

“stilling of the storm” in Mark and Matthew, and I take the example from a famous essay published in 1948 by Günther Bornkamm.<sup>4</sup>

In Mark’s version, the story is rather simple (Mark 6:45–52). Jesus sends his disciples across the Sea of Galilee in a boat while he stays behind to dismiss the crowd and to pray. The disciples are straining at the oars against a strong headwind when they see Jesus walking on the water, attempting to pass by them. They think they are seeing a ghost and cry out, at which time Jesus calms them and gets into the boat. The wind suddenly ceases.

Matthew adds several elements to the story and elaborates it (Matt 14:22–33). Instead of merely noting that there was a strong headwind, Matthew says that the boat was “battered by the waves” and was “far from the land,” a more precarious scene than in Mark (Matt 14:24). Then Matthew adds an entirely new story. After the disciples discover that they are looking at Jesus himself, not a ghost, Peter asks to be allowed to come to Jesus on the water. Jesus says, “Come.” But once Peter is out of the boat, he becomes terrified and begins to sink. He cries, “Lord, save me!” Jesus pulls him up, but admonishes him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” They both get into the boat, and the wind ceases. Matthew ends his version of the story not with the confusion and misunderstanding of the disciples, as in Mark, but quite differently: “And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’” (14:33).

In Bornkamm’s interpretation, Matthew has taken a rather simple “nature miracle” and turned it into something like an allegory for the church of his day. The church, as Matthew has already made clear, must experience persecution and opposition, represented by the “battering” of the boat by waves and wind. Christians, though, are to look to Jesus for their salvation, as Peter did: “Lord, save me!” Peter here represents “every Christian” who needs Jesus for salvation. But they are to attempt to turn their “little faith” into full faith. The idea that the church includes many people with “little faith” occurs repeatedly in Matthew. In fact, the term seems to be a favorite of the author to describe members of the church who have some, but not enough, trust in Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Matthew changes the ending he gets from Mark so that the disciples perform the action he expects of members of his own church: not confusion and misunderstanding, but worship of Jesus as Lord.

Bornkamm’s essay, published in the middle of the twentieth century, was one of several early examples of what scholars call “redaction criticism.” The word “redaction,” of course, merely means “editing.” In fact, we use “redaction” also in English—rather than the more colloquial “editorial criticism,” which would mean the same thing—simply because English-language

scholarship learned the method from German scholars, and *Redaktion* is the German word for “editing.” The method examines how authors alter (edit or redact) stories or sayings they seem to have found in another source—in this case Mark, although scholars do the same thing when they speculate about how Matthew or Luke may have altered something they found in Q. By studying how the Gospel writer changed materials he got from someone else, we can better see his own intentions in writing.

In this case, we come up with interpretations of Matthew that help us imagine his setting: his church, his purpose in writing, and his intentions. “Matthew” (recall that I use the name only for convenience; we don’t know the name of the actual author) is writing in a church that does include gentiles but that, in his opinion at least, must remain linked to Israel by obedience to the law of Moses. It seems that he expects the members of his church to keep kosher, to observe the Sabbath (though in a less strict way than some other Jews), and to continue circumcising male members of the church, probably both their male children and gentile converts. He sees himself and them as a community of teachers and scribes, passing along the teachings of Jesus and interpreting Jewish scripture rightly. They suffer persecution for following this crucified Messiah, and perhaps because of their own different interpretations of the law. But they are to endure, to follow and worship Jesus, and to flee from persecution when they can, but to use that retreat as an opportunity to evangelize further.

This is a version of Christianity quite unlike what most people today know about. It is hard for us to imagine a version of Christianity that takes Jesus to be the Messiah and accepts gentiles into the church but insists on the continuing observation of the law of Moses. But that is apparently what we see in the Gospel of Matthew. The author would certainly not believe that he was offering a different “religion” from Judaism. He sees himself rather as teaching the proper way to be “Israel.” This Gospel was certainly written after 70 C.E., and no doubt before the end of the first century. Most scholars would date its composition to sometime around 85 C.E., but that is only a guess. Here, toward the end of the first century, we have a Jesus-believing, law-abiding sect of Judaism that calls itself “church.”

## CHAPTER 8

# The *Gospel of Thomas*

*Overview:* The existence of the *Gospel of Thomas* had been known from ancient writers, but it was only after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices that the actual text became available. The *Gospel of Thomas* is basically a collection of sayings, or *logia*, that sometimes seem similar to, though perhaps more primitive than, sayings found in the canonical Gospels. Sometimes, however, the sayings seem better explained as reflecting a certain “Platonizing” understanding of the world similar to what would later be held by “Gnostics.” This involves a rejection of the material world and a desire for *gnosis*, a secret knowledge, in order to escape the world and return to the divine being.

### The Nag Hammadi Codices and Thomas Literature

Perhaps the single most persistent theme of this book is the diversity of early Christianity. In fact, scholars now can sometimes be heard talking about “early Christianities” to stress how varied the movement was in its early years, all the way through the second century. An excellent way to illustrate that variety is an examination of Christian documents that did not make it into the canon, that were not considered “orthodox” by later Christians, and that are therefore relatively unknown to modern people. The *Gospel*