

# To know what is before one's face: Group-specific metaphors and the composition of the Gospel of Thomas

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## Abstract

*This article uses the insights of second-generation cognitive linguistics to interpret some of the metaphoric sayings in the Gospel of Thomas. It is an attempt to show how the identification and use of conventional metaphors influence the understanding of poetic language. Group-specific metaphors, as a manifestation of basic conventional metaphors, are identified, providing a conceptual framework against which some Thomas sayings are interpreted. These basic metaphors then provide cohesion for the interpretation of some apparently disparate sayings in the Gospel of Thomas.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article<sup>1</sup> is an initial attempt to overcome some of the problems posed by the apparent lack of cohesion in the Gospel of Thomas by utilising insights from the contemporary understanding of metaphor<sup>2</sup> as developed by cognitive linguists like Lakoff, Johnson and

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<sup>1</sup> A reworked version of a paper that was first delivered at the Thomas Traditions group of the Society of Biblical Literature in November 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately time does not allow me to explain the metaphor theory which forms the point of departure for my paper. In my doctoral dissertation, from which this paper originates, this was done extensively: "The language of the Kingdom and Jesus: Parable, aphorism and metaphor in the sayings material common to the synoptic tradition and the Gospel of Thomas." It was completed at the Humboldt Universität, Berlin 1997, with Prof Dr C Breytenbach as supervisor. There I developed a theory for the interpretation of the parables and aphorisms of the Jesus tradition which utilises the advances that a cognitive linguistic approach to metaphor has made to our understanding of poetic language. A revised edition with the same title was published by Walter de Gruyter, Berlin in 2001, and all subsequent references are made from the published version.

Turner. In the process I will mainly focus on basic metaphors and the way in which they allow one to instantiate metaphoric meanings for some of the proverbial sayings in the Gospel of Thomas. However it is important to realise that the idea of basic metaphors forms but one aspect of the contemporary theory of metaphor a theory that has for the most part been completely ignored by recent studies on the parables and aphorisms of the Jesus tradition (see Liebenberg 2001:1-166).

## **2. A COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO LANGUAGE AND METAPHOR: METAPHOR AS A MATTER OF COGNITION**

The contemporary theory of metaphor as practised by scholars like Lakoff, Johnson and Turner, enables one to identify the basic metaphors and conceptual mechanisms, which underlie both conventional and unconventional language (poetic) use. Basic metaphors are important because they “are not the unique creation of individual poets but are rather part of the way members of a culture have of conceptualising their experience” (Lakoff & Turner (1989:9). *Basic* metaphors are important because they often form the basis of novel metaphoric language. As Lakoff & Turner (1989:51) remark:

Basic conceptual metaphors are part of the common conceptual apparatus shared by members of a culture... We usually understand them in terms of common experiences. They are largely unconscious, though attention may be drawn to them. Their operation in cognition is mostly automatic. And they are widely conventionalised in language, that is, there are a great number of words and idiomatic expressions in our language whose interpretations depend upon those conceptual metaphors.

This explains why we often have difficulty in understanding highly metaphoric texts from another time and/or culture such as the Gospel of Thomas: we as readers do not share the conceptual framework and basic metaphors of the community in which it originated. “Far from being merely a matter of words, metaphor is a matter of thought – all kinds of thought; thought about emotion, about society, about human character, about language,

and about the nature of life and death. It is indispensable not only to our imagination, but also to our reason” (Lakoff & Turner (1989: xi).

Similarly the metaphors in Thomas are not just a matter of words - they concern concepts, and these concepts did not exist somewhere in objective reality at the time that the Gospel came into being, but they existed in the minds and thought world of the Thomasine community. Consequently, our engagement with the text of Thomas, our interpretation of its metaphors ultimately involves coming to grips with these concepts and how we perceive that they functioned as source and target domains in the expressions by which they effected metaphoric designation in the Thomasine community.

Our success in designating metaphoric meaning to the poetic expressions in Thomas in such a way that we can state with some degree of confidence that the same expression would have instantiated a similar metaphoric meaning amongst members of the Thomas community is therefore not so much dependent on *whether* we are able to make sense of them in the first instance. It is rather dependent on the degree to which we are able to compile an encyclopaedia of knowledge about the community, which will enable us to make informed guesses about how they would have understood the sayings of the Gospel.

From this follows that once one has identified some of these basic metaphors operative in the Thomas community, one would be better equipped to interpret some of the metaphoric sayings in the Gospel of Thomas, and in this process gain invaluable insight into the way in which the community conceived of their world. This argument can also be made from the perspective of what Kittay (1987:58) calls group-specific default assumptions.

### **3. GROUP-SPECIFIC METAPHORS AS INSTANCES OF GROUP-SPECIFIC CONVENTIONAL/BASIC METAPHORS**

The identification of any metaphor depends on various factors, including its contextualisation. In Thomas, as we are all well aware, the literary context does not really attribute to the understanding of its various sayings. This forces one to interpret these sayings almost on face value. However, this does not mean that these sayings simply had meaning in a context free manner for the Thomasine community as well. As Kittay

(1987:55) remarks: “That we seem to be able to speak of the meaning of an expression as independent of context is, in large measure, the result of the supposition of assumptions which are shared by all or some members of a language community and which form an implicit context for utterances which are explicitly set in a context.” The Thomasine community had no need to provide the sayings in the Gospel with comments because they shared enough *default assumptions* to ensure at least a shared understanding of its various sayings (Patterson 1992:58).

Default assumptions are those assumptions “upon which speakers rely, in both verbal and non-verbal behaviour, in the absence of any contextual evidence cancelling or questioning such assumptions. Because speakers are scarcely conscious of employing such assumptions, they presume, again with little consciousness of making such presumptions, that their audience has the same assumptions” (Kittay 1987:55). One class of such default assumptions, which Kittay (1987:58) refers to, is *group-specific default assumptions*. These are assumptions, which are shared by a group because of whatever factors it is, which defines them as a group. The Thomasine community was no exception – because of their shared experiences about the living Jesus, they shared certain group-specific metaphors which were alien to other Christian communities and which were related to their unique reception of the Jesus tradition.

At this point it should be obvious that what Kittay calls *group-specific metaphors* represent what Lakoff calls *basic conceptual metaphors*, but with the qualification that these basic metaphors were unique to the Thomasine community. It should be obvious that once one has isolated some of these group-specific basic metaphors, one would be one step closer to the *default assumptions*, which the compiler(s) of the Gospel of Thomas shared with the Thomasine community.

#### **4. HOW DOES ONE GO ABOUT IDENTIFYING BASIC METAPHORS?**

Let us consider the basic metaphor *life is a journey*, a basic metaphor that is as prevalent today as it was at the time of the New Testament. It is because of the existence of this metaphor that the Matthean Jesus (following Q) says in Mt 7:13-14: “Enter through the narrow gate...” when he is talking about how people should live. Similarly we today

would comment on what someone is doing with her or his life by saying, “I am not sure where that boy will end up eventually.” In both instances the subject is life but the word “life” is nowhere mentioned. But people intuitively know that these expressions are talking about life, because they know the basic metaphor *life is a journey*, even though one is never “taught” this metaphor. It simply forms part of our conceptual world and is imparted to us as we grow up, and we use it quite unconsciously. In this basic metaphor *life* is the target domain of the metaphoric mapping while *journey* is the source domain. Since this is a basic metaphor, and as such forms part of our conceptual repertoire, the metaphor can be evoked simply by using a word from the source domain of the metaphor, such as “enter, going, road”, et cetera, providing that the context allows such an instantiation. So just mentioning “enter” and “gate” in an appropriate context is sufficient to evoke the metaphor *life is a journey* and the metaphoric understanding of life in terms of this metaphor, as happens in Mt 7:13-14. But we are in all probability never aware that our comprehension of an expression like Mt 7:13-14 is entirely dependent on our knowledge of this basic metaphor. Basic metaphors are almost never spelled out, they are simply assumed, taken for granted and utilised in construing novel metaphoric utterances.

But if we are aware of how they function, of the fact that they often underlie novel metaphoric expressions, we can then proceed to identify them in a text like the Gospel of Thomas by deliberately looking for them. Since we know that basic metaphors are evoked simply by mentioning aspects from the source domain (i.e., only mentioning enter and gate when the actual subject under discussion is life) we can examine the sayings of the Gospel of Thomas with this in mind. In this way we might just be able to reconstruct some of the basic metaphors (group-specific metaphors) at work in the Gospel. The assumption is of course that there are indeed some sayings in the Gospel where the basic metaphors operate on an overt level, or at least in a way that we as modern readers of these texts are able to identify some of them. Once one has identified some of these, they become helpful tools for understanding more difficult sayings in the Gospel which seem to utilise concepts from the same or similar source domains than the basic metaphors which one has identified.

## 5. IDENTIFYING SOME BASIC METAPHORS IN THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS SAYINGS 1-5

It is of course not completely arbitrary that I select these sayings to begin my investigation.<sup>3</sup> Some of the most significant and prevalent terms throughout the Gospel are also found here, these include:  $\rho\epsilon$ , find, discover;  $\omega\iota\eta\epsilon$ , search;  $\beta\iota\eta\epsilon$ , find;  $\kappa\omicron\omicron\upsilon\bar{\nu}\bar{\nu}$ , know;  $\tau\mu\eta\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron$ , kingdom and  $\omicron\upsilon\omega\eta\zeta$ , disclose, reveal.

- *GTh 1*: And he said: “Whoever *finds the meaning* of these sayings will not taste death.” The basic metaphor operative in this saying is *understanding is finding*. I refer to Sweetser’s (1990:1-48) work on perception metaphors here. These are metaphors by which we understand meaning to be an object. In this basic metaphor which is prevalent across an array of cultures and a time span of hundreds of years, people use verbs like “grasp, hear and see” to talk about understanding. This is precisely what happens in *GTh1*. This basic metaphor (meaning as an object) is also evidenced in the Old and New Testament, for example in the expression in Mt 13:14b “while looking you will see but never understand”, the famous quotation from Isaiah 6.
- *GTh 2*: (1) Jesus says: “The one who is seeking should not cease seeking until he finds. (2) And when he finds, he will be dismayed. (3) And when he is dismayed he will be astonished. (4) And he will be king over the All.”
- *GTh 2*: (1) also presupposes the basic metaphor *understanding is finding*, as can be deduced from the fact that it follows the statement about finding with one about being “dismayed” and “astonished”. The saying utilises this basic metaphor to create a novel metaphor according to which *ultimate understanding (=finding) is reigning*. This follows from the logic of the saying itself. Finding sets in motion a process which ends with reigning over the all.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course the attempt to understand Thomas sayings by referring to other sayings is by no means new. Davies (1992:663-682) follows a comparable procedure in interpreting the Gospel of Thomas, but without considering basic metaphors. So also Buckley (1985:245-272) who discusses “female imagery” in Thomas in an attempt to interpret *GTh 114* in the light of *GTh 61*. For another discussion of these sayings and their underlying basic metaphors, see Liebenberg (2001:137ff).

- *GTh 3*: (1) Jesus says: “If those who lead you say to you: ‘Look, the kingdom is in the sky’, then the birds of the sky will precede you. (2) if they say to you: ‘It is in the sea, then the fish (pl) will precede you. (3) Rather: The kingdom is inside of you and outside of you.” (4) “When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will realise that you are the children of the living father. (5) But if you do not come to know yourselves, then you will exist in poverty and you will be the poverty.”
- *GTh 3*: 1-2 utilises the basic metaphor *the kingdom of God is a location*, as backdrop to *GTh 3:3* which rejects a localised view of the Kingdom stating that the “Kingdom is inside of you and outside of you”. Here we have an instance where a popular understanding of a concept (Kingdom of God) as facilitated by a basic metaphor is deliberately countered (cf *Lk 17:20-21*).
- *GTh 3*: 5 is quite interesting in that it equates a lack of knowledge with poverty. What conceptual mechanism enables this peculiar link between a matter of the mind and possessions? The basic metaphor operative here is of course one which is known to us from the wisdom tradition namely *wisdom is treasure*. *GTh 3:5* utilises the metaphor to make a statement about a lack of self-knowledge. But note the way in which it does that – it actually *equates* a lack of self-knowledge with poverty, and then continues that those without self-knowledge actually *are* poverty. Again we have to ask what conceptual mechanism(s) allow(s) such a strange juxtaposition of concepts, in this instance “people without knowledge” and “poverty”. Recall that in *GTh 2* the one who finds understanding (from the basic metaphor *understanding is finding*) is said to eventually become a king. Here we have the opposite. The one without self-knowledge is said to exist in poverty and will eventually be poverty. In one instance understanding leads to a positive change in existence, in the other a lack of understanding (self-knowledge) leads to a negative change in existence. To me the link seems obvious – both sayings actually operate with the same basic metaphor, one which relates knowledge /understanding with the state of one’s existence, something like *state/existence is knowledge/understanding*. This basic metaphor relates the

nature and quality of one's existence in the world with the nature and/or quality of one's knowledge/understanding.

- *GTh 5*: (1) Jesus says: "Come to know what is in front of your face and what is hidden from you will become disclosed. (2) For there is nothing hidden which will not become manifest." The phrase "come to know what is in front of your face" evokes the perception metaphor which we encountered in *GTh 2* already *understanding/knowing is seeing*. As I remarked earlier, this metaphor is attested in both the Old and the New Testament. But again it is not simply a case of the Gospel of Thomas just reproducing a basic metaphor. As in most cases of poetic language, the basic metaphor is used in order to produce a novel metaphor. The peculiar combination of knowing (seeing, insight) with the disclosure of what is hidden, ie with revelation creates a novel metaphor which I believe to be operative in a number of sayings in the Gospel of Thomas, including *GTh 56 & 80*. It can be formulated as *revelation is insight into the mundane* or *disclosure is insight into the world/knowledge of the world*. Note that the insight of which this saying speaks is not some esoteric knowledge, it is knowledge about what is in "front of your face". Insight has to do with the mundane, with a specific way of looking at and encountering the mundane. This becomes extremely important if one realises that both sections of the saying also talks about *revelation as unveiling what is hidden*. In the context of the saying, revelation has nothing to do with supernatural knowledge but everything with insight into the mundane.

## **6. USING BASIC METAPHORS TO RELATE AND INTERPRET GTH 56, 80 & 110**

*GTh 56*: ΠΕΤΑΣΟΥΩΝ ΠΚΟΜΟC

Whoever has come to know the world

*GTh 80*: ΠΕΤΑΣΟΥΩΝ ΠΚΟΜΟC

Whoever has come to know the world

*GTh 110*: ΠΕΝΤΑΣΟΥΩΝ ΜΠΚΟΜΟC

Let one who has found the world



- GTh 56:    αφρε εγπτωμα  
          has found a carcass
- GTh 80:    αφρε επτωμα  
          has found the body
- GTh 110:   \_\_\_\_\_
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- GTh 56:    αγω πενταρρεε απτωμα  
          and whoever has found a carcass
- GTh 80:    πενταρρε δε επτωμα  
          but whoever has found the body
- GTh 110:     $\overline{\text{NQR}} \overline{\text{PMM}}\text{AO}$   
          (and) has become wealthy
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- GTh 56:    πκοσμοσ  $\overline{\text{MPTW}}\lambda \overline{\text{MMOQ}} \lambda\text{N}$   
          of that person the world is not worthy.
- GTh 80:    πκοσμοσ  $\overline{\text{MPTW}}\lambda \overline{\text{MMOQ}} \lambda\text{N}$   
          of that person the world is not worthy.
- GTh 110:    μαρεφαρνα  $\overline{\text{MPTKOCMO}}\text{C}$   
          let him renounce the world.

In GTh 56, 80 we have expressions, which do not readily make sense. In both expressions we have instances where the sayings end with an apparent high valuation of the person concerned, while the initial act (i e ‘come to know the world’) appears to have negatively valued consequences (because of the modifying phrase “has found a carcass/the body). The task of the interpreter of these sayings is to attempt to understand and explain the logic with which they operate. How can knowing the world possibly result in finding corpses and bodies and how can this attribute to the world being not worthy of such a person?

Since basic metaphors are evoked simply by the usage of words or phrases from the source domain of these metaphors (e g, mentioning a road when one is actually talking

about life) we start our analysis by asking what possible basic metaphors might underpin these sayings. It is likely that the double reference to “ $\zeta\epsilon$ , finding” implies that the basic metaphor *understanding is finding* is implicated in the metaphor. This explains why “know” and “find” form corresponding elements within the parallel structure of the first sentence of the saying: “whoever has come to *know*..., has *found*...” Finding is a mental process just like knowing- thanks to the basic metaphor *understanding is finding*. If this interpretation is correct the first sections of both GTh 56 and 80 mean that persons who have come to know the world, have come to understand its worthlessness.

The second part of both sayings once again evokes the basic metaphor *understanding is finding*, with the repetition providing the link between the person who has come to know the world and the concluding statement of the saying. The conclusion which states that the world is not worthy of a person who has come to know the world, seems a bit odd, until one realises that the basic metaphor which relates one's knowledge with one's existence and which we also have in GTh 2 & 3 is also operative in this saying. This basic metaphor *state/existence is knowledge* which judges the quality or nature of one's existence in terms of one's knowledge, facilitates the switch which takes place within the saying. The person who has come to know the world and who has received understanding of its worthlessness is changed by virtue of this knowledge. The result is that the world is no longer worthy of such a person since s/he has been changed as a result of gaining knowledge. Furthermore, if one takes into account that the phrase “come to know the world” probably evokes in the implied reader/listener the basic metaphor *revelation is knowledge of (insight into) the mundane*, it becomes clear how the attainment of knowledge can have such a profound effect.

## **7. BASIC METAPHORS, GTH 56, GTH 80 AND THE INTERPRETATION OF GTH 110**

We are now in a position to discuss GTh 110. This phrase *could* be understood as an exhortation to someone who is rich (or at least has some material possessions) to renounce wealth, and this is also the way in which Patterson understands it in terms of his postulate of the book's “social radicalism” (Patterson 1993:158-170). However, it appears that this view is mistaken because it fails to read the saying metaphorically.

Unfortunately I do not have time to go into this question in detail here. However I have done this elsewhere (Liebenberg (2001:147ff)). Suffice to say that the phrase “he who has found the world” does not to my mind really warrant a literal reading -what does it mean to “find the world” in a material sense?

The saying formally consists of an exhortation “Let him renounce the world” which has been elaborated by two phrases: The phrase “who has found the world” evokes at least three basic conceptual metaphors *the world is inferior existence*, *revelation/disclosure is insight into the mundane* and *understanding is finding*.<sup>4</sup> The phrase “and has become wealthy” is somewhat ambiguous since it might refer either to material possessions or to “wisdom”. However, the basic conceptual metaphors evoked by the phrase “who has found the world” already make it clear that this is to be understood not as material wealth.<sup>5</sup>

If one wants to argue that this saying is about material wealth, one is obliged to explain what mechanisms enable the phrase “he who has found the world” to make sense, in other words one has to explain what understanding of the ideas represented by “found” and “world” in this phrase enable them to be juxtaposed in the way that they are. It appears to me that any reading of this saying as if it refers to material wealth, has to ignore this phrase. However, if one realises the phrase implies a combination of the conceptual metaphors *understanding is finding*; *revelation/disclosure is insight into the mundane* and *world is inferior existence* then it becomes easy to understand how one can “find” the world, (which is after all, mostly viewed negatively in Thomas) and become “wealthy” (recalling *state/existence is knowledge* and *wisdom is treasure*). This would also explain the admonition to “renounce the world” as a *consequence* of “finding” and becoming “wealthy” – something which is not quite possible in a “materialistic” understanding of the phrase, where the admonition to renounce the world does not provide any reason for doing so.

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<sup>4</sup> Since these are basic metaphors they are evoked simply by the uses of “world” and “find”. In a text, which is as highly metaphoric as Thomas, one would expect indicators in the sayings themselves whenever a non- (or different) metaphoric reading is expected. A good example is GTh 28, where the context makes it clear that **ϠE** and **ϠINE** should not be understood to evoke the basic metaphor *understanding is finding*.

<sup>5</sup> One cannot simply assume that “wealth” carries a negative connotation in Thomas – because this ignores not only GTh 3 and 81, but also the whole wisdom tradition which views wisdom, knowledge as a treasure (cf for example Pr 2:1-4; 8:10-11, 18-19). Note also the correlation between GTh 81 and Pr 8:15-19: that between “reigning” and the “wealth” of wisdom, as opposed to “unwise” power.

The basic conceptual metaphor here is one especially operative within wisdom circles, that is *wisdom is treasure*, as well as another one which operates in GTh 3, that is *existence/state is knowledge*. The saying is therefore an exhortation to someone who has received revelation about the negative form of existence of the “world” and has consequently himself/herself been transformed (recalling both these basic metaphors) to act accordingly in relation to this negative state of existence. By knowing the sayings in GTh 56 & 80 and their underlying conceptual metaphors one is able to understand more readily that “to find the world” involves a positive judgement on the person doing the “finding”,<sup>6</sup> that it involves “disclosure/revelation” and finding it should ultimately lead to renouncing it.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

I realise that for someone not familiar with the contemporary theory of metaphor and especially the way in which I apply it to the sayings tradition, the foregoing analysis might seem somewhat contrived. I am sure some of these *basic metaphors* that I find in GTh 1-5 might not seem as obvious to many of you as they do to me. At least they allow me to qualify and motivate my interpretation of not only these three sayings of the Gospel of Thomas, but also many other sayings and parables throughout the Gospel. However, regardless of the fact that we might differ in respect to the basic metaphors which we believe to be operative in the Gospel, this does not take away from the fact that our contemporary understanding of the Gospel of Thomas (and the Synoptic sayings tradition) can hugely benefit by taking cognisance of the developments in metaphor theory since the early 1980's. The point is that an awareness of the existence of basic metaphors and the other conceptual instruments which are operative when we assign metaphoric meaning to poetic utterances will enable us to identify the conceptual correspondences between many sayings and parables in the Gospel of Thomas, in a way not possible when one only concentrates on shared words and phrases. This will in turn

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<sup>6</sup> There might be some argument that to “find the world” need not be interpreted positively, but that would violate what Lakoff & Johnson (1980:77-96) call the “coherence principle” underlying conceptual metaphors. The fact is that there does not appear to be any conceptual metaphors underlying any saying on finding in Thomas which sees “finding” (as a mental process) in itself as negative and to postulate one here would violate their “coherence principle”.

bring us one step closer to the thought-world of the community where the Gospel of Thomas originated.

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