondingly, covered each its part of the religious life, so that the disciples would have been told if they had to fast, how they had to pray, if they had to give alms, and what kind of diet they had to observe.

We do, in fact, have such answers in the Gospel according to Thomas, not in the immediately following passage, but two pages
further on in the papyrus, namely pl. 83,14–27. Before looking at this part of the text we will end our comparison of the contents of pl. 81,14–18 and 81,18–23 with the conclusion that although, through a very free interpretation, it is possible to regard 81,18–23, as a general answer to the questions in 81,14–18, it is more natural to admit that the saying in 81,18–23, does not apply particularly well as an answer to the questions in 81,14–18, but that it is more natural to regard the saying as an exhortation which could be said without the preceding questions.

As mentioned above, the Gospel according to Thomas does include a saying which gives the answers to the problems about fast, prayer, alms and diet, and we shall now consider this text, namely pl. 83,14–27.

The text runs as follows:

Pl. 83,14 ........................... πέξεβε
15 ἐν ἡλικίᾳ δὲ ετετήθη ἡμετεράς τεταρτή
16 ἅπαν ἲστιν ἡμεταρτοποιή αὐτῶν ετετήθη
17 ὥσπερ τεσσαράκταπερος ἤμων αὐτῶ
18 ετετήθηοι ἐξηλισμούμεν ετεπάκι
19 ρε ἡμικακοὶ πεταλώπειν αὐτῶν ετετήθη
20 μελήκων ἐρεγην επάρ νυν αὐτῶν ἠτετά
21 μοι ὡς ὃς ἡμεταρτοποιή ἐτεπάκι
22 ἤμων πετομαχώλεις χαριτώ τούτος χρονοῦς
23 πεταλώνης ὑμνητῷ ερεγηναπεγανην ἡμοῦ
24 οὐ πετομαχόνιον ἀπερεγην ὃ τετάκα
25 πρὸς ἐναχῶρι τινός τιν' ἀλλὰ πετάν
26 ἂν ἐναγα ὃ τετάκαπρο τοῦτο πε
27 ὑπαχάρι τινός τινι ................

In translation:

Pl. 83,14 ............................. Jesus said
15 to them: When you fast (ποιετεύειν), you will
16 beget sin for yourselves, and when you
17 pray, you will be condemned (κοτακρίνειν), and
18 when you give alms (ἐλημοσύνη), you will do
19 evil (κακόν) to your spirits (πνεῦμα). And when you
20 go away into any land and
21 wander in the regions (χῶρα) and they receive
(παρεδέχοσθαι)
22 you, eat what they set before you,
23 heal (θεραπεύω) the sick among them.
24 For (γάρ) what goes into your mouth
25 will not defile you, but (ἀλλὰ) what
26 comes out of your mouth, that is what
27 will defile you.

In the present form of the Gospel according to Thomas, this saying is not designated as an answer. There is no preceding “The disciples asked Him . . . .”. The saying is a clear statement concerning four of the most important problems in the religious life of man at the time of the Gospel. But as the present composition of the Gospel according to Thomas stands, it is not an answer to any particular question, but a statement which is absolute and independent of the immediately preceding part of the Gospel according to Thomas.

When, however, we look at the contents of this statement, we notice immediately, that not only does this statement deal with the same four problems as the four questions which were put forward two pages earlier, but also that the statement does in fact give an answer to each of the four questions in pl. 81,14–18, about *fast, prayer, alms and diet*. We also notice that these answers are given in the same order as that in which the questions were put, namely concerning

    fast
    prayer
    alms
    diet.

When we remember that the answers which were given in 81,18–23 did not, in fact, apply particularly well as answers to the questions in 81,14–18, and having now seen that the statement in pl. 83,14–27, gives an answer to each of the four questions in pl. 81,14–18, we come to the conclusion that the passage which we have in pl. 81,14–18, in a more original form of the text,
was followed by the passage, which in the present form of the
manuscript is found in pl. 83,14–27.

How well the statement in pl. 83,14–27, applies to the text in
81,14–18, as answers to questions, is easy to see when we compare
the two texts:

81,14–18
His disciples asked Him, they said to Him:
Do you want us to fast?
And how shall we pray?
Shall we give alms?
And what diet shall we observe?

83,14–27
Jesus said to them:
When you fast,
you will beget sin for yourselves.
And when you pray,
you will be condemned.
And when you give alms, you will
do evil to your spirits.
And when you go away into any
land and wander in the regions
and they receive you, eat what
they set before you, heal the sick
among them. For what goes into
your mouth will not defile you,
but what comes out of your
mouth, that will defile you . . .!

The contents of the three passages, 81,14–18; 81,18–23; and
83,14–27, have thus given us the idea that, in a more original
form, the text began with the questions (at present in 81,14–18)
and then, as answers to these questions, followed not the words
which are at present found in 81,18–23, but the words which
are now found in 83,14–27.

The opening words of the passage in 83,14–27 are περὶ πα γι ιε (Jesus said to them:). The word πα γι ιε which is trans-
lated to them indicates the presence of some persons to whom
Jesus could speak the words. This can be the situation which
we have in Pl. 82,25 ff. where, in 82,25, we read: περὶ πα γι ιε
(These disciples said to Jesus), in 82,30–31: περὶ πα γι ιε
(These disciples said to His disciples), in 82,32–33:
περὶ ια ρῆ πρὶ σιο μος πε τρος ιε (Simon Peter said to Him),
in 82,34–83,1: πεζαζη μαγη μαθημας με (Matthew said to Him), in 83,10–11: πεζαζη μαγη μαθημας (Thomas said to them). In this series of πεζαζη μαγη . . . or πεζαζη μαγη, the πεζε εκ μαγη με could fit very well, but, on the other hand, if we place the text now in 83,14–27, as immediately following the questions of the disciples in 81,14–18, we see that the opening words of the answer πεζε εκ μαγη με fit in very well with the opening words of the questions αγαυογη μετα μεμαθημεν. There the disciples ask Jesus, and then the μαγη (to them) in πεζε εκ μαγη με signifies the disciples. Thus, if we place the text which is found in pl. 83,14–27, immediately after the text in 81,14–18, we have a clear correspondence in the contents of the two texts as well as a clear agreement between the opening words of the two texts.

Thus we have good reasons to suppose that the texts now found in 81,14–18 and in 83,14–27 have been a connected whole in a more original form of the so-called Gospel according to Thomas or of a source prior to it.

The questions will then naturally be: why was the order changed, and when did the change occur? I hope to treat the first of these questions together with other problems of the same kind elsewhere. Here it must be enough to deal briefly with the second question: when was the order of the text changed to its present sequence? With our present sources we can only say that already the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 654 has had the same composition as our version of the Gospel according to Thomas in this place. The Ox. pap. 654 is very fragmentary at the end, but it is clear that in lines 32–39 this Greek papyrus has had a parallel to the text in the Coptic papyrus pl. 81,14–23. The parallel to the Coptic text 81,14–18 has constituted the questions in the Greek 1. 32–36, and the following in the Greek text 1. 36–39 a parallel to the Coptic 81,18–23, and not to the text in the Coptic MS. pl. 83,14–27. Thus the present order in the Coptic text has existed already in the Greek text found in Ox. pap. 654, which is commonly dated to the third century.