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Naked Bodies: Transgendering the Gospel of Thomas¹

Zusammenfassung:

Eine *transgender*-Perspektive wirft neues Licht auf einige Logien im *Thomas-Evangelium*. Sowohl *gender* als auch Körper und Verkörperung sind in diesem Evangelium verschiedenartig dargestellt, so dass Leser und Leserinnen zu keinem wirklichen Begriff von Geschlecht kommen können. Das Bild von nackten Körpern, die auf Kleidern trampeln (Logion 37) als Voraussetzung dafür, “den Sohn des Lebendigen” zu sehen, ist ein verblüffendes Bild, das für Menschen, deren Geschlecht nicht den kulturellen Normen entspricht, besonders hoffnungsvoll sein kann. Nacktheit ohne Scham ist außergewöhnlich. Für Menschen, deren Körper möglicherweise eine Kombination verschiedener Geschlechtsmerkmale enthalten, ist Nacktheit ohne Scham revolutionär.

Saying 36: Jesus said, “Do not be concerned from morning until evening and from evening until morning about what you will wear.”

Saying 37: His disciples said, “When will you become revealed to us and when shall we see you?” Jesus said, “When you disrobe without being ashamed and take up your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then you will see the son of the living one, and you will not be afraid.”²

Texts: Ancient and Modern

A few months ago, I sat in my study with a translation of the *Gospel of Thomas* in one hand, and Leslie Feinberg’s *Transgender Warriors* in the other.³ My experiences as a pastor, a foster parent of a transgender young adult, and a biblical scholar were pushing me to re-read and rethink *Thomas*. Another book was close at hand: Loren Cameron’s beautifully conceived collection of photographs entitled *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits*.⁴ Loren Cameron is a muscular striking individual whose body includes a wonderful mix of attributes: a moustache and modest beard, a sculpted chest, multiple tattoos, hair extending from navel to genitals, and a vagina. Loren Cameron is a man who does not have or apparently need a penis. Elsewhere in Cameron’s volume are photos of Chris. I first knew Chris as someone who felt trapped in a woman’s body: he

has since had surgery, and now lives as a man. As I pondered these pictures and texts, the image of my own foster daughter/now son came to mind. Specifically, I wondered, what might this gospel have to say to the transgender community and to those who both rejoice and struggle with awareness of transgender? Furthermore, how might the experiences of transgender people help us to read the *Gospel of Thomas*?

Starting with Transgender

In this paper, I am consciously beginning my brief exploration of *Thomas* from the presumption of transgender as a contemporary reality. “Transgender,” a term coined during the mid to late 1980s, is difficult to define precisely because it encompasses several different realities/experiences. In the recent *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America*, Kara Thompson notes that the term was first used to describe those who “crossed boundaries of gender, but not sex.”⁵ During the past few years, the term has acquired a broader use. As Justin Tanis explains, “*Transgender* is commonly used as a broad term to encompass a whole range of people who transgress the commonly understood definitions of general all or part of the time... Generalized statements about this group of people are difficult because the group includes such a wide variety of people.”⁶ My use of the term includes people who seek to physically alter their bodies to conform to their gendered self-understanding, as well as those who simply defy cultural gender norms.

My awareness of transgender comes not from personal embodied experience but only “second-hand,” via the experiences and stories of people who are known to me personally as well as those whose voices are available through books and other media. In the sense that I am pondering how a transgender perspective might move *contemporary* readers toward a new understanding of *Thomas*, my approach might be classified as “reader-response.” As I started to work on this paper the question raised by Athalya Brenner in her newest book struck a responsive chord:

“What would biblical narratives look like if reread confessionally and unashamedly with postmodern concerns in mind, openly emphasizing concerns raised by contemporary bible and literature scholars instead of guesses about ‘original’ intentions and conditions?”⁷

As a scholar I am indebted to the many studies of *Thomas* that offer us important glimpses into the ancient communities that produced and received the gospel, but here I am intentionally placing modern interests in the foreground, reading *Thomas* as a sacred

text that is provocative and hopeful in the context of emerging contemporary understandings of gender as a fluid, multi-faceted construct. I am not an expert in the *Gospel of Thomas*; my interest in *Thomas* emerges as much from pastoral as from scholarly concerns.

Gender and Performance

This paper is particularly indebted to the work of Richard Valantasis, whose 1997 commentary on *Thomas* appeared in the Routledge Press *New Testament Reading* series.⁸ Valantasis argued that one can best understand *Thomas*' theology as performative: In *Thomas*, Jesus invites a new set of behaviours that in turn lead to a new subjectivity. In Valantasis' view, gender and singularity are the two major areas in which the distinction between the old and the new subjectivity are most clearly delineated.⁹ I agree with Valantasis that as a sayings gospel *Thomas* is well-suited to a performative reading. However, I suggest that while the concept of unitary gender is found in some *Thomas* sayings, other sayings offer alternative gender constructions. Awareness of transgender as a contemporary construct has helped me to identify these alternative gender constructions. Further, I want to problematize Valantasis' suggestion that unitary gender should be understood as a third gender. As a number of thinkers have pointed out, simply positing a third gender tends to stabilize the binary system of male and female.¹⁰ Further, multiple genders (beyond three) are attested in an impressive variety of cultures, both ancient and modern.¹¹ I argue that both gender and embodiment are variously treated in this gospel. The diverse perspectives offered on these two related concepts are consistent with the destabilizing nature of the Sayings themselves.

I will proceed with a brief review of *Thomas*' varied treatment of gender, understanding gender as an embodied social construct, and then I will focus on Sayings 36 and 37. I will argue that *Thomas* constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs gender with the result that the gospel supports multiple possibilities, without arriving at a fixed notion of gender. This varied construction of gender poses a significant challenge to Western Christianity's concept of binary gender, and offers a place among the followers of Jesus for those whose gender does not fit this binary norm. Further, in keeping with other recent studies of *Thomas*, I submit that *Thomas* does not consistently denigrate the physical body.¹² Rather, just as the gospel offers a varied picture of gender, physical embodiment is also variously construed in *Thomas*, leaving the reader/seeker with multiple options for evaluating embodied life.

There is clearly a layered history related to different “texts” of *Thomas*, and parts of the gospel, including two sayings that are significant for my work, appear in various forms in different versions of the gospel. Readers interested in the textual, form critical, and redaction history of *Thomas* have a number of recent studies to consult.¹³ Here I focus on a translation of the Coptic text recovered as part of the Nag Hammadi library. My reading is not dependent on either the date or the provenance of *Thomas*.

A Review of Gender in *Thomas*

The sayings in *Thomas* both acknowledge and challenge a hierarchical and binary understanding of gender. Gender hierarchy and binarism are supported in a number of sayings. “Father” is consistently used to designate God. Similar to the canonical gospels, biological aspects of being female are not seen as redemptive in *Thomas*. Saying 79 includes Jesus’ remark that a time will come when wombs that have not conceived and breasts that have not given milk will be “blessed.” This Saying anthropomorphizes body parts associated with women and promises a blessing to these female parts when they do not fulfill the expected biological and cultural functions. The Saying counters the assumption, voiced by a woman, that women are blessed by bearing children. Being “born of a woman” is viewed in *Thomas* as less than ideal: the one who is “not born of woman” will be specially honored (saying 15). Saying 105 denigrates a birth mother: Whoever knows the father and the mother will be called the child of a whore. The negativity attributed to women’s physical capacity to give birth may be connected to the final Saying (114) which requires a female to become male as one step in the process of becoming a living spirit.

Thomas includes only one Saying that specifically deals with physical attributes normally associated with men. Saying 53 poses the question, “Is circumcision useful or not?”. In the world of *Thomas* circumcision is associated with men, who become circumcised as a sign of their membership in a particular community. The responder, presumably Jesus, moves the performance of circumcision into the realm of spirit: “true circumcision in spirit has become completely profitable.” In this sense, Saying 53 provides a kind of parallel to Saying 79: both invite seekers to broaden gender-bound physical performances into a spiritual quest. Whereas some scholars argue, however, that in *Thomas* all bodily functions are denigrated in favor of the spiritual realm, embodiment is not consistently portrayed as negative in this gospel.¹⁴

One of the embodied images affirmed in *Thomas* is that of sharing a meal. Saying 61 opens with Jesus’ statement, “Two will recline on a couch; one will die, one will live.”

Salome asks, “Who are you, mister? You have climbed onto my couch and eaten from my table...” Jesus says, “I am the one who exists in equality,” and Salome responds, “I am your disciple.”¹⁵ As the two women named in this gospel (Mary and Salome) interact with Jesus, gender expectations begin to be disturbed.¹⁶ Each woman initiates conversation with Jesus by posing a question. In Saying 21 Mary asks Jesus, “What are your disciples like?”. Jesus’ response is one of his longest in this sayings gospel, and, as Valantasis points out, his response creates solidarity between Jesus and Mary since Jesus refers to other people as “they.”¹⁷

Two Sayings, 22 and 114, have provoked much discussion about the concept of unitary gender, or a return to the androgynous state of Adam, the human being, prior to sexual division. Saying 22 is worth quoting in its entirety to illustrate the movement away from a clearly female embodied image to a unitary image that includes physical attributes not linked to gender:

Jesus saw some babies nursing. He said to his disciples, “These nursing babies are like those who enter the Father’s domain.” They said to him, “Then shall we enter the Father’s domain as babies?” Jesus said to them, “When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and the male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the Father’s domain.”

The opening image acknowledges a reality in which gender is both embodied and marked by specific physical parts or functions: the babies, presumably, are nursing at the breasts of women. By the end of the saying, when male and female are indistinguishable and body parts have been replaced, the opening image is no longer functional. Many readers assume that *Thomas*’ Jesus privileges spiritual reality and denigrates the physical. Meyer, for instance, argues that the character of the unified state is not androgynous but asexual, and reads Saying 22 as an invitation to an incorporeal nature.¹⁸ In Saying 22, however, physical characteristics are not eliminated but reconstructed. Some readers/seekers might understand that in the world being constructed, babies could nurse at anybody’s breast, or that any human could provide the nourishment necessary for life. Certainly Saying 22 disrupts the binary gender images found elsewhere in *Thomas*.

The concluding Saying, 114, once again deals with the issue of binary gender, but offers a different solution for the seeker.¹⁹ Simon Peter said to them, “Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life. Jesus said, ‘Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit representing you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.’” Saying 114 appears to negate the promise of Saying 22 that male and female are no longer valid distinctions. Saying 114 leaves us with a variety of images to consider. Women are clearly present among the community around Jesus, and appear to be causing discomfort for the male leaders, or at least for Peter. In this Saying, Jesus does not dismiss the women, but offers an option that many women find objectionable. The prospect of becoming male is hardly an attractive invitation for many of us, although a female-to-male might hear this Saying quite differently!²⁰ (The transgender person who seeks a move from male to female presents a particularly striking challenge to this Saying.) To add a further and quite unexplored image to the mix, Saying 114 prompts questions about the identity of Jesus, who refers to Peter and his companions as “you males.”

Who is Jesus? He avoids binary self-identification. In fact, he avoids clear identification at all. In Saying 13, when Jesus invites his disciples to compare him to something, none of their suggestions meet with his approval. In Saying 77, Jesus identifies himself with light and “with all.” When the disciples press the question of his identity, in Saying 91, pleading “tell us who you are,” Jesus replies, “you have not come to know the one who is in your presence.” Throughout the gospel, Jesus pushes the parameters of identity. Again, despite the arguments of some that Jesus is to be found in the realm of spirit opposed to body or flesh, the Sayings do not consistently support this privileging of non-materiality. Jesus is not disembodied, but he refuses to confine his identity to relational categories, such as son or teacher, or to a gender category, such as male.

In short, in *Thomas* the Sayings both uphold and disturb the gender expectations of hearers/readers, both ancient and modern, suggesting that the seeker must remain fluid in her understanding of gender.

Sayings 36 and 37: Clothing and gender performance

Sayings 36 and 37 are particularly interesting from a transgender perspective as they have to do with clothing and gender performance. In many cultures, clothing, along with hairstyle, body sculpting, etc. is a major gender citation. Changing one’s clothing, in a number of sacred writings and rituals, also signifies spiritual transformation or some shifting of identity.

Saying 36 includes an injunction of Jesus not to “fret, from morning to evening and from evening to morning, about what you’re going to wear.” For many people, but particularly those whose physical attributes do not match their preferred gender citation, the issue of how to clothe one’s body requires enormous thought and can produce tremendous anxiety. A transgender person in the midst of surgical and/or hormonal body reconstruction may think very carefully about what to wear, especially to work and in other settings where revealing one’s true identity may be risky both emotionally and physically. In some segments of the community, clothing also functions as an important and often secret signifier of one’s sexual preferences.

Saying 36 provides a powerful introduction to Saying 37: revelation (“seeing the son of the living one”) is the result of stripping off and stomping on clothing. Both the stripping and the stomping are performances that would be considered unusual, alarming, or subversive in most contexts, ancient and modern. The performers, in this instance, are not only naked: their nude bodies are actively engaged in physical movement.

For several decades, Jonathan Z. Smith’s identification of baptism as the setting for this Saying was unchallenged; in the 1990s, De Concick and Fossum reviewed his arguments and suggested instead that the saying is based on encratic teaching designed to prepare seekers for salvation.²¹ These scholars, like others, argued that the trampling “refers to the act of renouncing these garments, that is, the mortal body.”²² The usual readings of this and other *Thomas* sayings focus on the denigration of the physical body in favor of spiritual enlightenment, and most scholars also connect saying 37, being naked without shame, with a return to the Garden of Eden prior to the human decision to eat from the tree of life. While the saying certainly prompts images of Eden without shame, it is not necessary to associate lack of shame with a devalued body. On the contrary, to be naked without shame signals an acceptance of embodiment. To live comfortably in one’s body, however that body is configured, is a remarkable phenomenon. Further, to be seen naked, without shame or fear, counters many ancient and modern cultural expectations. As Brenner notes, “Nakedness is a shameful state in culture.”²³ Indeed, “clothing in the Bible symbolizes culture,” and Brenner notes that as soon as Adam and Eve eat from the tree, they cover their nakedness.²⁴ Nakedness revealing bodies that do not conform to binary gender “norms” is unsettling, to say the least.

In many communities, the image of stripping off one’s clothing without fear or shame would signal a new reality; for persons in the midst of body reconstruction or for those

whose bodies include both a penis and developed breasts or some other combination of embodied signifiers, to be naked without shame is particularly powerful. Most remarkably, these performers are not afraid: “you will see the son of the living one, and you will not be afraid.” Some gender non-conformers live with constant fear of exposure and violence. To be naked and stomp on one’s clothing without fear signals the inauguration of something new, what Valantasis calls a new subjectivity and an alternative universe. It has been my consistent experience that these *Thomas* Sayings evoke tears, amazement, and often hope in individuals whose lives include the complex negotiation of non-normative gender and/or sexuality. Both Sayings, 36 and 37, promise an enormous freedom to people who have agonized about clothing as a crucial gender signifier. At the same time, the sayings disturb, because they portray giving up the powerful communication possibilities and the shelter of clothing.

Just as gender is variously constructed in *Thomas*, the image of clothing occurs in very different contexts. Two Sayings in *Thomas* deal with clothing: Saying 21 portrays the disciples as children who live as squatters in a field; when the owner returns, they strip off their clothing in order to return the field. Valantasis interprets the clothing in this saying as a signifier of identity, in this case identity that can be easily discarded. In Saying 37, stripping off one’s clothing functions quite differently: when the disciples can strip without shame and stomp on their clothes like children, they will see the son of the living one. Perhaps in keeping with the promise of Saying 2, presenting two quite different effects of the same performance – stripping one’s clothing – causes the readers/listeners to be disturbed. Just as *Thomas* offers neither a consistent unitary image of gender nor a clearly binary gender construction, the performances suggested by the gospel likewise vary in their effect. One might note that both images of stripping one’s clothing refer to adults becoming like children; in one case, the children are those who do not see, and in the other, the disrobed children are the ones who experience transformation. Yet again, the common denominator among the Sayings appears to reside in the expectations of the readers/hearers continually being challenged! The promise of Saying 2 is fulfilled: “...When they find, they will be disturbed...”

A careful reader of *Thomas* might conclude that gender is linked to spirituality and somehow connected to seeing the son of the living one. What this gender looks like from a physical perspective is a matter for continuing conversation. *Thomas*, I submit, at the very least gives us a place to wrestle with the questions and the images in such a way that the binary and hierarchical paradigm, male and female, should remain forever disturbed.

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in San Antonio, Texas (November 2004) and the Upper Midwest Regional meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota (April 2005). I appreciate the comments and questions of SBL members attending those sessions.

² The English translation of *The Gospel of Thomas* cited in this paper is that of Richard Valantasis in *The Gospel of Thomas* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1997); Valantasis largely follows the Scholars Version published by Polebridge Press.

³ Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

⁴ Loren Cameron, *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1996).

⁵ Kara Thompson, “Transsexuals, Transvestites, Transgender People, and Cross-Dressers,” in *Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History in America*, volume 3 (edited by Marc Stein; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2004), 206.

⁶ Justin Tanis, *Transgendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 19.

⁷ Athalya Brenner, *I Am: Biblical Women Tell Their Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) x.

⁸ Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 7-12.

¹⁰ The concept of a third gender is quite ancient, predating the Gospel of *Thomas*. See, for instance, Plato’s *Symposium*, in which Aristophanes makes a speech about “three kinds of human beings,” including male, female, and a third combination of the two. *Symposium* 189-191.

¹¹ In India, for instance, in addition to the *hijras*, devotees of the goddess Bahuchara Mata who are attested for well over two millennia, gender-variant roles include the *sadhin*, female ascetics who reject marriage and child-bearing, the *jogamma*, female cross-dressing attendants of the goddess Yellamma, who is also served by male transvestite attendants, the *jogappa*. For a description of multiple genders in Native American cultures, see, for instance, Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native America* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998). For a brief introduction to gender diversity across cultures, see Serena Nanda, *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland, 2000).

¹² See, for instance, Risto Uro, *Thomas: Seeking the Historical Context of the Gospel of Thomas* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), especially Chapter 3, “Body and Community.” Uro argues that “*Thomas*’ attitude toward marriage and sexuality is more ambiguous

than has usually been assumed....;” the chapter intends to show that *Thomas* “does not reveal such an extreme distaste for the human body as scholars have often suggested.” (56)

¹³ See, for instance, Risto Uro, *Thomas*; Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian: The Relationship Between the Gospel of Thomas and the Diatessaron* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003); April D. DeConick, “The Original *Gospel of Thomas*,” *Vigilae Christianae* 54 (2002) 167-199.

¹⁴ In Saying 28, Jesus claims that he came “in the flesh [sarx]”; in Saying 29, Jesus suggests that spirit came into being because of body. Stevan Davies notes that this proposition “may restate the mythic theme of the precedence of body over spirit that is found in Genesis 2:7, where the first body comes into being through clay, through God’s creative power, and God subsequently breathes into, or “inspirits” the clay with life.” Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2003) 42.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of Saying 61, see Kathleen E. Corley, “Salome and Jesus at Table in the Gospel of Thomas,” *Semeia* 86 (1999) 85-97. Corley argues that Saying 61, “from which one may infer that Jesus is reclining on a dining couch with the woman disciple, Salome,” offers evidence of “controversy in the *Thomas* community over whether the salvation of women by meanings of ‘becoming male’ should be taken to the extreme of allowing them to recline like men at community meals.” (85) Based on her analysis of Saying 61, Corley locates the *Thomas* community “squarely within its Hellenistic milieu.”

¹⁶ For insightful discussion of the women disciples of Jesus in these and other *Thomas* logia, see Silke Petersen, “Zerstört die Werke der Weiblichkeit!” *Maria Magdalena, Salome und andere Jüngerinnen Jesus in christlich-gnostischen Schriften*. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 48. (London: Brill, 1999) especially 104-111, 198-202.

¹⁷ Valantasis, *Gospel of Thomas*, 92.

¹⁸ Marvin Meyer, “Making Mary Male: The Categories ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in the Gospel of Thomas,” in idem, *Secret Gospels: Essays on Thomas and the Secret Gospel of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003) 76-95, here 84. See also Meyer’s essay in the same volume, “*Gospel of Thomas*: Saying 114 Revisited,” 96-106.

¹⁹ There is a great deal of literature on Saying 114; for a sampling see the works by Meyer above; Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *Female Fault and Fulfilment in Gnosticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), especially chapter 5, “An Interpretation of Logion 114 in *The Gospel of Thomas*,” 85-104; also Stephen J.

Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1993), 153-57; Silke Petersen, note 16 above.

²⁰ Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley links Sayings 61 and 114 and argues that “logion 114 speaks of an initiation ritual required for the female so that she may be restored to the lost unity of Adam in Genesis 2.”, in: “An Interpretation of Logion 114 in *The Gospel of Thomas*.” *Novum Testamentum XXVII* (1985) 245-272, here 245.

²¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Garments of Shame.” *History of Religions* 5:2 (1966) 213-238; April De Conick and Jarl Fossum, “Stripped Before God: A New Interpretation of Logion 37 in the Gospel of Thomas.” *Vigilae Christianae* 45 (1991) 123-150, here 123-24.

²² *Ibidem*, 133.

²³ Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering ‘Sexuality’ and Desire in the Hebrew Bible*. Biblical Interpretation Series. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 42.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 41.

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