

Research Paper

# **Women in Thomas and Q**

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The rise of feminist scholarship in historical Jesus research has introduced new questions about Christian origins. It is putting a spotlight on early Christian women, their roles in their religious communities, and Jesus' own teaching on women. Central to this debate are two gospels that have already come under very close scrutiny within current scholarship but which are largely unfamiliar to people who have only been exposed to canonical texts: Thomas and Q. In this paper, I shall examine both gospels' views on women. As a caveat before proceeding: since both gospels are under such intense current debate, it is impossible in this paper to do justice to major issues that impact the study of women in these texts. Because of this, I am explicitly limiting the paper's scope along the following lines. (1) I will focus on the final versions of Thomas and Q. There is ongoing debate about whether either gospel contains a more original portion to which subsequent sections were added.<sup>1</sup> If this is true, then it becomes important to understand each stratum individually and each one's views on women. This is particularly important in the case of Thomas and Q because their content overlaps with each other to some degree, indicating that they might share a common stratum. However, I shall focus on the final products themselves and on neither one's possible earlier forms or common ancestry. The only exception to this will be the possible interpolation of Thomas 114, which presents a particularly acute challenge to understanding Thomas's views on women. (2) I will also focus on what each gospel explicitly says about women. It may be useful to examine both gospels in their entirety to determine the cultural and socio-economic contexts in which

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding Q, for instance, this issue divides leading Jesus scholars. John Dominic Crossan promotes the theory that we should see Q as three distinct strata (Q<sub>1</sub>, Q<sub>2</sub>, and Q<sub>3</sub>) with each containing a unique perspective and message. *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998) 250-2. Marcus Borg, however, believes that we should not affirm such a view. Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: HarperCollins 1999) note 14, 252.

each arose and thereby learn more about each one's implicit views on women. However, such an inquiry is beyond the capabilities of this paper. I shall limit myself to explicit statements. (3) Finally, I shall not touch on what may be ultimately the most important issue: the degree to which these gospels reflect Jesus' actual views. I shall focus only on their own messages. Whether they reflect Jesus' is the subject of another conversation.

### Thomas: A Theology of Sex Reunification

Thomas, discovered in Egypt in 1945 with the rest of the Nag Hammadi library,<sup>2</sup> is an early gospel completely unlike its canonical counterparts. Structurally, it is a very simple text: a very brief introduction claiming Thomas as the author followed by one hundred fourteen sayings of Jesus. Often a saying (or logion [pl. logia]) simply begins with "Jesus said" or "He said" and then proceeds into some type of brief teaching ranging from a few words to a full paragraph. Sometimes a logion opens with the disciples asking a question that Jesus then answers. The gospel has no sense of chronological development but on a couple of occasions does break into very brief narrative or dialogue, sometimes involving specific disciples. Two of the named characters are women: Salome and Mary. I shall begin with a general analysis of Thomas's view of sex and then look specifically at these two women.

**Thomas's Theology of Sex:** To understand any teaching in Thomas, one must first understand Thomas's underlying dualistic theology between body and spirit. Thomas's Jesus teaches a fundamentally pessimistic view of the physical world, ridiculing the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, rev. and expanded ed. (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 1994) 301.

world as “a carcass” (56) and cynically stating that it “is a marvel of marvels” that our bodies were even able to produce our spirits (29:2).<sup>3</sup> Jesus therefore views the spirit as best able to thrive when it is least reliant on the physical world. This is particularly true because the physical world creates distinction and division which requires reunification. It is only through transcending these divisions that we attain an optimal level of existence. One of several sayings that deal with this is logion 22: the disciples ask Jesus how they can come into God’s kingdom, and he responds that they will arrive once “you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower” (22:4). That is, they must unite the opposites of this world.

What is important for this paper is what immediately follows. The disciples must also “make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female” (22:5). This is probably the most explicit statement about sex in the entire Gospel. The ultimate goal is to overcome sex distinctions altogether and become a unified being. As Meyer puts it, “the properly spiritual person is one who transcends sexuality and renounces the enslaving life and divisive categories of sexuality, as a part of his or her renunciation of this world of darkness and acceptance of the world of freedom and light.”<sup>4</sup> In essence, to become godly beings we must leave the physical world behind, and that includes our sex distinctions.

This teaching also appears as a call to become like a child, and even an explicitly nude child—a state of innocence and functional asexuality. Jesus says that salvation occurs “[w]hen you strip without being ashamed, and you take your clothes and put them

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<sup>3</sup> All citations of primary sources are from Miller, *The Complete Gospels*.

<sup>4</sup> Marvin W. Meyer, “Making Mary Male: The Categories of ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in the Gospel of Thomas,” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985) 561.

under your feet like little children and trample them” (37:2) and “that whoever among you becomes a child will recognize the {Father’s} imperial rule” (46:2).<sup>5</sup> The point of these statements is that children are more independent of physicality’s chains, particularly in the area of sexuality. Thus a pursuit of the spiritual life naturally means becoming more like care-free children. Miller argues that “the true children of the light are to let go of this world, take off the bodies that are clothing them, and be liberated from mortal existence to immortal life. The reference to stripping recalls the shameless and innocent nakedness of children in general.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, as Thomas’s Jesus rejects the physical world, he also rejects the female sex, but he does so not because it is female but because it is a sex, a category of the physical world that we must transcend. The real question in Thomas then becomes not whether women are good but whether they can transcend their physical category as well as men. We shall now examine how well Salome and Mary do.

**Salome:** This woman, possibly the same Salome as the minor character in Mark 15:40 and 16:1, only appears in logion 61. There is debate over how this logion begins. Jesus makes a statement about two people “on a couch,” one of whom dies and one of whom lives (61:1). Salome then confronts him quite strongly: “Who are you, mister? You have climbed onto my couch and eaten from my table as if you are from someone” (61:2). Buckley argues that we should see Jesus’ statement as the end of the previous logion’s dialogue.<sup>7</sup> This would eliminate the cryptic and potentially negative notion that one of them will die. Regardless, what happens following Salome’s confrontation is more

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<sup>5</sup> Braces recreate a symbol in the translation that indicates an implied word in the original text. Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Meyer, “Making Mary Male,” 559.

<sup>7</sup> Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, “An Interpretation of Logion 114 in the Gospel of Thomas,” *Novum Testamentum* 27 (1985) 268.

important. Jesus responds that “I am the one who comes from what is whole” (61:3), once again emphasizing the divine’s undivided nature. Salome then simply says, “I am your disciple,” and Jesus states, “For this reason I say, if one is {whole}, one will be filled with light, but if one is divided, one will be filled with darkness” (61:4-5).

This logion’s exact meaning is difficult to determine, but two points need to be made. First, both times that she speaks, Salome is proactive and assertive. She confronts Jesus directly and strongly (and in a way unparalleled in the rest of Thomas). Then, upon hearing Jesus’ claim about himself, she accepts it and declares herself to be his disciple.<sup>8</sup> Second, Jesus appears to accept her. He takes no offense at her statement (unlike the questioner whom he seems to ridicule publicly in logion 72) and provides an answer. When she declares herself to be his disciple, his subsequent statement about those in the light and those in the darkness could be an affirmation: there are two camps, and by choosing to be my disciple, you have chosen the right one. Certainly, Jesus never explicitly rejects her as his disciple. In short, Salome’s brief appearance shows a strong and proactive woman becoming Jesus’ disciple. While there is a lot of nuance and cryptic language in the text, there is nothing to make us think that she is on the wrong track or is being rejected, and there is clearly nothing to indicate that she is failing because she is a woman.

**Mary:** This brings us to the woman in the text who has generated greater controversy.

Thomas never indicates to which Mary in the canonical gospels this one corresponds

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<sup>8</sup> Buckley notes that she is the only disciple to do so in the entire text, which causes him to conclude that “she is the only one who has, so far, been initiated into Jesus’ mysteries.” “An Interpretation of Logion 114,” 268-9. That Salome has an advanced or special relationship with Jesus makes sense. However, we cannot forget the special role of Thomas himself as clearly expressed in logion 13 and as the one who comprehends the entire text as its attributed author.

although Meyer argues that she is most probably Mary Magdalene but that the author might not have had a particular Mary in mind.<sup>9</sup> She first appears briefly in logion 21 when she publicly asks Jesus a question about his disciples. This may imply that she is not one herself, but she is nonetheless present and an active participant in the discussion. However, Jesus directs his response to the entire crowd (21:10), and the fact that she asked the question seems to have little bearing on his answer. Her far more significant role comes at the very end of Thomas, in logion 114. Peter says to “them” (presumably the other disciples), “Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life” (114:1). Jesus then says (presumably to everyone), “Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the domain of Heaven” (114:2-3). Such a statement obviously requires further exploration.

Jesus’ response is at first glance a command to privilege one sex over the other in direct contradiction to his call for a sexless existence in logion 22. Ultimately, there are only two possible overarching explanations: either logion 114 is in fact a contradiction or it is compatible. If it is a contradiction, then it could be an interpolation by a later editor. This may be a viable explanation.<sup>10</sup> The content clearly is unique, and it physically comes at the text’s very end, a place in which interpolation could easily occur. What is also striking is its unusual structure. It is the only place in the latter half of the text (after Salome’s appearance in logion 61) that a specific person other than Jesus (in this case both Peter and Mary) is named. Not counting John the Baptist, 114 is also one of only two cases in all of Thomas in which a speaker names a third party (Mary) specifically

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<sup>9</sup> Meyer, “Making Mary Male,” 562.

<sup>10</sup> Meyer believes it is a possibility. “Making Mary Male,” 561.

(the other is James in 12:2). Furthermore, it is the only logion in the entire Gospel to open with a statement that is neither by nor addressed to Jesus. While none of this proves interpolation, these anomalies are certainly odd. Nevertheless, whether interpolated or not, the owner of the only surviving full copy saw fit to own and preserve the text of logion 114, so we should grapple with it as it is.<sup>11</sup>

Buckley and McQuire both argue that logion 114 is compatible with the rest of Thomas on the grounds that to “become” male in this context does not mean becoming a member of the male sex but rather returning to Adam’s unified (but still nominally male) state prior to his split into both himself and Eve.<sup>12</sup> McQuire argues that Thomas views this pre-Eve Adam as only nominally male, just like God: “As with traditional Christian representations of God as literally neither male nor female, yet most frequently addressed as “Father,” so the primordial Human of *GThom* 114 is not literally male, but is symbolically of the male gender.”<sup>13</sup> Thus 114 is merely a reiteration of Thomas’s already discussed theme of sex reunification. To quote McGuire again, “Jesus transforms Mary and ‘makes her male’ in order to show that women, as well as men, are ‘worthy of Life,’ the state of the Primordial Man and of entering the elite circle of the redeemed.”<sup>14</sup> This understanding of “male” as not a traditional male but the original Adam may find strong support in cryptic references throughout Thomas to the “end” and the “beginning” being the same. For instance, Jesus says that “the end will be where the beginning is.

Congratulations to the one who stands at the beginning: that one will know the end and

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<sup>11</sup> Fragments of Thomas were also discovered in Oxyrhynchus, but they contain no material from the latter quarter of the full version. Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, 323-4.

<sup>12</sup> Buckley, “An Interpretation of Logion 114,” 245-72 (especially 271) and Anne McGuire, “Women, Gender, and Gnosis in Gnostic Texts and Traditions,” in *Women & Christian Origins* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 2002) 281-2.

<sup>13</sup> McGuire, “Women, Gender, and Gnosis,” 299, note 147.

<sup>14</sup> McGuire, “Women, Gender, and Gnosis,” 281.



will not taste death” (18:2-3). Miller views this passage as a call for restoration to life’s original state before the unfortunate creation of the physical world.<sup>15</sup> Thus Thomas would be being internally consistent if it called for a return to the sexless (but nonetheless nominally or metaphorically male) Adam.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, regardless of whether Adam is the backdrop of 114, we should recognize that no matter what the meaning of this passage, it is androcentric to some degree. Even McGuire, who views the passage as referring to the sexless Adam, feels that Thomas’s “representation of the human ideal as male nonetheless devalues the symbolic category of the female.”<sup>17</sup> However, we also need to remember that it is Jesus’—not Peter’s—view that carries the day. Mary is not inherently incapable of salvation but can be saved as long as she “makes herself male,” a process this is (regardless of *what* it is) feasible for her. Thus perhaps Thomas’s most important statement about women comes not in this last logion, but in the very first when Jesus says, “Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.” This is an open-ended opportunity, available to both men and women. The physical world is entrapping both sexes. The path to freedom for everyone lies in these passages.

#### Q: Almost Silent on Women

Studying Q is different from studying Thomas in one obvious respect: no copy of Q survives. Q is rather a text that most scholars believe existed in early Christianity and

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<sup>15</sup> Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, 308.

<sup>16</sup> Meyer sees 114 as compatible in a different way: male and female serve as metaphors for what is good and bad, and thus the world needs to be cleansed of its “femaleness.” The point is thus that “all humans are involved in femaleness” but that both men and women can purify themselves of it. “Making Mary Male,” 554-70 (especially 565-7).

<sup>17</sup> McGuire, “Women, Gender, and Gnosis,” 282.

was a source for the gospels that we today commonly call Matthew and Luke. Various sections of both gospels are similar, causing many scholars to think that both were based on a common, preexisting source. German scholars began calling this text “Quelle” (German for “Source”), and thus it became known among English-speakers as “Q” for shorthand. Unfortunately, while some of the overlapping sections are very similar and even are occasionally verbatim the same, it is also clear that both later gospel authors often added, removed, rearranged, or changed Q, making it difficult for us to determine exactly what was in it. Mainly we can determine that, like Thomas, Q was largely a collection of Jesus’ sayings.

What is important for this paper is that Q is largely silent on issues of sex and women. No commands are addressed specifically to women, nor are there any female characters. There is also no discussion of women’s salvation as in Thomas 114. Nevertheless, scholars have attempted to extract as much information about women as possible from Q. I shall try to proceed modestly and with the belief that often silence can only be explored so far. I shall begin by examining two facets of Q from which scholars have tried to draw information on women and in which I view the temptation to overreach as being particularly strong: references to personified wisdom and doublet parables. I shall then conclude with an overview of Q as a whole.

**Personified Wisdom:** In a few places, Q portrays Wisdom as an active and explicitly feminine character. This occurs most directly in Q 7:35,<sup>18</sup> which states that “wisdom is vindicated by” and then puts either “all her children” (Luke) or “her deeds” (Matthew). In

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<sup>18</sup> I shall follow the common convention of citing Q by its equivalent address in Luke (in this case Luke 7:35).

11:49-51, Q objects to the abuse that past Hebrew prophets have received, but the gospels differ on who sent them: both have Jesus speaking, but in Matthew he says that he is the agent (“I sent”) while Luke’s Jesus attributes the act to Wisdom (“the wisdom of God has said, ‘I will send...’”). If Luke’s version is original, then Q portrays Wisdom as a powerful entity who can interject in world affairs and send prophets.<sup>19</sup> Also, in 13:34-35, both gospels also make a statement about the ill treatment of the past prophets. Jesus says, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you murder the prophets and stone those sent to you! How often I wanted to gather your children as a hen....” The text then slightly differs in each version but immediately afterward says that the hen wanted to bring her “chicks under her wings, but you wouldn’t let me.” Some argue that even though both gospels have Jesus talking, in Q these are Wisdom’s words (due to the blatantly female imagery and her apparent close ties to the prophets).<sup>20</sup> These are the major examples of Wisdom’s appearance in Q.<sup>21</sup>

The problem is that even if every possible case of Wisdom speaking in Q is true, what bearing does that have on Q’s teaching about women? A feminine image speaking does not *per se* make the message’s content either more pertinent or sympathetic to women. Had Q presented a masculine image as saying the same words, the text’s message would still be the same. Even if a male image had used the hen metaphor on himself (as both Luke and Matthew’s Jesus in fact does), the point would still be the same. As Tuckett points out, “there is plenty of precedent in the OT of similar imagery

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher M. Tuckett argues that Luke does better preserve Q in this case. “Feminine Wisdom in Q?” in *Women in the Biblical Tradition* (ed. George J. Brooke; Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1992) 126.

<sup>20</sup> Tuckett discusses the debate on this issue but leans toward an agnostic position himself. “Feminine Wisdom in Q?” 126-7.

<sup>21</sup> Tuckett also raises the possibility of Wisdom being to some degree connected to Q 6:23 (which also pertains to the prophets’ abuse) and 9:58 (Jesus’ reference to his own homelessness). “Feminine Wisdom in Q?” 113.

being used of God who regularly has ‘wings’ to shelter people in their ‘shadow.’” He concludes, “there is little or nothing that depends exclusively on the femininity of Wisdom.”<sup>22</sup> Thus we cannot confuse the message and the messenger. Any statement will impact women based on its own substance rather than the gender of the personification making it. After all, it is quite common in action movies for a man to give either his firearm or his (naval or space) ship a female personification. However, that has significance for neither his female enemy nor ally. Why should it be any different for an ancient text?

**Doublet Parables:** In a few places in Q, Jesus tells parables in pairs with the first being a story about a man and the second about a woman. I shall begin my analysis with an example of scholarly overreaching to reiterate the need for modesty in examining these doublets. In Q 13:18-21, Jesus gives analogies for the kingdom of God/Heaven. He first describes it as a man who plants mustard seeds which become a tree that is large enough for birds to nest; he then says that the kingdom “is like leaven that a woman took and concealed in fifty pounds of flour until it was all leavened.” Levine, who correctly argues against reading too much positive news for women in Q, goes too far in the other direction with this passage. She notes that, “within the symbolic vocabulary of both formative Judaism and the early Church, yeast [leaven] has negative connotations.” She also observes that the verb choice has the woman “hiding [concealing]” the leaven in the

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<sup>22</sup> Tuckett, “Feminine Wisdom in Q?” 127.

dough and not “kneading” it. These two points cause her to conclude that Q is implying that “her manual labour is underhanded, and the process she cooks up is one of decay.”<sup>23</sup>

There are several problems with this conclusion. First, even if “hiding” yeast in dough were to have negative connotations, it is also a very regular and highly mundane activity. The main point of both parables is that the kingdom is like something that is so small as to be initially not invisible but then to go on to have a great impact (either on the birds who are thus able to reside in the tree or on the people who get to eat the bread). A planted seed and leavened dough are both excellent metaphors for this: they are both well known and create a crisp mental image. Second, the word choice of “hiding” rather than “kneading” does in fact makes sense. Part of the point is that neither the seed nor the leaven is initially apparent. Thus the verb choice might simply have been to strengthen the analogy by putting the yeast fully inside of the dough instead of mixing it in in such a way that it is visible from the surface. Levine’s explanation that the leavening is somehow a clandestine activity makes no sense. From whom is the woman hiding the leaven, and for what reason? Finally (and perhaps most importantly of all), the parable is not even about the woman but about the leaven. The sentence could have been put in the passive (“like leaven that has been concealed in”), and the point would have remained the same. To turn this into a commentary about the woman is to be overly eager to find information on women in the passage.

There are two other major doublet parables: the parables of the shepherd finding his missing sheep and the woman finding her missing coin (15:4-10) and the depictions

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<sup>23</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, “Women in the Q Communit(ies) and Traditions,” in *Women & Christian Origins* 162-3. See also 169, note 57.

of the people being raptured (17:34-35).<sup>24</sup> However, Arnal, referring to these passages and others in which there is some sort of male/female joint appearance, states that “*not a single one* of these sayings units is part of an argument about or discussion of women or the role of women within the group.”<sup>25</sup> Thus we should be very cautious in proceeding. Nevertheless, it is notable that Q’s Jesus is going out of his way to (at least sometimes) bring up both sexes. We should not understand this to be a move toward some sort of egalitarian “equal time,” but even so the redundancy has to be there for some reason. Arnal argues that they emulate contemporary legal formulae and are there to make explicit that both sexes fall under the text’s teaching.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps a simpler answer is that both sexes may have been in the audience and that the message is thus being made accessible to both sex’s daily lives. Ultimately, analyzing Q’s doublet parables too closely can quickly devolve into the equivalent of reading tea leaves. While Q’s Jesus is bringing up both sexes, we may never know exactly why.

**Q Overview:** Q contains sayings about a variety of issues, but very little of it pertains specifically to women. This fact may in and of itself be significant. Corley argues that Q has an “overall male-centered mindset.”<sup>27</sup> Levine notes that Q does not discuss

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<sup>24</sup> However, both of these doublets have problems. The parable of the missing coin appears only in Luke. There is no doublet in Matthew and thus maybe not in Q either. However, Levine says that scholars often accept the coin parable as being in Q. “Women in the Q Communit(ies) and Traditions,” 163. William E. Arnal also accepts this view. “Gendered Couplets in Q and Legal Formulations: From Rhetoric to Social History,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116 (1997) 82. Regarding the rapture scenes, Matthew depicts two women and two men, thus matching the doublet pattern. However, Luke depicts two women and then “two on one couch,” possibly a married couple. It is difficult to tell which is closer to Q.

<sup>25</sup> Arnal, “Gendered Couplets in Q,” 81. Italics original.

<sup>26</sup> Arnal, “Gendered Couplets in Q,” 87-94.

<sup>27</sup> Kathleen E. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 2002) 82.

reproduction and childhood ever as such but only as metaphors for something else.<sup>28</sup>

Arnal states that the text has an “androcentric orientation” and outside of the doublets, usually speaks from a male perspective.<sup>29</sup> I shall simply make two points in response to these claims. First, as with Thomas, we should never forget the fundamentally liberating and salvific message of Q or any similar religious text. From Q comes the famous calls to follow the beatitudes (6:20-23); love one’s enemies (6:27); seek and thereby find (11:9-10); be like the lilies and not worry (12:27); and be the salt of the earth (14:34). These are all addressed to men and women alike, and they seek to liberate and empower both sexes spiritually. Thus any discussion of men being prioritized must be seen not in a pro-male/anti-female dichotomy but as a question of degree within a larger spiritual framework that claims to help the entire community.

Nevertheless, my second point is that considering Q’s context and culture, it is not surprising that the text would have an androcentric tone or at least fail to address issues that would have been raised had women been more prominent. The absence of women in the text is certainly significant. However, ultimately we must also accept that absence for what it is: an absence. Q is not a commentary on women, and we cannot treat it as such. The fact that it did not discuss women more is itself significant to some degree, but we cannot take even that too far. Q did not address women, and we cannot make it do so now.

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<sup>28</sup> Levine, “Women in the Q Communit(ies) and Traditions,” 161.

<sup>29</sup> Arnal, “Gendered Couplets in Q,” 86.

## Conclusion

I have now examined two early sayings gospels, Thomas and Q, and explored their views on women. They are distinctly different from each other in that Thomas explicitly discusses sex and women (particularly their criteria for salvation) while Q does not. This difference greatly impacts the extent to which we can draw conclusions from these texts. In Thomas, it clearly promotes a theology that rejects the material world and thereby our sex distinctions. It calls for a reunification of the sexes and (depending on one's interpretation of Thomas 114) a call for both women and men to return to Adam's initial sexless state. Q, on the other hand, largely does not engage in explicit discussions about sex or women. This has led some scholars to overreach and read too much into the text in hopes of extracting its views. In the end, these two overlapping texts showed incredibly different ways of approaching one of the most important issues in any religious community: the lives and roles of the women.



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