Genesis Now:

Midrashic Views of Bereshit Mysticism in Thomas and John

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Abstract:

This paper proposes that the Bereshit mystical influences found in both Thomas and John may be illuminated by the nature of the Semitic substructure of the language and concepts in which this mysticism was originally framed. The phenomenological difference between Greek and Hebrew thought has been explored by Boman (1960), Lee (1988) and others. Aramaic and Hebrew, being synchronic languages, lend themselves to a different view of time than that of Greek language. In addition, they presume a different way of encountering the world somatically, one that emphasizes a continuum of "inner" and "outer" states, rather than a radical separation. In addition, the distinctions between "eschatological" and "primordial" (or between "ascent" and "descent") are not as clear as Western historical-critical models would have them. Terms translated from Thomas and John as "in the beginning," "darkness," and "light," can be viewed from the unified cosmology-psychology of Semitic languages. While not minimizing the differences between John's and Thomas's exegesis of Genesis 1, this method can reveal a phenomenological dimension to the use of the Genesis story in early Jewish and Christian mystical practice as revealed by these two Gospels.

In a recent paper, Elaine Pagels (1999) compared the patterns of exegesis of Genesis 1 in Thomas and John, finding in the differences two approaches both to the person of Jesus and to the Bereshit mysticism with which the communities of John and Thomas may have been familiar. Jey J. Kanagaraj (1998) has pointed out the influence of both Merkabah and Bereshit mysticism on John as well as an intertwining of the two in his development of the Logos-concept.

Various studies in Thomas and John posit meaning directed to certain audiences based on content, then seek justification for these assumptions in various theories of text trajectories and influences. Other studies have started from the other side of the hermeneutical circle and have begun with textual

strands and threads, building a theory towards a supposed audience and consequent meanings. At present, various circles of inquiry and their attendant theories exist (as are witnessed by the collection edited by Risto Uro 1998).

This paper attempts the modest goal of widening the range of these hermeneutical circles in order to include the psychological dimension of the proposed Genesis exegesis in Thomas and John. It proposes that the Bereshit mystical influences found in both Thomas and John may be illuminated phenomenologically by the nature of the Semitic substructure of the language and concepts in which this mysticism was originally framed. In addition, without attempting to reconstruct whole passages in Aramaic, which is the province of another sort of work (Black 1967; Fitzmyer 1973; Casey 1998), the paper uses a midrashic hermeneutical technique to establish a dialogue between the Semitic language substructure of the Genesis exegesis in both Thomas and John.

Greek and Hebrew Thought.

The phenomenological difference between Greek and Hebrew thought has been explored by Boman (1970), Lee (1988) and others. Aramaic and Hebrew, being synchronic languages, lend themselves to a different view of time than that of Greek language.

The Greek language view of time is based on the image of points projected along a line in space:

> Western minds represent time as a straight line upon which we stand with our gaze directed forward; before us we have the future and behind us the past (Boman 1970, 124).

Likewise the Greek conception of time (as expressed by both Plato and Aristotle) regards time as inferior to space, since the former represents change and destruction. The divine world must therefore be exempt from time and transitoriness (Boman 128). For instance, the divine Ideas of Plato exist in a place beyond both time and change. On the other hand, Hebrew language thinking considers time from the standpoint of the experiencer, not viewed spatially as though from the outside. As such, the language's concept of time is by definition

phenomenological. In this regard, Boman proposes an metaphor of "time-rhythms" rather than time cycles or time lines:

> As subjective time determinants for [hu]man beings, we may cite sleep and wakefulness, work and rest, meal-times; we may also have shorter rhythms, such as heart-beat, pulse-beat, and respiration. It is common to all of these that they can determine a point in time or an interval of time without using any sort of spatial movement (133-134).

Following on from the above Boman maintains, with justification marshalled from the vocabularies and grammars of the two languages, that they presume a different way of encountering the world somatically. The Greek language specializes in sight impressions, based on images that can be construed to have objectivity, form and immutability. The Hebrew language bases perception primarily on hearing as well as on other somatic sensations such as light, warmth, odour, flavour and proprioception.

> For the Hebrew, the decisive reality of the world of experience was the word; for the Greek it was the thing (emphasis in original, 206).

For the Hebrew (and one could say, the Semitic language) mind, the form of a thing is incidental to its purpose and use. For this reason, no description of anything that approaches a photographic reality appears in the Hebrew scriptures.

Underlying these differences in the two languages' root metaphors and world views, Boman finds a difference between an emphasis on that which is static and unchanging in the Greek and that which is dynamic and changing in the Hebrew. Various Hebrew verbs for standing, for instance, do not mean the condition of standing still but would be better translated as "coming to standing." The moment of stillness is only a punctuation to movement, metaphorically a musical rest interspersed within unceasing rhythm and melody.

Parallel to this, from the standpoint of Greek (and most Western thinking) the Semitic languages maintain a continuum between "inner" and "outer" states, rather than a radical separation. As Boman notes, the separation that European language thinking finds in the notions of being and becoming also do not adhere.

Stative verbs in Hebrew express "neither being nor becoming but assert an action of the subject proceeding from within"(33-34).

Boman sees the Greek concept of *logos* derived from its most basic sense found in the root *leġ*, to gather and arrange. The Hebrew *dabhar* on the other hand is not creative word, but a combination of both word and action:

> If the Israelites do not distinguish sharply between word and deed, they still know of very promising words which did not become deeds; the failure in such instances lies not in the fact that the man produced only words and no deeds, but in the fact that he brought forth a counterfeit word, an empty word, or a lying word which did not possess the inner strength and truth for accomplishment or accomplished something evil. An Israelite would not therefore be able to burst out contemptuously like Hamlet, "Words, words, words!" for "word" is in itself not only sound and breath but a reality (65-66).

On the basis of this comparison, in Greek thinking the divine <u>word</u> would be immutable, residing in a place or space beyond the line (or circle) of time. In Hebrew thinking, the divine <u>word</u> would continue to be active, creative and changing as the experiencer follows and is included, so to speak, in the wake of its advancing movement.

Based on the foregoing, distinctions drawn between "eschatological" and "primordial" as well as between "ascent" and "descent,' in discussions of Bereshit mystical influences in Thomas and John need to re-evaluated phenomenologically. An "ascent" or "descent" for instance, would not be considered in relation to some fixed point in space, but rather as experienced by the practitioner through a form of kinaesthetic imagination.

Constructions in Thomas and John using terms like "light" and "dark" also need to be carefully considered in each case in which they are juxtaposed. As Lee notes, the Hebrew mind, as expressed not least in the Genesis 1 story and Deutero-Isaiah, carries a great ability to tolerate paradox as well as to hold to the overarching unity of the divine being itself:

> That there might be a divine darkness is not a possibility for the basic Greek symbols of deity. The image there is light—all light….There is

no ambiguity in classical theism, grounded as it is in Greek presuppositions. Deutero Isaiah, however, knows there is only one God, and that one God must bear responsibility for the whole world. The whole world is always darkness and light, ambiguously good and ambiguously bad. To separate the good from the bad can only be done at the level of abstraction; in its concrete reality, the world is always both. And that world's God says:

I am Yahweh, and there is no other.
I form the light and I create the darkness.
I make well-being and I create disaster.
I, Yahweh do all these things (Is 45:6b-7) (88)

These underlying metaphors and their capacity to simultaneously hold concepts that seem paradoxical to the Western mind are built into the nature of the root-and-pattern system in Semitic languages. The roots allow one to "marry" certain concepts within a single word and enable the use of midrashic techniques found later in various Jewish mystical schools to produce multiple translations or interpretations of scriptural passages. The dynamic character of the languages themselves seems to have empowered a notion of scripture itself as creative and creating. In the tradition of midrash, each new generation must do its own reinterpretation and even re-translation of the scriptures, not simply as a cognitive endeavour but also as a phenomenological experience. We might call this a spiritual or mystical practice, based on the language world in which we operate, but it may simply have been another form of prayer for early practitioners of the form.

As I have proposed elsewhere (Douglas-Klotz, 1999a), viewed from the standpoint of various post-modern models of inquiry, this type of midrashic interpretation can be seen to reside within a field of probability bounded by the limits of the Hebrew or Aramaic words themselves and yet remain indeterminate until fixed by the view of a particular reader or hearer. The process of fixing meaning at a particular time means re-experiencing in the present the event or image toward which a particular text points. Combining the ancient midrashic technique with that of the social science inquiry schools can produce a "

hermeneutic of indeterminacy" that can be useful in illuminating biblical texts, especially those which seem to point to a very similar usage and understanding on the part of the supposed reception audience(s).

Thomas and Time

I would suggest that the use of the Genesis story in Bereshit mysticism, as it was understood by the audiences of Thomas and possibly John, was of the same type of midrashic technique, based in the underlying structure of the language itself. That is, the Genesis event was re-experienced somatically and phenomenologically rather than visually and objectively, using the Hebraic concepts of the text as pointers. If so, we can re-consider various constructions in Thomas from this standpoint

If, for instance, the target audience for Thomas was Jewish Christians engaged in a type of what we call Bereshit mysticism, the use of the phrase "in the beginning" can be viewed from the unified cosmology-psychology of Semitic languages. "Standing at the beginning" (as is found in log. 18) would not mean imagining oneself at a point in time behind one, but rather "coming to standing"—projecting oneself ahead towards the beginning of a moving caravan of ancestors who have gone before one. This movement ahead, rather than a movement behind, would empower one to feel at the same edge of creativity, the outpouring of warmth, heat and light (derivatives of the Hebrew word *breshith*) with which the Holy One began the cosmos. This practice would theoretically re-create the experience of dying, so that one would not later "taste" death.

Likewise the notions of "first" and "last" (as found in Thomas log. 4) can be read against this worldview of time. Those who are "first" have "gone before" in the Hebrew sense of Genesis 1. This includes also the birds and fish (mentioned in log. 3) as well as the other elements of the natural world created before humanity. Those who are last are those who will follow in the future. By placing one's awareness at the imagined head of the caravan, one unites with those who have gone before. When one unites the sense of first and last, one is in contact with the whole process of living creation or *dabhar*. First and last can also, in the midrashic sense, be seen as two different aspects of one's *nephesh* or "ensouled life" (a concept that bridges the Western notion of subconscious and conscious mind). This *nephesh* could be seen as either a unity of "I-ness"

(reflecting the divine "I am" in the beginning) or as a community of individual voices (reflecting the diversity that results from the divine creative acts that follow in Genesis 1). (In this regard, Quispel (1975) has proposed that the "I am" that unites many paradoxical voices in Thunder, Perfect Mind is reflective of a Jewish Wisdom or Hokhmah tradition).

Similarly, the phrase "becoming a single one" (for instance, in log. 16, 49 and 75) could be construed not only as becoming solitary (in an encratite context) but in a more Semitic sense becoming unified or complete, as reflective of the motivating force behind the whole seven days of creation. This would support the literal translation sense of log. 70 as "when you <u>beget</u> that one in yourselves, the one which you have will save yourselves." The same paradoxical sense of one and many can also be read from the divine name Elohim used in Genesis 1. Log. 11 poses the paradox as a question to be solved (translation from Patterson-Meyer 1992 hereafter):

> On the day when you were one, you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?"

In the midrash we are pursuing, one answer to this question might be: become one or unified again, through a meditative re-creation of the creation story. The first division in Genesis 1 occurs already in verse one, when the motivating qualities of "earth" and "heaven" are formed. Again, earth in a Hebraic sense can be seen qualitatively as "earthiness" or individuality. "Heaven" as heavenliness, expressive of its root *shem*, which unites all wave-form realties, such as sound, radiation, perceptible atmosphere and non-visible light. This first radiation-light, extends from the first "beginning" receding in front of the experiencer of Genesis and extends through her or him towards a future that follows. To stand at the beginning was both a standing with unity and with light. The similar saying in log. 22 ("when you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer…) can be interpreted with the same Semitic language metaphors.

Seen from this perspective, the "kingdom" affirmed in log.3 and elsewhere is not a static condition, or a primordial or apocalyptic place beyond time, but rather a dynamic reality included in the creative act of the divine in

Genesis 1, which can continue to affect the life of the experiencer in the present, almost as though it were pulling from ahead. The Hebrew or Aramaic root *mlk* reflects primarily the dynamic qualities of vision-reign-empowerment rather than any particular manifestation of them. This "kingdom" can in this sense be seen as both "within you and outside you." The Coptic version of Thomas in log. 3 seems to want to make explicit a paradox that can be expressed by both the Greek <u>entos</u> (used in Luke 17:21) as well as either possible subtexts like the Hebrew-Aramaic *men* or the Syriac *legau men* (as found in the Peshitta of Luke 17:21). One could conjecture here that the person doing the Coptic rendering either had a Semitic text as an original or carried a Semitic understanding of the Greek, and so did not see the need to translate the paradox out of the saying. Likewise log. 113 can be seen to reaffirm the notion of kingdom, from a Semitic sense, as spreading (rather than as already spread).

We can choose to see the term "light" used in Thomas in reference to Gen. 1:1 or more likely, as Elaine Pagels proposes, to Gen. 1:3. If the latter, then the midrash needs to account for the understanding of light in the latter verse as instrumental intelligence, that is, that which illuminates as though in a straight line (*aor*) extending to or from the experiencer. After the initial divisions of Gen. 1:1, this intelligence follows on from the creation of darkness (*hoshech*) in v. 2, a concept that can point more to chaotic movement and unintelligibility, rather than to some sort of primal opposition to the divine creative power. In v. 2, *hoshech* is seen as *tohu wa bohu*, a term that has occasioned much interpretative zeal by both rabbinical and kabbalistic voices and which is usually translated with Western concepts like "formless void" (NJB). From one Hebraic language standpoint, the term can be seen as a dynamic reality that can be experienced by the practitioner as layers of being-becoming unfolding from a denseness, like the germ of a seed extruding itself from within.

In this sense, I would suggest that if we are presuming a Hebraic language or Jewish-Christian concept of Bereshit mysticism for Thomas, we must take a more nuanced view of light-dark polarity, one which challenges an unconsciously Greek language view of the two. For instance, in log. 24:

> There is light within a person of light, and it shines on the whole world. If it does not shine, it is dark.

In view of the above midrash, the light or intelligence within a person of light is obvious and apparent. It can be perceived and felt by the receptor, just as one perceives the light of day radiating heat. Metaphorically, this light-intelligence emulates the stage of the Bereshit story recollected in Gen. 1:3. That aspect of the nephesh of a person that does not shine, or is not illuminated, is still at an earlier stage of the story (*hoshech*). Like the "first" in log.3 above, this denser aspect may take longer to realise itself as the light-intelligence that empowers creation simultaneously in past, present and future, (another paradoxical concept expressed by Gen. 1:3's *ihei aor wa ihei aor*).

Log. 50 can also be seen to express this synchronic notion of time in its expression, "We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established [itself] and appeared in their image." As Pagels notes (485), the Coptic reads literally, "where the light came into being by its own hand." Reading this with a Western notion of causality makes no sense, whereas Hebrew-Aramaic can express a process-being that is simultaneously existing in the past, present and future.

Likewise, the following clause in log. 50 may be rendered, "which came to standing and appeared forth in their image." In a Hebraic substructure of this saying, the thing which appears is identical with the material with which it is composed. The form does not come first, as there are no ideal visual forms in Hebrew, only instruments used by the divine. As Boman notes (92-93): "Form without content is pure unreality…. An implement is therefore material fashioned and used for a definite purpose."

If we translate "image" by the Hebraic concept of *shem* (name), then we are speaking of qualities and attributes of the divine light-intelligence, which can show themselves in the person of light who is their instrument. Or if we translate "image" from the Hebraic *tselem* used in Gen. 1:26, then we are again dealing not with a visual appearance but rather with the way in which a person of light can approximate the totality of the divine qualities. Again, Boman brings the perspective that the term "image of God" (*tselem ʾelohīm*) does not relate the visual appearance of the Holy One in itself, but only how Elohim appears before human beings and is known by them. "The corporeity of God is mentioned (Gen.

1:26ff) only as a form of revelation vis-à-vis humanity"(111). This perspective can help to unravel the question of images in log. 83:

> Images are visible to people, but the light within them is hidden in the image of the Father's light. He will be disclosed, but his image is hidden by his light.

The Holy One makes itself known to human beings not through ideal forms but rather through instruments, made of various substances, which it uses. In this sense, "image of God" heard with a Hebraic subtext would better convey the notion of a "living attribute" of God. That these proto-images are perceptible yet not visible is clarified by the following logion:

> But when you see your images that came into being before you and that neither die nor become visible, how much you will have to bear!

The "evidence of the Father" (motion and rest) cited at the end of log. 50 recapitulates the entire dynamic flow of the Genesis story. Alternations of darkness and light, night and day, and opening and closing precede the pause of the seventh day, after which by this reading, creation continues until the present.

Finally, the differences between "bodily" or "spiritual" experience can also be considered in light of both the Semitic language and psychology of possible early Jewish Christian audiences of Thomas. This is a large area, which has been subject to a number of more extensive studies, many of which are considered, for example, in Uro's (1988, 140ff) recent consideration of whether Thomas is an encratite gospel. For future investigation, I am simply suggesting here that the Semitic notions of "spirit" and "body" need to be rigorously re-evaluated in this discussion at some point. "Spirit" which in both Hebrew and Aramaic (*ruach, ruḥā*) can also mean breath, wind or atmosphere, is never as "spiritual" as in Western conceptions. Likewise, "flesh" (as in the Hebrew *bashar*, which derives from the root meaning to relate or tell) is never as wholly material. As Boman summarises the paradox:

> For the ancients, the word was more substantial and the matter more spiritual (meaningful) than for us (92).

In this conception, spirit does not fill the empty form of flesh, but rather the divine breath en-fleshes itself. Likewise, flesh can also express as an instrument the qualities of the divine word or *dabhar*: its telling <u>is</u> its action, which is good or bad depending upon whether it fulfils the purpose for which it was intended at the right time. As a midrash on the question, "which came first?" the Jesus of Thomas relates log. 29:

> If the flesh came into being because of spirit, that is a marvel, but if spirit came into being because of the body, that is a marvel of marvels. Yet I marvel at how this great wealth has come to dwell in this poverty.

This is essentially the question pondered by the rabbis for centuries: did creation come from some-<u>thing</u> or from no-<u>thing</u>? In any case, it is a marvel that the most expansive and the most restrictive qualities (the great wealth and great poverty) can both express the divine unity. We might also question the degree to which the Coptic translation of "body" and "corpse" reflects the underlying Hebraic notion that while our flesh can express the divine *tselem*, it is only considered a separate thing—a corpse—when it no longer does so. Hence the lack of a word for what we would call "living body."

Hearing John with Semitic Ears

We do not, of course, have any definitive evidence of the extent to which the original audiences of either Thomas or John were influenced, at the level of root metaphors, by Hellenization. Most current theories see John as absorbing Greek-language thinking along with an almost consequent emphasis on a "high Christological" evaluation of the role of Jesus. For instance, Kanajaraj (1998, 299-300), while ascribing to John's Logos concept a mixture of Hebrew mystical ideas, nevertheless maintains that he is framing them in Greek concepts and trying to persuade his audience that the only real mystical ascent is through "Jesus-on-the-cross," rather than through Merkabah mystical practice. Lee (1988, 88) also maintains that for the author of John, "God is only light."

A number of current studies in Thomas on the other hand (cited in Pagels, 1999) propose that the cultural context that supports this book's Genesis exegesis is more properly Jewish Christian rather than some form of gnosticism, however

defined. Likewise, the evaluation of early Christianity in Egypt by A.F.J. Klijn (1986, 163) proposes that "[t]he lines between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, on the one hand, and those between Christianity and Judaism, on the other, are vague. Klijn further evaluates four early Egyptian texts (Epistula Apostolorum, The Sibylline Oracles, the Testimony of Truth, and the Apocalypse of Peter and finds in them "a consistent picture of a Logos Christology based upon Jewish ideas about Wisdom (172). This Christology seems to start out lower (to use the current terminology) and become increasingly higher and more exclusive as the organising structure of the group changes from a loose movement in the form of esoteric schools to brother/sisterhoods to churches.

If we accept the theory that John was written partly in response either to Thomas or to the Genesis exegesis it represents, then we might well ask the question: What would a Semitic language speaker, schooled in Bereshit mysticism, or at least with a background of Hebrew-language root metaphors, have made of John's prologue? How would he or she hear it? While these questions may seem speculative, one could argue that, given that the jury is also still out in relation to the origins, written and/or oral, of John, the answer to the question could help inform assumptions about its original community, or in any case, provide an interesting parallel to Thomas's treatment of Genesis material.

One possible answer to these questions is provided by the Syriac Peshitta version, the most "Semitic" of the Syriac versions. The prologue of John in Syriac shows evidence of an interpretation similar to that which gave rise to Thomas. If this interpretation were still in use at the time of the Peshitta, then one could argue that it must have had some force.

For instance, in John 1:1 the Peshitta uses the expression *brīšīta ʾīt hewā melṭā*, which can be rendered, "In the beginning was coming into being the continuing word (or discourse)." The Syriac here can carry the same sense as the Hebrew of Genesis or the Coptic of Thomas that creation is a continuing process in which one can participate. The extreme delay until v. 17 of any identification of the "word" (*melṭā*) with the person of Jesus aids this interpretation, and in any case carries the sense that the "word" is continuing today (cf. Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, and Luke 21:33).

Likewise the Syriac of John 1:3 uses the same formula as Thomas log. 50, "through it (the word) all things were coming into being by its own hand (*kul*

bʾīd̲ā hewa). John 1: 5 uses the Syriac words corresponding directly to the Hebrew ones used in Gen. 1:2 and 1:3 for darkness and light (*ḥešuk̲ā* and *nuhrā*). The use of these terms may have been heard by the Semitic speaker as emphasising the possible interpretation that the light-intelligence was not being understood or comprehended by the dark or unilluminated aspect of being, but that both were held together in the divine unity.

Similarly, the admonition to be "born again" in John 3:3 is rendered in the Peshitta by a form of the Aramaic *yiled,* to be regenerated, *men drīš,* a form which again recalls the Hebrew *bereshith* and which can be rendered as "from the beginning" or "away from the head or start of a process." The Peshitta's rendering of water and spirit in John 3:5 as *mayā* and *ruḥā* may also have alerted a Semitic listener to resonances with the Hebrew of Genesis 1:2.

While a more exacting comparison of the Syriac Peshitta and Greek texts of John in relation to their Bereshit overtones will need to be left for the future, preliminary comparisons evidence an interpretation that can be seen as closer to Thomas in its "lower" Christology and emphasis on Jesus as an embodiment of Wisdom (see Douglas-Klotz, 1999b). It is not surprising for this reason that such an interpretation led to non-participation by these Jewish Christians in the later councils of the Romanized church (a difference that remains in the Assyrian church to this day). That some portion of Syriac Jewish Christianity carried this low Christology over into early Islam follows directly from this choice (see Küng 1993, 123-124). We find in early Islam similar notions of Bereshit mysticism associated with the *nuri Muhammad*, a pre-existing activity of light-intelligence associated with the Prophet (as a sort of *adam kadmon*), with which certain esoteric schools (such as the Sufis and the *batinis* of the Ismaili line) have attempted to engage.

In summary, a Semitic language view of the possible Bereshit mystical background of either Thomas and John, does not give us any argument for a priority of either Gospel, or a dependence of one upon the other. At the same time, this view raises the question as to whether the types of conjectures that have been made about the original reception audiences of either Gospel based solely on content are at least partially prejudiced by a type of worldview that would be foreign to the persons being discussed. With these considerations in mind, we can at least begin to re-orient the metaphors we use in evaluating the

evidence of Bereshit mysticism where we find it in Thomas and John. It may turn out that, if John were written partly in response to the Genesis exegesis in Thomas, the differences between the two may not have been as polarised as the Greek version of John and the Coptic version of Thomas make them seem. Finally, while not minimising the differences between John's and Thomas's exegesis of Genesis 1, this method can reveal a possible phenomenological dimension to the use of the Genesis story in early Jewish Christian mystical practice as revealed by these two Gospels.

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