What was Christianity like in Edessa in its earliest phase? A generation ago Walter Bauer conjectured that it was originally a Marcionite form of Christianity that was planted there around the middle of the second century.¹ But Christian sources from the second century reveal a more complex situation. Far from Marcionite, most of this material can only be described as Jewish Christian. It is also profoundly influenced by Hellenistic thought—especially the anthropological and cosmological speculations of the Middle Platonists. As with other Jewish Platonists, like Philo of Alexandria, the Christians of Edessa spent time pondering Genesis 1 and 2, and what it might mean to be created in the image of God. Their ethos was world-renouncing, but only later “encratite,” and never grounded in the anti-cosmic dualism more typical of Marcionite or Manichaean mythic schemes. Salvation, however, does come by enlightenment, where Christ plays the role of helper and revealer. There is little talk of Jesus’ death, and the idea of atonement seldom appears. A brief review of the extant second century sources will, I believe, show this. Among these sources I would number the *Odes of Solomon*, Tatian’s *Oration*

to the Greeks, the remnants of Bardaisan’s school, and the Acts of Thomas. Bracketing these sources are the Gospel of Thomas on the early border of the first and second centuries and the Book of Thomas on the later border of the second and third centuries. These I will not include, though a few remarks about the Gospel of Thomas might be ventured at the end.

The Odes of Solomon

Among the earliest Christian traditions from eastern Syria are arguably the Odes of Solomon, written near the end of the first, or the beginning of the second century C. E. They may be described as “Jewish Christian” insofar as their focus is on God, not Christ, who appears only with great ambiguity in several odes, where he may be referred to as “the Lord.” The birth of “the Son” is recounted in one ode, and in another the resurrection and Christ’s descent into

---


hell. In this hymn the cross is also mentioned, but not in connection with the concept of sacrifice and atonement. Rather, the ode sings of God’s Righteous One, who was persecuted and thought to be dead, but is still alive—a well-known motif in Jewish Wisdom theology. In the Odes “the Lord” is one who brings wisdom, truth, light, and knowledge to those who would attend to these things. Revelation comes by the Word—the Man, the Son, the Messiah—who “was known before the foundations of the world, that he might give life to persons forever by the truth of his name.” Salvation comes as a gift (“grace”)—the gift of knowledge from the “Father of Knowledge” and “Word of Knowledge,” who “was zealous that those things should be known which through his grace have been given to us.” His knowledge comes as a stream of water, as from a “living spring” flowing from “the lips of the Lord.” The “elect” seek him and are instructed to walk in his ways. “Walk in the knowledge of the Lord and you will know the grace of the Lord generously.” The Lord promises the elect: “I will enter into you and

7 Odes Sol 42:2.
8 Cf. Wis 2-3; the ode is a good example of G. W. E. Nickelsburg’s early Jewish “stories of persecution and vindication of the righteous” (Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism [HTS 26; Cambridge: Harvard, 1972]).
9 citations
13 Odes Sol 30.
bring you forth from destruction, and make you wise in the ways of truth.” At times the elect are identified with the Lord: “Behold, the Lord is our mirror. Open (your) eyes and see them in him.”

Throughout the Odes the dualities of light/darkness, truth/falsehood, immortality/corruption, serve to mark out a universe of good and evil. But these dualities are more akin to Johannine dualism than to Manichaean schemes. The good is associated with that which is “above,” and several of the Odes sing of mystical experiences in which the believer travels the heavens viewing the mysteries of the transcendent world above. The God one encounters in such experiences is constantly praised in the Odes as one who loves and is loved, who shows mercy, kindness, grace, who offers wisdom, truth and understanding, and protection from adversaries. The tone is intimate, sometimes erotic. In one of the Odes, God, though masculine, is depicted as having female breasts. In another Christ is depicted in feminine terms, offering milk from her breasts to those who would attain perfection and incorruptibility. Other Odes seem to reflect the point of view of a woman. It may well be that this collection of early Christian hymnody developed in a setting in which men and women both participated in creating liturgical materials, reflecting experiences shared across gender lines. One calls to

---

16 Odes Sol 33:8.
22 E.g. Odes Sol 14, 16, and possibly 3.
mind Jewish sectarians described in Philo’s *De Vita Contemplativa*, whose periodic night-long celebrations ended with choirs of men and women merging to form a common chorus, both male and female, to sing hymns in praise to God.  

**Tatian**

Perhaps the best-known figure of early Christianity east of the Euphrates is Tatian. Tatian was a native of “Assyria,” who as a young man went west to study rhetoric and philosophy among the great scholars of Rome. While there he was converted to Christianity while by reading the LXX, and eventually joined the circle of Justin Martyr. After the death of Justin, Tatian seems to have gone his own way and returned to the east, probably around 172 C.E. He is credited with having written much, but only the fragmentary remains of his gospel harmony, the *Diatessaron*, and a most remarkable tract, the *Oration to the Greeks*, survive.

The most striking thing about the *Oration to the Greeks* is its ascription to a Christian writer. Indeed, were we not familiar with Tatian and his history, this would not be considered a

---

23 *Vita Cont* 83-89.

24 So he describes himself in *Or ad Graec* 42, the term generally designates the region east of the Euphrates extending east to Parthia.

25 *Or ad Graec* 29.

26 Irenaeus, *Haer* 1.28.1; Eusebius, *Hist eccles* 4.29.3. Tatian mentions Justin with affection and admiration in his *Or ad Graec* 18.

27 Eusebius, *Chron* 12; Epiphanius, *Adv Haer* 1.3.46. Beyond this there are no clear dates associated with his life.


29 For the relevant fragments and *testimonia* see D. Wünsch, *TRE* 10:628-29.

Christian work at all, but a kind of classic text of Hellenistic Judaism. In it Christ scarcely appears at all.\(^{31}\) When, in the course of the essay, Tatian describes his own conversion experience, it is not recounted as coming to know about Christ, but as a discovery of the wisdom and insight of certain ancient “barbaric” writings,\(^ {32}\) by which he means the Jewish scriptures. To the Greeks he sings the praises not of Jesus, but of Moses, whom he regards as the most ancient of all sages.\(^ {33}\)

As with the *Odes of Solomon*, the theology expressed in this tract has much affinity with Platonically-oriented Jewish Wisdom theology. God, the “foundation of the whole,” created the universe by the power of the Logos, an extension of God, like unto a flame that is passed from a fire to a torch, of like nature and undiminished, and yet separate.\(^ {34}\) Tatian’s anthropology shares with much of Hellenistic Judaism its interest in the two creation accounts in Gen 1:27 and 2:7. The Logos, he says, created the human (ὁνθρωπος) as an “image of immortality” (εἰκόνα τῆς ἀθανασίας), so that like God, he might also be immortal.\(^ {35}\) Later he explains that at creation human beings were endowed with two types of “spirits” (πνεύματα), one called “soul” (ψυχή), which connects a person to the material world, and another, “greater than the soul,” called “the image and likeness of God” (θεοῦ...εἰκὼν καὶ ὁμοίωσις) which elevates a person above mere material existence.\(^ {36}\) Behind Tatian’s thinking lie the Genesis creation accounts, in

---

\(^{31}\) He is clearly referred to only in ch. 21, but may also be alluded to in chs. 6 and 13.

\(^{32}\) *Or ad Graec* 29.1.

\(^{33}\) *Or ad Graec* 41.1.

\(^{34}\) *Or ad Graec* 5.1-2. Note the currency of this idea among the Middle Platonists.

\(^{35}\) *Or ad Graec* 7.1.

\(^{36}\) *Or ad Graec* 12.1.
which the human is first created “according to the image and likeness” (κατ’
εἰκόνα...καὶ...ὀμοίωσιν) of God (Gen 1:27), and then is said to have been formed of the dust of
the earth and enlivened by God’s breath to become a “living soul” (ψυχὴν ζωσσὸν; Gen 2:6). In
other words, each person has a material body and a soul, and then something more, the “image of
God,” which conveys immortality. Elsewhere he will describe this “image and likeness of God”
as God, through the Spirit, taking up residence (κατοικεῖν) in otherwise mortal human beings.37
The influence of Middle Platonism, with its tripartite anthropology, is quite palpable here.38

Tatian understands sin and salvation within this scheme as well. The soul by itself is not
immortal. And yet, it can become immortal, with the help of God’s Spirit. Originally, says
Tatian, the Spirit was the soul’s constant companion. But when the soul refused to follow it, the
Spirit gave it up for lost. If the soul wanders thus in ignorance of God, when the body dies, the
soul will die with it. But souls that are obedient to Wisdom will once again draw to themselves
the Spirit, and with the help of the Spirit, they will ascend to the realms above, where the Spirit
finds its home.39 In this way Tatian understands the soul as the human capacity for free will and
choice. By choosing Wisdom the soul gains knowledge of God and immortality. But the soul
that turns away, and rejects “the servant of the suffering God” (τὸν διάκονον τοῦ πενθότος
θεοῦ)40 becomes an enemy of God and will be punished at the resurrection of the dead.41

37 Or ad Graec 15.1-2.
38 See esp. Plutarch, Mor 943A. The idea is rooted in the Timaeus 30A-B. The influence of Middle Platonism on
Tatian is extensive; see Martin Elze, Tatian und seine Theologie (Forschungen zur Kirken- und Dogmengeschichte;
39 Or ad Graec 13.
40 Perhaps an oblique reference to Jesus.
Tatian’s religious vision included an element of world renunciation, but there is little sign of the extreme encratite theology often attributed to him.\textsuperscript{42} He simply advocates a certain attitude of detachment from common pursuits and concerns that arise out of the vicissitudes of life: “If I am a slave, I put up with slavery; if a free man, I do not boast of my good birth. I see that the sun is the same for everybody, and through pleasure and want there is one death for everybody…. Even the richest die.”\textsuperscript{43} The form of community he advocated seems to have been remarkably egalitarian. He boasts of his practice of teaching both men and women, young and old, poor and wealthy,\textsuperscript{44} and he up-braids the Greeks for honoring various women with statuary, while “jeering at the women who philosophize among us,” and refusing to admit that there might be “wise women” in his community of learning that comprises “women and boys and girls.”\textsuperscript{45} Thus, his world-renunciation is of a sort not unlike that attributed to Jesus in the synoptic tradition: he is a cultural dissident, but not necessarily an ascetic. It is a dissidence that fits well the dualistic mytheme of a self divided into parts mortal and immortal, where the goal of life is to transcend mortal existence and attain immortality by ascending to the spiritual realm.

\textit{Bardaisan}

Many of these ideas seem to have been shared also by the enigmatic Syrian intellectual, Bardaisan, who flourished in the court of Abgar VIII in the latter part of the second century (154-}

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Or ad Graec} 13.
\textsuperscript{42} See, e.g., Eusebius, \textit{Hist eccles} 4.30.2-7; Jerome, \textit{Lives} 29.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Or ad Graec} 11.1.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Or ad Graec} 32
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Or ad Graec} 33.
222 C. E.), and passed at least part of his life there as a Christian. Of the many works authored by Bardaisan, apparently none survive. Thus, our incomplete knowledge of his views rests for the most part on second-hand, and often hostile accounts (e.g., in Ephraem of Syria), and the so-called Book of the Laws of the Countries, in which a student of Bardaisan lays out his ideas on fate and free will in the form of a dialogue between Bardaisan himself and a certain disciple, Aveida.

---


47 Ephraem mentions a Book of Mysteries and a work Concerning Domnus (CH 1.14; CH 56.9), one hundred and fifty hymns he is said to have written (CH 53.6), and several books on astrology that were current among his followers (CH 1.18). Eusebius (Hist eccles 4.30.1) and Hippolytus (Haer 6.35; 7.31) mention a Dialogue Against the Marcionites. The 10th century chronicler Ibn al-Nadim refers to three works, Concerning Light and Darkness, On Spiritual Reality and Truth, and Concerning the Moveable and the Immovable (Drijvers, “Bardesanes,” 207).

48 In his Hymnen contra haereses; see E. Beck, ed. and trans., Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses (CSCO, Scr. Syr., 76-77; Louvain: Peeters, 1957).


Eusebius may refer to this work as The Dialogue Concerning Fate (Hist eccles 4, 30, 2), which would be a more descriptive and appropriate title.

50 Several problems attend this work, including whether the dialogue is that mentioned and attributed to Bardaisan by Eusebius (Hist eccles 4, 30, 2; Praep evang 4, 9, 32) and Epiphanius (Panarion, 56) is this dialogue, or based upon it, and consequently, the extent to which it reflects accurately the views of Bardaisan. For discussion, see Drijvers, The Book of the Laws, pp. xx-xx.
Bardaisan’s cosmology\textsuperscript{51} was a modified form of the Platonic scheme as found in the *Timaeus*. Before the world began there existed four basic Elements: Light, Wind, Fire, and Water (cf. Plato’s Earth, Air, Fire and Water\textsuperscript{52}). Above them stood the Lord, below them the chaos of Darkness. According to Bardaisan, the creation came about as the result of a crisis occasioned by the accidental mixing of these primal elements with the Darkness—the influence of Genesis 1:2 is evident. As the Elements mingled with the Darkness there arose great chaos and the primordial order of the cosmos was destroyed. The Elements appealed to the Lord for help, who sent into their midst the “Word of Thought” (“First Word” in Ephraem), who began then to sort out the cosmic mess. The Word separated the Darkness from the Elements and consigned it once again to the depths below. But the Word’s purifying work could not yet be carried to completion, and a small part of the Darkness remained intermingled with the Elements. From these Darkness-tinged elements, then, the Word created the world, including human beings. Over the course of time the Word continues to purify the Elements of their remaining Darkness through the processes of birth and regeneration, until the Darkness is completely purged and the cosmic order restored.

*The Book of the Laws of the Countries* offers a glimpse of the anthropology that accompanied this myth. The subject of Bardaisan’s dialogue with Aveida is Fate, and whether a human being is bound by all that is fore-ordained, or contrariwise, may choose to do good or evil. For Bardaisan, as with Tatian, it is the latter. The reason for this claim rests in the Jewish

\textsuperscript{51} Bardaisan’s cosmology is to be reconstructed, with difficulty, from the *Book of the Laws*, four other major sources (Barhadbesabba ‘Arabia, Moses bar Kepha, Iwannis of Dāra, and Theodore bar Khonai), and other minor ones. The present work follows Drijvers’ analysis in *Bardaisan of Edessa*, pp. 96-126 and 218-25.

\textsuperscript{52} *Tim* 32C.
account of creation, which Bardaisan apparently grafted onto the myth of the four Elements and the Word of Thought. Other created things exist only as instruments to serve the wisdom of God, he says, but not so with human beings. The Word created humans in the “image of Elohim,” and so they do not serve, but are served. Moreover, because of this a human being is uniquely guided by his/her own will, “so that whatever he is able to do, if he will he may do it, and if he do not will he may not do it, that so he may justify himself or condemn.” Thus, like Tatian, Bardaisan seems to have been influenced by the Hellenistic Jewish theological tradition that placed great store in Gen 1:27 as the key to understanding humanity’s uniquely moral relationship to God. Humans are free to exercise moral agency because they are created in God’s image. Elsewhere in the Book of the Laws Bardaisan states the matter thus:

While in matters pertaining to their bodies they preserve their nature like animals, in matters pertaining to their minds they do that which they choose, as children of the free, and endowed with power, and as made in the likeness of God.

Like Tatian, Bardaisan seems also to have subscribed to the tripartite anthropology that Philo and other Hellenistic Jews derived from reading the Genesis creation accounts in light of Platonic philosophy. Referring, again, to the question of how Fate might exercise influence over a person, Bardaisan describes a process whereby the three parts that make up a human being

---


54 *Laws* (ANF VIII: 724).

come together in a kind of descent into complete human existence. Fate is a kind of order, he
insists, and

…in conformity with this said procession and order, intelligences undergo change when
they descend to be with the soul, and souls undergo change when they descend to be with
bodies, and this order, under the name of Fate and nativity, is the agent of the changes
that take place in this assemblage of parts of which a human being consists….56

In other words, Fate insures that when all of a human being’s constituent parts—mind, soul, and
body—come together, they do not result in identical human beings, but individuals. But all
individuals have these parts: ) (\(dM\), } \(4PN\), and } \(rGP\), which Drijvers avers must be roughly
equivalent to the Greek terms so critical to Platonic anthropology: \(\nu\sigma\upsilon\varsigma\), \(\psi\mu\chi\iota\), and \(\sigma\omicron\omega\mu\alpha\).57 Of
the three, it is the first, ) (\(dM\), that comes ultimately from God and remains free to decide for
good or for ill. This, of course, is comparable to the role ascribed to \(\nu\sigma\upsilon\varsigma\) in the Platonizing
theology of Philo.58

How does Jesus function in Bardaisan’s thought? As with others who embraced the
Platonic mind/body dualism, Bardaisan would have thought of the body as transient, subject to
dissolution at death, while the mind (or soul) carried on, ultimately to return to the divine place

56 *Laws* (ANF VIII, 729).

57 *Bardaisan of Edessa*, p. 87.

58 See discussion below, pp. xx-xx.
from whence it had come. But this return is not easily accomplished. Again, Jewish ideas about creation come into play. For Bardaisan, it is Adam’s sin and death that become the mythic impediment to the soul’s ability to cross back over into the divine realm. It falls to Jesus, the Lord, to overcome the sin of Adam, and thus lead the souls of the righteous back across to the Kingdom. Ephraem explains:

According to the doctrine of Bardaisan—the Death that Adam brought in—was a hindrance to Souls—in that they were hindered at the Crossing place—because the sin of Adam hindered them—“and the Life,” he says, “that our Lord brought in—is that he taught verity and ascended—and brought them across into the Kingdom.”

“Therefore,” he says, our Lord taught us—that “every one that keepeth My Word—death forever he shall not taste”—that his Soul is not hindered—when it crosses at the Crossing-place—like the hindrance of old—wherewith the Souls were hindered—before our Savior had come.

Jesus saves those who “keep his Word.” By teaching them truth, and showing them the way to ascend, he brings them to the “Bridal chamber of Light,” that is, the paradise from whence they have come.

---


Bardaisan’s ethics are not obvious from the extant sources. He was apparently active in the court of Abgar VIII, and presumably led the life of those with access to the king’s inner-circle. Thus, while Bardaisan would have cultivated a certain attentiveness to Jesus’ teachings as a way of nurturing the mind (or soul) and preventing the excesses of the body-driven life, one could not describe him as an ascetic. He apparently did not withdraw from normal life, but lived out his religious principles in a conventional setting in which he was at home, and fairly successful.

The Acts of Thomas

The notion that Syrian Christianity was especially ascetical comes primarily from the Acts of Thomas, a close relative of the Gospel of Thomas, but a century or more removed from the origins of the Syrian Christian community. In the Acts, the cultural dissidence seen in earlier texts is raised to the level of apostolic ideal, with self-control and world renunciation as the center of the life of true discipleship. This ideal also includes one’s manner of dress and one’s diet. Of Judas Thomas is it said, for example, that “he fasts much and prays much, and


65 E.g., Acts Thom 12; 28; 61; 83-84, etc.
eats bread and salt and drinks water, and wears only one garment, and takes nothing from anyone for himself, and whatever he has he gives to others.”66 This mendicant lifestyle is offered to “men and women, boys and girls, young men and young women, young and old, whether you are slaves or free.”67 This life of world-renunciation is combined with a kind of apostolic mission focused on the poor. Judas, it is said, “was going about in the villages and cities, and was ministering to the poor, and was making the afflicted comfortable.”68 He is “the nourisher of the orphans and the provider of the widows.”69.

The goal of this life of world-renunciation and service to the poor is salvation in a heavenly afterlife. For example, in the Second Act,70 when King Gudaphorus discovers that Judas has taken all the money given him to build a new palace and spent it on the poor and afflicted, he is initially incensed. But he soon discovers that the palace Judas has been building him is not of this earth, but exists in heaven. He is thus converted and listens rapt as Judas preaches the virtues of world renunciation: “Look upon the ravens and consider the fowl of heaven which sow not nor reap, and God feeds them; how much more then will he care for you, you lacking in faith.” And “repent and believe in the new preaching and receive the pleasant yoke and the light burden, and live and die not…. Come out from the darkness, that the light may receive you.”71

68 Acts Thom 19.
69 Acts Thom 19.
70 Acts Thom 17ff.
71 Acts Thom 28.
Presupposed in the *Acts* is an anthropology not unlike that of Tatian and Bardaisan, and there are again glimpses of Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom theology. The person is presumed to consist of a body and a soul,\(^72\) or occasionally a body, soul, and a spirit.\(^73\) At death the body is dissolved,\(^74\) but the soul survives to receive eternal rest at the resurrection\(^75\) or to sink into punishment for deeds done in life.\(^76\) It all depends on one’s decisions—to remain mired in the world and its temptations, or to listen to Jesus in the voice of the apostle, and to “walk in all humility and temperance and purity, and hope in God,” and “become servants of him.”\(^77\)

The fate of the soul is depicted metaphorically in the *Acts* in the remarkable poem commonly known as the “Hymn of the Pearl” (chs. 108-13). The origin of this hymn or poem is not known, but it may well pre-date the *Acts*,\(^78\) and thus belong to the legacy of early Christianity in Syria as it mingled with the many cultural streams that flowed through the crossroads of Edessa in the second century. The “Hymn of the Pearl” is an allegory for the descent and ascent of the soul. In it a young prince undertakes a journey from his home in the east, “down into Egypt” in search of a pearl guarded by a menacing serpent. But while he is there, he forgets

\(^72\) *Acts Thom* 22-23; 28; 30; 39; 42; 53; 67; 95; 152; 158.

\(^73\) *Acts Thom* 94.

\(^74\) *Acts Thom* 95; or alternatively, something from which to be set free (*Acts Thom* 160; 166; 30). It is described as “alien” (*Acts Thom* 39).

\(^75\) *Acts Thom* 80.

\(^76\) *Acts Thom* 55-57.

\(^77\) *Acts Thom* 58.

himself and becomes enmeshed in the corrupting life of Egypt. He forgets about the pearl and his mission and falls into a deep sleep. His parents, though, learn of his plight and send him a letter, which reawakens him, reminds him of who he is and of his mission, and beckons him home. Thus he is redeemed. He soon subdues the serpent, takes the pearl and begins his ascent out of Egypt, back to the land of his father and mother, led all the while by the letter. In route he is met by emissaries from his parents, who bring with them the son’s royal robe, adorned with glorious colors and studded with gems, and embroidered upon it the “image of the king of kings.” The robe is “like a mirror of myself,” he says, for “though we were two in distinction and yet again one in likeness.” He puts on the robe and comes soon once again to the home of his father, where he mingles with his princes and prepares to proceed to the gate of the king of kings, that “with [his] offering and [his] pearl” he should present himself to the king.

The background for this story is, again, the Platonic belief, widespread in the Hellenistic world, that the human soul has its origins in the heavenly, spiritual realm, from whence it descends to become incarnate in a body. This involvement of the soul in the physical realm is problematic insofar as it can hinder, or even blot out, the soul’s cognizance of the divine realm from which it has come. The soul can become lost, weighed down, lulled to sleep, intoxicated, and thus lose touch with its true nature, source and destiny. The antidote is contemplation leading to genuine wisdom, or self-knowledge that can rekindle one’s memory of the transcendent realm from which the soul has come, and thus make possible its return. Elements of this mythos can be seen reflected throughout the Acts, but also in the other texts of early Syrian Christianity, including the Gospel of Thomas.
Christianity in eastern Syria might thus be described as a distinctive form of Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom theology, in which Jesus plays a role (though sometimes surprisingly limited) as guide, sage, revealer, or sometimes the role of Wisdom herself. The concern of Edessene Christians was the nature and identity of the true self. In answering this question they borrowed heavily from Middle Platonic ideas about the tripartite nature of the self—body, soul, mind (or spirit). Their goal was salvation, understood as the soul’s (or spirit’s) return to the heavenly realm from whence it had come, the place of life and light, where souls find their rest in God. The means by which one might reach this goal was world renunciation, presented in terms reflecting sometimes more, sometimes less ascetical rigor, together with deep self-reflection on one’s true nature and destiny. The world was thought to be a place of fallenness, of corruption and imperfection, where one might easily be swept along forgetful of one’s true nature and destiny in God. This, however, is not due to any inherent flaw in the cosmos—it was not created by a rebellious demiurge, for example. The flaw lies in human folly, expressed as devotion to corporeal existence and neglect of the transcendent. These followers of Jesus believed that he had called them to wake up, realize who they really are, and leave behind this world which they have learned to despise. One demonstrates this wakefulness or enlightenment by eschewing worldly values, and devoting oneself to those whom the world has despised: the poor, the widow, the orphan. It was a calling they understood to belong to both men and women, young or old, slave or free. It was possible, they believed, for anyone to take up the life of Jesus and to embody his peculiar form of counter-cultural wisdom.

What might be said of the Gospel of Thomas in respect of these observations? The Gospel of Thomas is quite at home in this environment, both in terms of theology and practice.
Thomas is also a text rooted in Jewish Wisdom theology, in which Jesus appears as sage and revealer. A basic form of Middle Platonic thinking also serves as the interpretive lens for many of its elaborated sayings. The mildly ascetical form of social radicalism that expresses itself in the renunciation of worldly values of wealth and conventional living is quite characteristic of Thomas as well. Of course, there are differences. Thomas is more wedded to the Jesus tradition than any of these other sources, comprising as it does a long list of Jesus’ sayings. Tatian’s creation of the Diatessaron might be seen as somewhat comparable, although given what we have just observed about Edessene Christianity in the second century, it is not clear just how the Diatessaron would fit into this picture, if at all.

This close adherence to the sayings tradition, together with the remnant of Jerusalem-centered Christianity in logion 12, once suggested to me that Thomas might be associated with the arrival and development of Christianity in Edessa at the end of the first century—as the legends about its founding also suggest. This still makes sense, I believe. Thomas forms a kind of bridge from what we see earlier in the west and what eventually develops in the east. The Diatessaron, too, might be seen as a kind of bridge, but one that belongs to a later time. In the third century and later, Christianity takes a rather different turn in the east. This, perhaps not coincidentally, coincides with the incorporation of these territories into the Roman Empire under Caraculla. In figures like Ephraim and Aphraat, eastern Christianity has taken up the narratives of the west; the Platonizing strains of this earlier period are all but lost. That makes Edessene Christianity in the second century a kind of theological cul-de-sac, but one in which some interesting chapters in the history of earliest Christianity were written.