

**Going places with bodies that can seek and  
find, eyes that can see, and  
ears that can hear:  
Some remarks on the body and  
understanding in the Gospel of Thomas**

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**Abstract**

*This article discusses the role which “the body” plays in the Gospel of Thomas. Despite the fact that Thomas has often been regarded as “Gnostic, it is interesting to note that significant sayings within the Gospel (referring to “revelation”) involve the body, while there are also a number of sayings which are distinctly anti-material – most notably GTh 17. The article uses the insights of second generation Cognitive Linguistics and the role of primary metaphors to explain this anomaly.*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

For a Gospel which has been regarded as Gnostic, and which is in fact still being regarded as Gnostic by some scholars<sup>1</sup>, I find it quite interesting that the Gospel of Thomas uses “body language” and language about “body parts” and bodily senses so readily in sayings about revelation and knowledge. Of course, despite a growing awareness and realisation among the majority of Thomas scholars that the Gospel cannot be simply regarded as Gnostic, it is nevertheless clear that sayings such as Thomas 17,

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief discussion of the arguments for and against the *gnostic* nature of Thomas, see Patterson (1998:53ff).

24, 27, 28, 29, 56, 87 and 112 are distinctly anti-material.<sup>2</sup> Of these, Thomas 17: “I will give you what eye has not seen and what ear has not heard and what hand has not touched and (what) has not arisen in the heart of man” is perhaps the most outspoken in this regard, especially since it links up with the idea of revelation and insight, similar as it does in 1 Cor 2:9a and perhaps Dial Sav 57a which all perhaps echo Isaiah 64:4 and/or 52:15.

On the other hand, there are sayings which are quite comfortable using bodily actions or “the bodily senses” in contexts where revelation is involved. One only has to think of the introductory sayings and especially Thomas 5: “Know what is in your sight and what is hidden will be revealed to you ...” or perhaps the repeated use of the phrase “Whoever has ears to hear let him hear” in sayings such as Thomas 8, 62, 65, etc. Consider also a saying like Thomas 41: “Whoever has in his hand, to him shall be given; and whoever does not have, from him shall be taken even the little that he has.”

So we find sayings which on the one hand link revelation with the body and senses, and we also find sayings which do precisely the opposite. How shall one address this? It is possible to argue that one should not make too much of these apparent discrepancies regarding the link between the body or the senses and revelation because of the fact that Thomas is a sayings collection without an (as yet) clearly identified structure. That is one possibility. One could also argue that sayings such as Thomas 17 and the conclusions to sayings 8, 62 and 65 are not unique to the Gospel of Thomas, and are found in other parts of the Jesus tradition as well. But to my mind both these options would be to take the easy way out. There appears to be another way to address this issue, one which has to do with the metaphoric nature of these sayings and of the Gospel as a whole. I also think that such an approach is perhaps necessitated by a closer look at the “seek, find, know” sayings which are found not only at the beginning of the Gospel, but throughout the Gospel as a whole and which give us important clues about Thomas’ understanding of knowledge and revelation. But before we turn to a discussion of one or two of these, a few words on embodiment and metaphor are in order.

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<sup>2</sup> For a treatment of “social radicalism” within early Christianity, and also the Gospel of Thomas, see Patterson (1993:121-195).

## 2. EMBODIMENT AND METAPHOR

One of the contributions of second generation cognitive linguistics, as practised by scholars like George Lakoff, Mark Turner and others from the second generation Cognitive Linguistics Movement, is the fact that it stresses the role that our embodiment plays in the process of instantiating meaning, including metaphoric instantiation.<sup>3</sup> This theory of metaphor enables one to identify the basic metaphors and conceptual mechanisms which underlie both conventional and unconventional language (poetic) use. What second generation cognitive linguistics calls basic or – more recently *primary* – metaphors are the metaphors which underlie the majority of the novel poetic creations which poets and ordinary people come up with every day. For example, when Thomas 28b remarks “empty they came in to the world ...” the *primary* or basic metaphor at work is *life as a journey*. We know this saying is not talking about people themselves being empty, but that it is in fact making a statement about their lives – even though it never mentions “life”. In that way the primary metaphor informs the novel creation of Thomas 28b. Note also that we make this kind of connection quite effortlessly. Of course, we still have to do a lot of conceptual work to then go on and make sense of the novel metaphor which Thomas 28b created.<sup>4</sup>

To return to basic/primary metaphors. They are important for two reasons: (1) 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) and (2) because they often form the basis of novel metaphoric language. As Lakoff & Turner 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 (like I just did with *life is a journey* in Thomas 28b – JL). 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

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<sup>3</sup> For a more comprehensive treatment of the implications of second generation Cognitive Linguistics for the material of the sayings tradition, see Liebenberg (2000) especially pp 48-165. I take the insights reached there as background to the current study.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief treatment of how the process of “conceptual integration” works in instances such as metaphoric instantiation, see Turner & Fauconnier (1995).

interpretations depend upon those conceptual metaphors” (Lakoff & Turner 1989:51). 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. From these few remarks it becomes clear that “(f)ar 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 (Coptic) Thomasine community(ies). 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. One way of doing this is, I believe, to try and find some of the basic conventional metaphors which might be operative throughout the Gospel and the assumptions that they represent.<sup>5</sup>

Metaphoric utterances are metaphoric because they induce a mapping of one concept onto another. Metaphor does not only belong to poetic language, but forms an

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<sup>5</sup> For the notion of group-specific default assumptions within the context of metaphor use see Kittay (1987:55ff).

integral part of ordinary language use. Poetic expressions such as the parables and aphorisms do not create their novel metaphors in isolation from ordinary language use, but utilise the same conceptual instruments which characterise ordinary everyday metaphoric expressions. Among these, basic or conventional metaphors such as understanding life as a journey, form an integral part. Basic metaphors form an integral part of the conceptual world of any community – without them it would be extremely difficult to create novel ways of speaking about the world and experience. If a community has a strong self-identity it follows that they would have their own basic metaphors, apart from those shared with the outside world.

For a language expression to induce a successful metaphor, the two concepts which are juxtaposed with one another should share a generic-level structure. The more “self-evident” such a common generic-level structure is, the easier it is to make sense of a metaphor. For instance – it is much more difficult to make sense of an expression such as *life is a chair*, than it is to understand the metaphor *life is a journey*. This is because both life and journey are processes with definite beginnings and ends, with stages, etc.

While it is true that humans of every culture share certain dominant metaphors which are not necessarily readily understandable to outsiders, it is equally true that there are certain primary metaphors which can be found across cultural and time barriers – as Eve Sweetser (1990) has shown. These primary (or basic) metaphors are often related to our embodiment as human beings. They include metaphors of *perception* such as *knowing/understanding is seeing, insight is hearing*, etc. In a metaphor such as *knowing is seeing*, there is a metaphoric mapping from the field of seeing (the source domain) to the field of knowing (the target domain). An example of such a metaphor underlying an expression is the well-known saying from Mark 4:12 which in turn echoes Isaiah 6:9-10, about looking without really seeing. These commonly shared metaphors of perception are not random in respect of their target domain, because they are related to specific human acts of perception. In other words, understanding is not metaphorically understood in terms of kicking, or running or any such activity, but it is related specifically to perceptual acts such as seeing and hearing. Another basic metaphor which is found in many cultures is *life as a journey*. This metaphor is also closely related to our embodiment, while it forms the basis for metaphoric expressions such as talk about

“reaching one’s goal”, or many of the “seek-find” metaphors which one finds in the Gospel of Thomas.

Already in the introductory section of the Gospel, GTh 1-6, there is an idea that understanding proceeds from one’s embodiment, that is from a metaphoric understanding of insight as linked to “finding” (which is a physical activity) and proper “looking”. In this respect the Gospel is not unique, because it is utilising *conventional* metaphors which can, for instance, be found in the New Testament as well. What does make it unique, however, is the way in which it uses these conventional “embodiment metaphors” to effect its own view of understanding as something which is available within this world, and within the reach, so to speak- of everybody, provided one uses one’s embodied faculties such as sight and hearing properly – as is evidenced from Thomas 5: “Know what is before your face and what is hidden from you will be revealed to you.”

### **3. FINDING AS UNDERSTANDING**

In this section I want to concentrate on some of the “seek” and “find” sayings in the Gospel of Thomas. The terms “seek, find, know” are already introduced in the highly metaphoric opening sayings of the Gospel, when it talks about “finding the explanation” (GTh 1) or “seeking until one finds” (GTh 2). As metaphors, these sayings do not strike one as particularly odd and they introduce the theme of seeking-finding which one encounters at various points throughout the sayings Gospel. But while these sayings and most of the seek-find sayings in the Gospel seem out of the ordinary, the same cannot be said for two of the “find” sayings we encounter in the Gospel namely Thomas 110: “Whoever has found the world and has become rich, let him renounce the world” or GTh 111:b “Whoever finds himself, of him the world is not worthy”. While the other “find” sayings, for the most part, seem to fit nicely within the broad domain provided by the conventional metaphor *wisdom is treasure*, the same cannot so easily be said of these two metaphors. How does one “find the world” – and what does it mean to find the world? Or how does one “find oneself” – and what does that mean? How shall one relate “finding the world” in GTh 110 with “fasting from the world” as is suggested in Thomas 27? What does it mean when Thomas 110 says someone who finds the world becomes “rich”? *And finally – what do all these sayings have to do with embodiment?*

First, it is quite obvious that the actions “seeking” and “finding” are actions which one does by using one’s body. Of course, in the sense that the Gospel uses these terms such as **ΣΕ** (find, discover); **ϞΙΝΕ** (search) and **ΚΙΝΕ** (find), it is clear that they are to be understood metaphorically. Still, our understanding of these metaphors is entirely dependent on our knowledge of the source domains of these activities, which are bodily actions through and through. Just listen to Thomas 2: “Let him who seeks not cease seeking until he finds, and when he finds, he will be troubled ...”. It is very difficult to hear this saying and not picture someone in the act of going from one place to another, trying to find something tangible. In fact, when we hear this metaphor our own understanding of it is determined by our own experiences of looking and searching for something, that is our own understanding of the metaphor is enhanced, indeed facilitated by our own embodiment.

But there is another aspect to this metaphor, in fact I believe that it links up with another very prominent conventional metaphor, namely that of viewing *life as a journey*. This follows because it is quite easy to read some of these sayings in Thomas about seeking and finding - actions which by their very nature demand that one goes from one place to another – and make the connection with the metaphoric understanding of one’s life as a journey, as travelling – a connection which Thomas 28b also makes: “empty they came into the world and empty they seek (**ϞΙΝΕ**) to go out again”. (And journeying in ancient times involved bodies much more than is perhaps the case for most of us today.) Now for a saying like Thomas 2 which only talks about “him who seeks” it is quite easy to imagine some kind of search relating to one’s life and to meaningful existence (if I may use such a term), especially when it ends with a promise that such a person after being duly troubled will “reign over the All” – whatever that may mean.

But it becomes another matter altogether when a saying like Thomas 110 talks about someone who has “found the world and became rich” as a result, or even when Thomas 111 talks about a person finding himself. One would expect more from an endeavour which is linked so closely with reigning or with the Kingdom. Although we can recognise the metaphoricity of these sayings they do seem at odds with some of the other “find” sayings I already mentioned and with such as Thomas 38b: “There will be days when you will seek me (and) and you will not find me” or even Thomas 92 and 94

which both speak about seeking and finding in a more general sense. One does not expect “finding” in a metaphoric sense to have “the world” or “himself” as object. While it is conceivable that there may be circumstances under which one does not find – despite the promise of Thomas 92, these two objects seem somewhat problematic. Perhaps this is a moot point. But if searching-finding in a metaphoric sense is so important in the Gospel that they form the introductory framework for its sayings, what should one make of Thomas 110 and 111? What metaphoric understanding of the concept “finding” (both  $\omega\upsilon\eta\epsilon$  and  $\zeta\epsilon$ ) allows for it to have as object “explanation, the living Jesus” on the one hand and “the world and yourself” on the other?

I suppose there are more than one way to look at this. For me the answer lies with the primary metaphor *knowing/understanding is finding*, which underlies all of these “seek-find” sayings in the Gospel, and which is closely related to the basic metaphor operative throughout the biblical wisdom tradition, namely *wisdom/knowledge is treasure*. Consequently, when Thomas 1 talks about “finding the explanation of these words” - it is talking about “understanding”. We all recognise this instantly. We know it is a metaphor, we know it is talking about knowing and understanding. Why is this so? Because we have to do with more than one very powerful basic metaphors. First, the juxtaposition of  $\zeta\epsilon$  and  $\epsilon\pi\mu\epsilon\nu\epsilon\iota\alpha$  is dependent on a basic metaphor which sees *words and ideas as objects*, one that we are all still familiar with today and which enables such metaphors as: “he did not grasp what I said at all”. Second, this basic metaphor in turn makes possible the metaphor *wisdom/knowledge is treasure*, and as a conventional metaphor it can be evoked by just mentioning an aspect from the source domain of the metaphor. For instance, when the Matthean Jesus talks about “entering through the narrow gate” – we know that he is not talking about a physical journey on a road – why? Because we know the metaphor *life is a journey*. Similarly here, when Thomas 1 talks about “finding” we have no trouble in making the connection, because we are familiar with the metaphoric understanding of wisdom and knowledge as a treasure.

This also becomes the background against which Thomas 110 and 111 must be understood. Both these sayings are primarily informed by the basic metaphor, *understanding is finding*. So in that sense it is not problematic that one “finds” the world, or even oneself, because finding has to do with knowledge and understanding. And to



understand the world or oneself, means to have insight into what the world or oneself is, perhaps into their true nature. For the world, it might mean that one becomes aware of its true nature, for oneself, it might mean some special insight, as is also suggested by Thomas 3 and 67. That “finding” is the verb used here then becomes entirely unproblematic – it does not matter if one finds “the world” – even if world entails “negative existence” as is suggested by Thomas 28 and 51, because the *result* of the action remains the same, it remains an event with a positive outcome: gaining knowledge about the world, understanding the world, knowing what it is about. And all this is made possible because of the basic metaphor which maps *understanding* in terms of *finding*.

But seeking as a bodily act which leads to finding is also closely tied in with the act of walking, of moving from one place to another as I mentioned already. So while I was struggling to try and make some sense of these sayings, it suddenly occurred to me that because seeking-finding as an action implies moving one’s body from one location to another, it was quite feasible that these sayings about “finding” would also link up naturally with a metaphor such as *life is a journey*, because the concepts journeying and seeking share enough generic-level structure between them to facilitate such a link.

#### **4. GOING PLACES WITH YOUR BODY: FINDING AND SEEING THE THOMAS WAY**

When one engages the Thomas sayings with the metaphor of *life as a journey* in mind, it suddenly becomes clear that many sayings which one perhaps would not normally relate with one another, might perhaps be related after all – via this metaphor. They can for heuristic purposes be grouped as follows:

##### ***The seek-find sayings***

- 1 finding the explanation
- 2 seek-find
- 3 those who lead you
- 24 show us the place where you are, for it is necessary that we seek it
- 38 you will seek me and you will not find me

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- 49 blessed are the solitary and the elect for you shall find the Kingdom, because you  
have come from it and you shall go there again.  
60 seek for yourselves a place of rest ...  
76 you also, seek for the treasure which does not fail ...  
92 seek and you will find  
94 whoever seeks will find

*The enter, go, come sayings*

- 3 those who lead you  
4 first shall become last (life as a race)  
(14) wandering in the regions  
18 tell us how our end will be  
22 these children ... are like those who enter and shall we enter the Kingdom as  
children?  
27 if you do not fast from the world you will not see the Kingdom  
28 empty they have come into the world and empty they seek to go out ...  
34 if a blind man leads a blind man they both fall into a pit  
39 the Pharisees and Scribes ... did not enter and did not let those enter who wished.  
42 become passers-by  
50 from where have you originated  
55 take up his cross in my way  
75 the solitary one's will enter the bridal chamber

*The see-know sayings*

- 3 see, the Kingdom is in heaven  
5 know what is in thy sight

If you will allow me an aside, here, I just want to refer back to my opening remarks on the Gospel and the body: What emerges from these 26 sayings, which relate in some way or another with the metaphor of *life as a journey*, is that despite the denial of the body and bodily senses which one finds in Thomas 17 and other sayings, there is a group of sayings in the Gospel which cannot but be interpreted by virtue of their reliance on

embodied understanding. Moreover, these sayings – especially those on seeking-finding and those on seeing have to do with the special knowledge or insight, or revelation which the Gospel is trying to induce in its readers. Furthermore, these 26 sayings exclude a number of sayings which are similarly indebted to perception metaphors that also rely heavily on embodied understanding and which use source domains such “taste, see, hear”, et cetera.

But this is not the main issue I want to highlight from these sayings. Instead, I want to attempt to relate these sayings with one another from the perspective of the *life as a journey* metaphor. It is quite easy to relate journeying with seeking, because of the fact that these concepts share a significant amount of generic-level structure (moving from one point to another, engaging the whole body, etc). But why include Thomas 3 and 5 here? I specifically include Thomas 3 and 5 here because both these sayings fit perfectly into a scenario of people on a journey. In Thomas 3, we have an image of people being led by others, while in Thomas 5 one sees people on their journey being encouraged to properly judge that which they see in front of them. Let us now put all these together and see how these metaphors can be related:

Within the confines of the Gospel itself, it is possible to imagine the Thomas disciples as follows: They are people wandering around with the living one, journeying from place to place constantly being reminded to hear, to see, to seek, to find. Their journey is one which could lead to them finding the Kingdom (Thomas 27), but they are constantly reminded that this is not a straightforward process, even though they are in the company of the living one, they do not yet know him, and he must still be revealed to them (37) – because in the words of Thomas 5 – “they do not know what is in front of their face”.

Similarly for the implied (Coptic) Thomasine community – life, the life of discipleship, if I may call it that, is a life of journeying, because it is primarily a life of seeking in the hope to find (92). And there is much to find, “the explanation (1), perhaps the Kingdom (2, 27) or even the living one (38). On this journey, it is quite possible that they would find the world (110), or even themselves (111), but this would be entirely dependent on whether they have learnt to “see”, to “look” properly, as Thomas 5 demands. For only those on this journey who have learned to use their senses, their

embodiedness, to engage properly with the mundane, with that which is in front of their eyes, which is in fact in their presence will find that, that which has been hidden, suddenly is revealed to them. They are the ones who will get to know the world for what it is, and in the process find that the world is not worthy of them anymore (56, 80). They are the ones who will get to find themselves (111), that is, know themselves (3, 67) and find themselves to be superior to the world.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Of course, I am quite aware that it is not possible to fit all the sayings in the Gospel into such a neat schema dictated by the *life as a journey* metaphor. But this is not my intention. My intention was on the one hand to show how many of the sayings in the Gospel are related to humans being embodied entities. But more importantly, I also wanted to show how engagement with the basic metaphors at work in the Gospel might help us further on the road towards finding a comprehensive framework to interpret the majority of its sayings. Lastly, I wanted to show why it might be helpful to relate sayings which rely on different embodiment metaphors to one another.

The people in Thomas, the disciples in the Gospel, and those in the implied Thomasine community, are not disembodied creatures involved in some esoteric disengagement from the world. Instead, they are very much embodied beings, beings who must learn to find revelation in the correct engagement with the world. They live their lives constantly on the move, constantly journeying, but nevertheless in this world. To become one of them, to join the Thomasine community, one has to do many things, but primarily one has to engage on one's own journey in search of the Kingdom. And then, living your life as a journey, it so happens that you seek, that you find, that you see certain things "in front of your face". And sometimes you even "find" the world or yourself – but this is all part of the journey towards finding that which is hidden, the journey to revelation – which implies the correct engagement with the world – engagement, not as beings without bodies, but precisely as embodied beings, who can see, hear, taste, seek, find, walk, and in the process *enter* the Kingdom, at the end of this *life as a journey*. Perhaps, they are the ones who will ultimately also know the truth of

Thomas 17 which says: "I will give you what eye has not seen and what ear has not heard and what hand has not touched and (what) has not arisen in the heart of a human."

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