

# Did Thomas Know the Synoptic Gospels? A Response to Denzey Lewis, Kloppenborg and Patterson

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## Abstract

Nicola Denzey Lewis, Stephen Patterson and John Kloppenborg have written appreciative but critical reviews of the books by Simon Gathercole and Mark Goodacre. This response focuses on several key elements in their critiques: *Thomas's* role in second- and fourth-century Christianity; the difference between 'direct links' and 'diagnostic shards'; the analogy of 'the plagiarist's charter'; the categories 'secondary orality' and 'scribal culture'; the role played by oral tradition; the argument from *Thomas's* genre; the example of the Rich Fool; modelling Christian origins; and questioning the notion of a 'new Synoptic Problem'.

## Keywords

*Gospel of Thomas*, Synoptics, Synoptic Problem, Kloppenborg, Denzey Lewis, Patterson, Goodacre, Gathercole

## Introduction

It is a peculiar kind of privilege to be asked to respond to lengthy, fair, carefully considered reviews of one's work. Authors are seldom well advised to reply quickly to critiques of their work, even those that so effectively temper criticism with appreciation. False modesty over the reviewers' praises can be as embarrassing to witness as the defensive author's bruised ego over the reviewers' criticism. And yet in this case, the task is welcome, not least because of

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the happy coincidence that Simon Gathercole and I published similar books at much the same time (Gathercole 2012; Goodacre 2012). Our reviewers helpfully reflect on the similarities in our approaches and arguments, and notice differences that were not apparent to me. Moreover, each contributes something unique: Nicola Denzey Lewis combining her welcome, flattering appreciation of our approach with a sobering rebuke about our failure to consider *Thomas* in the context of the second and fourth centuries, John Kloppenborg presenting a characteristically forensic analysis with appropriate attention to exegetical detail, and Stephen Patterson capping over two decades of pioneering research on *Thomas*'s relationship to the Synoptics with stimulating reflections on the bigger picture, neatly bookending his piece with Irenaeus's four-gospel canon.

### **Thomas in the Second and Fourth Centuries**

Of the three reviews, the most complimentary is also the most challenging. I am grateful to Nicola Denzey Lewis for her positive comments about our books—no author could wish more than for a reviewer to be persuaded by one's arguments and, even better, to hear that 'the implications are nothing short of revolutionary' (p. 242). At the same time, though, Denzey Lewis effectively targets the weakness in an approach that focuses on *Thomas*'s relationship to the Synoptic Gospels. By staring so intensely at *Thomas*'s Synoptic parallels, one can all too easily give the impression that its relationship to the Synoptic Gospels is the most important thing about the work, thus ignoring some key questions about the *Gospel of Thomas* as a product of the early second century and Coptic *Thomas* as a fascinating feature of the fourth. Denzey Lewis's critique is well taken. I was surprised to discover, for example, that neither Gathercole nor I even mentioned the Oxyrhynchus shroud with its parallel to Greek *Gos. Thom.* 5 (Luijendijk 2011).

In the preface, I joked that the 'and' in the title *Thomas and the Gospels* might be the most important word (Goodacre 2012: vi). It was an interest in the Synoptic Problem that first brought me to *Thomas*, and it is an interest in the relationship between the Synoptics and *Thomas* that made me write the book, although the attempt to establish the literary relationships between these works can only ever take us part of the way. Nevertheless, observing how *Thomas* uses the Synoptics provides an ideal platform for understanding *Thomas*'s thought more broadly. One of the striking things about *Thomas* is that the themes that appear regularly in the unique material repeatedly turn out to be echoed in the way that the author redacts the Synoptic material (Goodacre 2012: 172-92). This kind of top-down, redaction-critical approach to *Thomas* is, I argue, more fruitful than the evolutionary approach to *Thomas* that has been popular in so many works, an approach that treats the Synoptic parallels as an early 'core' or 'kernel' onto which later materials accrete.

## Direct Links and Diagnostic Shards

There are several points where Patterson's and Kloppenborg's responses overlap, and since this may draw attention to areas that may be of interest to other readers too, I will comment directly on these points. This gives me the opportunity to underline and clarify my understanding of issues over which we disagree.

In *Thomas and the Gospels*, I argue that there is one important methodological step that has been missed in all discussions of the relationship between *Thomas* and the Synoptics, namely, the question of whether or not the parallels between the texts are close enough to establish that there is some kind of literary relationship between them. This is always an important step in discussion of the Synoptic Problem, where it is necessary first to establish that there is a literary relationship between texts (e.g., Kloppenborg 2008: 2-5; Goodacre 2001: 16-19). This is where the study begins. The search for redactional features of one Gospel featuring in another comes second. One of the difficulties with most studies of *Thomas* is that they have bypassed the first, key step and have leapt straight to the second, thereby giving the impression that the evidence for a literary relationship with the Synoptics is much more scant than in fact it is. Thus my Chapter 2 ('Verbatim Agreement between *Thomas* and the Synoptics') argues that the verbatim agreement between the texts is sufficiently close to demand a literary relationship, or, a 'direct link'. Chapters 3 to 6 then lay out the case for Synoptic redactional features, the 'diagnostic shards' that appear in *Thomas*.

Kloppenborg (p. 202) says that 'direct link' is my preferred term for *Thomas*'s dependence on the Synoptics, but the term is used without prejudice to the direction of dependence between the texts and solely in the context of establishing the literary relationship between them.<sup>1</sup> I use the terms 'familiarity with the Synoptics' and 'knowledge of the Synoptics' in order subsequently to establish the direction of the link.<sup>2</sup> Patterson (p. 254) helpfully summarizes my approach in Chapter 2 as establishing that 'focusing on the question of where *Thomas* reproduces Synoptic redaction may have obscured a more obvious fact, namely, that occasionally the level of verbatim agreement between *Thomas* and the Synoptics rises to a level that could not be accounted for by merely supposing a shared oral tradition'. However, he then conflates this argument with the subsequent argument about Synoptic redactional features occurring in *Thomas* when

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1. Kloppenborg's list of references to 'direct link' (p. 202 n. 10) and 'direct contact' are clustered in Chapter 2, on verbatim agreement between the texts, or from later discussions of verbatim agreement.
  2. Kloppenborg (p. 201 n. 9) curiously suggests that I draw a contrast between Luke's 'knowledge of' Matthew and Matthew's 'dependence upon' Mark on the basis of my citation of an article by Michael Goulder. To be clear, therefore, I maintain that Luke is dependent on both Mark and Matthew, indeed that Luke's dependence on Mark provides the model for understanding his dependence on Matthew (Goodacre 2002).

he says that I believe that ‘these brief sayings constitute “diagnostic shards” that tip the hand of a plagiarist’ (p. 255).<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, the analogy from ‘diagnostic shards’ (Chapter 4) relates to the argument that Matthaean (Chapter 4) and Lukan (Chapters 5–6) redactional features appear in *Thomas*.

The distinction between direct links and diagnostic shards is simple but important. We need first to establish how close the links are between *Thomas* and the Synoptics. Given the number of scholars who argue that *Thomas* is independent of the Synoptics, it is essential to fill in this missing step, and to see if the verbatim agreement is sufficiently close to make the case for direct contact. My argument in Chapter 2 is that the verbatim agreement is indeed so close at points that it demands a direct link of some kind. But as with the Synoptics themselves, the necessary second step searches for the appearance of the redactional features of one text in parallel material. This second step is also essential, and Gathercole and I spend a lot of time on this, underlining Synoptic redactional features in *Thomas* that have been noticed by others, and adding several of our own. These are what I label ‘diagnostic shards’, on analogy with the elements among archaeological discoveries that help to diagnose dating.

### The Plagiarist’s Charter

Both Kloppenborg (pp. 202-203) and Patterson (pp. 255-56) also pick up on what I label ‘the plagiarist’s charter’ (Goodacre 2012: 54-56), where scholars argue against *Thomas*’s familiarity with specific Synoptic sayings by drawing attention to the elements that they do not share. My point is to draw attention to the weakness of scholarly appeals to the lack of agreement in given parallels (Goodacre 2012: 36, 38, 45-46, 84). It is not a general comparison between the author of the *Gospel of Thomas* and the modern plagiarizing student, still less a ‘value judgment’ (Kloppenborg, 202 n. 11) or an attempt to add ‘the taint of “plagiarism” to the “fifth gospel”’ (Patterson, 259-60). It is simply an illustration of the difficulty of appealing to non-parallels when one is discussing parallels. I vary the analogy by appealing to Judge Learned Hand’s famous ruling that ‘no plagiarist can excuse the wrong by showing how much of his work he did not pirate’. The danger, of course, with any analogy is that it can be over-interpreted,<sup>4</sup> and over-sensitivity about the use of contemporary terminology is unhelpful. Let us be clear: if we were to characterize *Thomas*’s use of the Synoptics as ‘plagiarism’, then Matthew’s and Luke’s use of Mark (as well as Luke’s use of Matthew, or both evangelists’ use of Q) would be far more blatant cases of plagiarism, but this is not the point of the straightforward analogy about contemporary scholarly arguments.

3. Patterson counts nine sayings, eight from Chapter 2 and one from Chapter 3.

4. A similar phenomenon is at work in Downing 2001, echoed in Kloppenborg 2002: 5-6; see the response in Goodacre 2003.

## Secondary Orality and Scribal Culture

As Kloppenborg notes (pp. 201-205; cf. Patterson, 258), one of the differences between Gathercole's approach and mine is that he likes the popular scholarly language of 'secondary orality' whereas I suggest abandoning it (Goodacre 2012: 135-40). My primary reason is that the terminology is confusing. In studies of orality, the term was coined by Walter Ong who uses it to refer to electronic communication (Ong 1982: 3, 11). It has nothing to do with the re-oralization of written texts, a concept that is in any case problematic because of its invocation of a period of primary orality in early Christianity that never existed (Goodacre 2012: 137-42). My objection to the terminology should not be taken (Kloppenborg, 201-205) as suggesting some kind of solely 'scribal' approach (p. 202), nor does my brief speculation that the author of *Thomas* may, on occasion, have accessed physical copies of manuscripts (Goodacre 2012: 150) negate my more extensive discussion of the oral-literate culture in which the author of *Thomas*, as well as the authors of the Synoptic Gospels, participated.

The difficulty is that our models for the development of early Christian texts and traditions have been too simple, too unidirectional and too reliant on simple form-critical 'tendencies' and 'trajectories' that are demonstrably problematic. Although I dislike the language of 'secondary orality', I share Gathercole's scepticism over the legacy of form criticism in studies of the *Gospel of Thomas*, and I am grateful to Denzey Lewis (pp. 242-43) for her commendation of our books on this front.<sup>5</sup> For Patterson, though, appeal to shared oral tradition remains the default explanation for the parallels between *Thomas* and the Synoptics, nicely illustrated using the analogy of the skeleton, the beer, the mop and other contemporary bar jokes (Patterson, 256-57).

While I disagree with Patterson (pp. 255-56) about the rarity of oral tradition in contemporary culture, even university culture (Goodacre 2012: 130-34), I do agree with him that jokes provide a good contemporary analogy for the ways that stories and sayings may have circulated among Christian groups in antiquity. It is beyond reasonable doubt that oral traditions of Jesus sayings did circulate in the first century, and that they find their way into texts that are independent of one another. I am sure, for example, that there is no literary link between Paul's version of the mission saying in 1 Cor. 9.14, 'The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel', and the Synoptic version 'Labourers deserve their food' (Mt. 10.10, cf. Lk. 10.7). However, examples like this, where there are clear conceptual similarities alongside differences in wording, simply draw attention to the remarkable nature of many of the agreements between *Thomas* and the Synoptics, which include a 13-word verbatim

5. Kloppenborg tersely suggests approval on this point, at least in relation to 'the impressionistic form-critical arguments that have sometimes been invoked in the past' (p. 209; cf. p. 201).

agreement (Mt. 7.5 // Lk. 6.42 // *Gos. Thom.* 26; Goodacre 2012: 30-33) and a phrase that is never found in Greek literature until it appears in the parallel between Lk. 17.21 and *Gos. Thom.* 3 (Goodacre 2012: 35-36).

Nevertheless, the happy irony of Patterson's privileging of the joke about the skeleton going into a bar is that I had never previously heard it, but I will now always associate it with him, and with his article. So if one day you hear me repeating this joke, I will not have taken it from oral tradition, but from this article. Sometimes, even in a genre that is implicitly oral, like joke-telling, an individual's source might be a literate reframing of something that they had taken over from their tradition.

Moreover, the idea that *Thomas* pulled his Synoptic parallels from pre-Synoptic 'pools' of oral tradition runs into difficulties when it comes to conceptualizing this model. The difficulty with the multiple 'pool' theory is that *Thomas* has parallels to material from every single strand of Synoptic material, double tradition, triple tradition, special Matthew, special Luke, even special Mark, something that creates a serious anomaly for the notion of *Thomas*'s independence (Goodacre 2012: 20-24; cf. Meier 1991: 137). If *Thomas* did not know the Synoptics, the author was able to access material from every pool of tradition that fed them, a striking phenomenon given *Thomas*'s social location and idiosyncratic theological profile. It is much more straightforward to suggest that *Thomas* simply knew the Synoptics.

## Genre

An area of particular concern for Kloppenborg (pp. 205-207) is a section on the genre of the *Gospel of Thomas* (Goodacre 2012: 9-14) in which I respond to those who align the hypothetical Q with *Thomas* in a bid to establish the latter's primitivity and independence. It is an argument that is endemic in the literature, but it is no more persuasive for its frequent repetition. I understand Kloppenborg's sensitivity on this topic given his extensive and erudite publications in the area (especially Kloppenborg 1987), but his dispute should not be with me but with those who frame the over-simplistic argument for *Thomas*'s antiquity on the basis of a comparison with Q.

In the cases I document, the scholars in question are making the case that the hypothetical Q is so similar to the *Gospel of Thomas* that both should be anchored in the first century. Far from being an argument about the pervasiveness of sayings collections in antiquity, the alignment between Q and *Thomas* focuses on these as special representatives of a unique, primitive sub-genre of first-century sayings gospels. The argument runs that they are different from and more primitive than the narrative gospels that found their way into the canon. But the argument is weak not only because of the key differences between Q and *Thomas*, differences that make better sense on a source-critical rather than

a genre-critical approach (Goodacre 2002: 170-85), but also because sayings collections are so pervasive in antiquity that one does not need to isolate Q and *Thomas* as allegedly special first-century cases. There is, after all, a control. One can ask whether there are any extant literary works that focus on Jesus' sayings or discourses that date from the second to the fourth centuries and there are, of course, plenty of them (Goodacre 2012: 10). In other words, the argument that *Thomas*'s genre demands a first-century setting is without merit.<sup>6</sup> It is one of those 'first impressions' (Goodacre 2012: 1-25; cf. Goodacre 2002: 1-18) that sounds persuasive in the introductory level sketches but which evaporates on closer examination.

### The Rich Fool

Of the three responses here, Kloppenborg's is the most detailed, and his counter-arguments deserve attention. Neither Gathercole nor I have enough space to comment on each of Kloppenborg's examples, but Gathercole (pp. 274-77) has responded persuasively to his discussion of the Tenants in the Vineyard, and I will focus on another example, the parable of the Rich Fool (*Gos. Thom.* 63; Lk. 12.15-21), which provides a good illustration of Kloppenborg's approach. While his attention to detail is welcome and well taken, it is sometimes at the expense of acknowledging other major points in the discussion, including elements where I had discussed the data that Kloppenborg offers in his own argument. So here I argue (Goodacre 2012: 87-96 and 111-12) that the parable is suffused with Luke's characteristic styles and emphases: (1) It is one of the four 'example stories' (*Beispielgeschichten*) that are found in the Synoptics, and all four are found in Luke, and only this one has a parallel in *Thomas*; (2) it is a parable about eschatological reversal involving rich and poor, a marked characteristic of Luke's writing; (3) it features Luke's characteristic interior monologue. Kloppenborg does not mention (1) or (2) and makes a detailed response only to (3), arguing that since Luke does not have a monopoly on interior monologue, the case for *Thomasine* familiarity breaks down. He goes on to note the parallel to the parable in Ben Sira 11.18-19 to counter my argument about Lukan creativity (p. 215-16).

In a cumulative case, however, it is important to look at the full range of elements, and one should be careful not to over-argue individual points. It is true, of

6. Kloppenborg frames the argument as a critique of Austin Farrer (Farrer 1955) and his 'disciples' (presumably Goulder 1989 and Goodacre 2002), alleging an argument against the existence of Q on the grounds that it lacks first-century generic parallels. Not only does this caricature Farrer's, Goulder's and others' arguments, but it does not address the issue at hand, which is that scholars who argue for the independence of *Thomas* regularly do so by aligning it specifically with Q as an alleged first-century 'sayings gospel', and not with ancient sayings collections in general.

course, that Luke does not have a ‘monopoly’ on interior monologue. The point is that this is a characteristic Lukan stylistic feature (Goodacre 1996: 169-71) and that it only occurs in *Thomas* where it is parallel with Luke. Redaction criticism is always and inevitably about characteristic features rather than exclusive ones. Further, when Kloppenborg brings forward Ben Sira as if this is counter-evidence, he neglects to mention my discussion of the parallel (Goodacre 2012: 95-96), in which I point out that the multiple allusions to Ben Sira in Luke–Acts provide evidence that Luke is the best candidate for having creatively reworked the passage.

### Modelling Christian Origins

This kind of criticism of particular points runs the risk of suggesting that I do not appreciate Kloppenborg’s erudite article, which would be far from the truth. Among other things, his characteristic emphasis on the importance of reflecting on how we model early Christianity, with its diverse texts and traditions, is illuminating and insightful, and the focus on *Thomas*’s redactional interest in labour and toil, and its relationship to *Thomas*’s encouragement to ‘research’ Jesus’ sayings, deserves serious reflection (pp. 229-30).

Nevertheless, Kloppenborg implies that Gathercole and I have too simplistic a notion of the way in which the *Gospel of Thomas* was constructed. Thus while some of our arguments about Synoptic redactional elements turning up in *Thomas* hit the mark, we are over-confident in seeing this as an overarching solution to a complex problem in which there will have been other factors at play, including the influence of pre-Synoptic oral traditions (especially pp. 231-32). I concede that Gathercole and I may sometimes give the impression that the relationship between *Thomas* and the Synoptics is as straightforward as the lines that students draw when they are mapping solutions to the Synoptic Problem, but it is important to remember that the maps we draw and the models we make are necessarily simpler than the reality that they are attempting to represent. This is why it is so important to remind ourselves continually of the realities of orality and literacy in the ancient world without using this as an excuse for constructing unnecessarily complex models.

### Partners in Crime

Most scholars are too close to their own work to be able to respond to reviewers in the kind of fair and dispassionate way that might genuinely serve their readers. I have been lucky in having so brilliant and congenial a colleague in this project as Simon Gathercole. It has made the task far easier than it might otherwise have been. Indeed his book makes up in several ways for the inadequacies of my own. Although we wrote independently of one another, like Matthew and Luke on the



Two-Source Theory, I knew that he was planning to devote the first half of his monograph to the question of *Thomas's* language (Gathercole 2012: 19-125), and I was grateful to hear this, not least because it gave me the encouragement I needed to drop a weak section from the first draft of my book. I am somewhat surprised to see our three reviewers either neglecting this half of Gathercole's book or playing down its importance. In the face of the recent works by Nicholas Perrin (2002) and April DeConick (2005, 2006), among others, Gathercole's contribution on this topic is as welcome as it is well written.

There are many other aspects of Gathercole's work that I found valuable, but I will mention two, one major and one minor. The major one is to register my surprise, once more, about a section of Gathercole's work that all three reviewers neglect, his discussion of *Thomas* and early Christian literature (Gathercole 2012: 225-66), specifically Paul, the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Two Ways tradition. Given my own much more narrow focus on *Thomas* and the Synoptics, I am grateful to Gathercole for his helpful and persuasive investigation of *Thomas's* relation to other early Christian literature, an investigation that will no doubt continue in the future.

Second, the minor point: Gathercole persuasively argues that Matthew's presence in *Gos. Thom.* 13 points to familiarity with Matthew's Gospel (Gathercole 2012: 169-78; cf. Watson 2000: 37-39; Perrin 2007: 107-24). It is a strong point, and I should have made much more of it myself. Patterson (p. 254) responds rather weakly by suggesting that *Thomas's* knowledge of the apostle Matthew says nothing of his knowledge of the Gospel of Matthew, which I found surprising given that Patterson himself had previously noted this very possibility: 'The rather pointed criticism of Matthew and Peter in Thom. 13 suggests that perhaps the author of this saying has in view the Gospel of Matthew and the particular form of Christianity associated with it' (Patterson, Robinson and Bethge 1998: 42).

## A New Synoptic Problem?

I would like to conclude with a reflection on John Kloppenborg's provocative title, 'a new Synoptic Problem', about which I have mixed feelings. As it is classically defined, the Synoptic Problem is a puzzle that focuses on the literary relations of Matthew, Mark and Luke. These are, of course, the 'Synoptic' Gospels because they can be viewed in a Gospel 'Synopsis'. In other words, they are so similar to one another that it is straightforward to design and colour a Gospel Synopsis in which they appear side by side. But are other texts now ready to be welcomed into the fold of an 'enlarged' Synoptic Problem? Will studying the Synoptics alongside the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Didache* or even the *Secret Gospel of Mark* yield exciting new data about the historical Jesus and Christian origins?

Where I am sympathetic to the notion of an expanded Synoptic Problem is that too many scholars have failed to study the *Gospel of Thomas* synoptically, and there is still no good Synopsis that places *Thomas* and the Synoptics, in the original languages, side by side (Goodacre 2012: 64-65). The same could be said of the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Protevangelium of James* and other ancient works with extensive parallels to the Synoptics. The more that scholars and students choose to illustrate and explore parallels between texts in a clear graphical format, the more they will have the chance to reflect intelligently on the relationships between those texts. Word-processing is now decades old, and the construction of Synopses is surprisingly straightforward, yet there are still painfully low numbers of students who are trained to do this basic work. Moreover, a proper stress on setting out the parallels between the Synoptics and non-canonical texts helps one to undermine the canonical bias that still pervades the field.

On the other hand, however, the Synoptic Problem does have a unique profile. Its fascination lies in the fact that these three Gospels are so very close to one another, both in terms of high verbatim agreement and order, as Kloppenborg and I know more than most. There is simply no doubt that there is a literary link of some kind between Matthew, Mark and Luke, and it is this agreed premise that provides the platform for the investigation of the inter-relationship between them. Even though I am persuaded that *Thomas* knows the Synoptics, its agreement with them is not on the same scale as their agreement among themselves, and the same is true of the *Gospel of Peter*—the verbatim agreement is nothing like as impressive in scope or volume.

There is, then, a poignancy in any attempt to expand the Synoptic Problem. The more we draw non-canonical texts like the *Gospel of Thomas* into the fold, the more we notice the comparatively high levels of verbatim agreement among the Synoptic Gospels themselves. Moreover, many of those who have invested time and energy into studying the potential contribution that *Thomas* could make to studies of the historical Jesus and Christian origins are those who are convinced of its independence. In other words, those who might be most amenable to the idea of a new Synoptic Problem are often those most invested in demonstrating the un-Synoptic nature of *Thomas*, in underlining its distance from the Synoptic Gospels.

I concluded the book with some discussion of *Thomas* as the fifth Gospel. The term is in large part an attempt to put *Thomas* on the map by giving it a unique role in a new scholar's canon, one that sheds light on the historical Jesus and Christian origins. But this is a role that *Thomas* does not want to play. As Gathercole and I attempt to show, its access to Synoptic materials is mediated through the Synoptics themselves and not through a special pre-Synoptic bypass. I am hugely grateful to Denzey Lewis, Kloppenborg and Patterson for taking our work seriously and to the editor of *JSNT* for devoting this volume

to reflections on the *Gospel of Thomas*. Whether or not there is a new Synoptic Problem, and whether or not we grant *Thomas* fifth-Gospel status, it is undoubtedly a topic that will continue to fascinate scholars and students of Christian origins for years to come.

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