

## Is the Gospel a Myth?: A Literary Argument for the Historicity and Uniqueness of the Gospels (Part II)

In part I, I gave forty-five characteristics that the four Gospels share in common, with I think few exceptions. For the most part, I think the fact that the four canonicals share most of these characteristics is not too controversial.

After listing the characteristics, I summarized points I think follow from these similarities. One point was, if we could find another document that shares with the Gospels the first 35 (non-theological) characteristics, but not the last 10 (theological), then skeptical suspicions would be confirmed: the Gospels were written for theological, if not political, purposes. We might suppose the apostles took the records of a pretty normal person, added their theology, and Voila! Christianity was born.

If, on the other hand, the Gospels differ from all known religious fiction even in their non-theological characteristics, and in ways that supports the realistic nature of their text, then it is far more likely that they are different because they truly reflect the unique character and actions of Jesus.

Another point I made was, “If the Gospels came together by a natural process and Jesus were (a) . . . normal religious leader . . . world literature ought to be littered with works that resemble (them).” Skeptics have claimed to find works that resemble the Gospel many times. As mentioned, Jesus Seminar scholars have put forward the *Gospel of Thomas* and parts of the *Gospel of Peter* as two such works. One intelligent atheist of my acquaintance (a librarian) also suggested the *Iliad*, while another (a scientist who has read widely) mentioned the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. From a naturalistic perspective, there is no reason why the Gospels should be unique in any fundamental way.

But what if the Gospels reveal a pattern quite distinct from any of these, or other, rivals? C. S. Lewis said that, as an atheist with a love of literature, he was surprised to find the Gospels like the mythology he loved in one way, and like biography in another. How if the Gospels were found to not only fit, but exceed, the most sober historical documents, in characteristics that connote honest truthfulness, yet reveal mythopoetic patterns? What would follow then?

So in part two, I will begin to look at other allegedly similar works, and see which of the characteristics listed they share with the Gospels.

As for which documents to compare, I said:

“First, Old Testament books that are narrative (*Job, Genesis*). Second, OT prophetic books (*Isaiah, Micah*). Third, OT wisdom literature (*Ecclesiastes*). Four, non-cannonical (and mostly, or all, somewhat later) Jesus accounts (*Thomas, Mary, Peter, Infancy Gospel of James*). Fifth, ancient “biography” (bioi). Sixth, founding documents from other religious traditions (*Analects, Dao Dejing, Zhuang Zi, Rig Veda, Katha, Mundaka Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Dhammapada, Koran, Book of Mormon*). Seventh, other near-Eastern literature that has been compared to the Gospels (*Epic of Gilgamesh, Iliad, Apollonius of Tyana*) or related epic myth (*Beowulf, Journey to the West*).”

I’ll begin with six ancient works: the *Thomas, Analects, Gilgamesh, Agricola, The Life of Apollonius of Tyana, and Journey to the West*, as my “control specimens.” I choose these first because skeptics have compared *Thomas, Apollonius*, and *Gilgamesh* to the Gospels, and I have compared *Analects* to the Gospels before in a non-systematic way, and found a fair degree of similarity. *Agricola* is an example of realistic Greek biography. *Journey to the West* is a Chinese epic “tall tale” with a subtext of spiritual allegory. Thus we have here excellent examples of the last three categories.

The procedure I’ll follow will be as follows. First, I’ll list the 35 non-theological and 10 theological characteristics that define the canonical Gospels. Next, I’ll show how these six texts compare with the Gospels in terms of these 45 characteristics. In the case of *Thomas*, I’ll give more detail than for the others, since according to skeptical theories it is the closest to the Gospels. (This comparison will clearly show that it is not.) After that, I’ll summarize the data briefly, and finally, summarize conclusions about the historical and mythological character of the Gospels.

#### **First, the characteristics:**

- (1) The Gospels seem to have been completed from three to seven decades after the end of the story they record.
- (2) They are primarily narrative in nature.

- (3) The Gospel narrative is mostly understated. (“Just the facts, Ma’am.”) in a style that contrasts sharply with the words of Christ. Everyone but the teacher is a straight man.
- (4) They tell about an allegedly historical person named Jesus.
- (5) Twelve disciples are introduced, along with a number of other commoners, who play consistent roles in the Gospels. The personalities of a few of the teacher’s followers are developed in a consistent and recognizable way.
- (6) Other characters come and go, exit stage left, and disappear. No unexpected coincidences are introduced to tidy up the plot or reintroduce old characters. In fact the “plot” is rather untidy.
- (7) The leading disciples are mostly fishermen.
- (8) A fair amount of the action takes place around a familiar natural location. (On or near the Sea of Galilee.)
- (9) Some of it also takes place in and around a familiar urban location. (The Jewish temple.)
- (10) Otherwise familiar political figures play cameo roles, consistent with their known personalities.
- (11) The teacher is ethnically distinctive, and carries on a dialogue with his own traditions that contains both radical affirmation and radical tension.
- (12) The main character of the Gospels gains a guru-like following. He also teaches the masses.
- (13) The teacher does not wander very far, either geographically or in words. He travels a bit, but moves towards a specific geographical goal at the end of all the Gospels: Jerusalem.
- (14) He praises sometimes, often the most unlikely person – but never flatters.
- (15) He calls people to repent and assume responsibility. He never appeals to base motives, like a propagandist. He repeatedly tells his followers, in fact, to “take up your crosses.”
- (16) He accepts authority: the “Father,” but also his parents.
- (17) By contrast, he tends to speak his hardest words to the powerful.
- (18) He takes an interest in simple people. While he confronts the powerful, he tends to speak respectfully (but bracingly) to the weak.
- (19) The central figure in the Gospels often sees individuals, where those around him see members of a class.
- (20) He acts and speaks as if self-aware.
- (21) He teaches in parables, especially to the crowds. Sometimes he explains his meaning more clearly to his disciples in private.

- (22) Much of his teaching comes in response to questions. (Less structured and deliberately didactic than the *Republic*.)
- (23) He does not attempt to directly influence the political rulers of his society, though his claims have a political dimension. He is not a political advisor, nor does he create a religious community completely separate from the secular world.
- (24) The main character in the Gospels expresses a variety of emotions, in a natural and unapologetic manner: anger, frustration, delight, joy, sorrow.
- (25) They are full of realistic details, often intense narrative realism.
- (26) Crowd reactions are depicted extremely realistically and with variety, (anger, joy, bafflement, fear), and are usually given without theological defense of Jesus by the narrator.
- (27) Jesus offers moral lessons.
- (28) The teachings of Jesus are never platitudinous, but are highly original and always surprising.
- (29) He often uses poetic hyperboli to get his point across.
- (30) The main character of the Gospel's teachings transcend their environment. They were shocking and unreasonable then: they are shocking and unreasonable now. They are equally impossible for people of all times and cultures to keep.
- (31) But they are also often surprisingly mild.
- (32) While some of it is puzzling or even off-putting, overall, the quality of teachings given in the 4 Gospels is unmatched. "No one has ever taught like this man." It takes a lifetime or more to be properly astounded by his words.
- (33) They are also often very hard to get to the bottom of. Attempts to patronize them generally wind up making even smart people appear a bit ridiculous. One aspect of that complexity is "degrees of perspective."
- (34) The Gospels are full of confrontations. They are dramatic.
- (35) The Jesus of the Gospels treats women without fear, condescension, or male superiority, and with particular compassion, that consistently violated the social mores of his time.

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(Characteristics that are related specifically to "Christianity," or that could conceivably be interpreted that way.)

- (36) Jesus grounds his teachings deeply in the Old Testament. While they are universal in effect, they grow from Jewish culture.
- (37) The authority of Jesus is one of the most prominent characteristics of all the Gospels, rewriting religious law, forgiving sins, accepting worship.
- (38) The Jesus of the Gospels acts like he has a mission. He speaks of death as part of his

calling.

- (39) Jesus heals people. He does this neither simply by praying, nor by incantations, occult and magic. Rather, he acts as if he had the same right to reduce physical laws as he did the moral laws passed down in Scripture.
- (40) Except for the withering of the fig tree, all the miracles help rather than harm.
- (41) The Gospels are eschatological. They see Jesus as coming to bring some change in the relationship between Heaven and Earth.
- (42) Jesus sees Himself as (in some sense) one with God.
- (43) The “good news” that the Gospels bring resolves around the death of Jesus for the sins of the world.
- (44) They climax with him rising from the dead.
- (45) They see Jesus as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy and prophetic archetypes.

Now let’s see how other literature compares to the Gospels in these regards. (Before we do so, I should point out that I did not usually think of the other documents as I was preparing this list of Gospel characteristics. So going through the list with the other writings was a kind of adventure for me – though I had an intuitive and general impression of the similarities and differences, it was interesting to me to see how it came out in detail.)

I’ll note which characteristics the books share in common (“yes”), which they differ on (“no”) and which they share in common partially, or I am unsure about (“maybe”). Sometimes I’ll add comments to clarify my choices.

#### **I. A. *Thomas*, non-theological characteristics:**

“Yes:” 6, (The disciples are on the margins of the text, as in the Gospels – though unlike the Gospels, there is no plot), 20 (Jesus speaks with self-awareness), 21 (he uses parables, some borrowed from the Gospels, some new), 22 (The disciples ask questions, which Jesus answers, at fairly regular intervals in *Thomas*.)

“No:” 1, (Thomas obviously depends on the other Gospels, and there is no reason to think it is 1<sup>st</sup> Century) 2, (no narrative) 3, 5 (the disciples have practically no individual personalities here, apart from one misogynistic question by Peter), 7 (Thomas gives no clue what the disciples do for a living.) 8, 9 (No information is given about locations.) 10 (No political figures appear in the text.) 11 (To me at least, there is little that seems particularly Jewish about this document, apart from its partial origin in the Gospels) 13 (No sense of movement is given in this

text), 14 (Jesus praises people in general here, but no one I could find in particular), 15 (Very surprisingly, given that Thomas is a “sayings Gospel,” the book contains practically no moral comment), 16, (“Jesus” offers no sign here of being under authority, except perhaps the use of the word “Father” for God, and for bizarrely telling Salome, “I am your disciple.”) 17 (*Thomas* speaks hard about the Pharisees, but not to them, as Jesus does in the Gospels), 18, (“Jesus” here takes no interest in other people, except perhaps as an audience) 19 (The “Jesus” of Thomas shows no sign of noticing individuals as the Jesus of the Gospels does, but rather speaks of general classes such as Pharisees and prophets. “You” is generally in the plural.), 23 (“Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor, give God what belongs to God, and give me what is mine,” suggests a separatist cult, as does the Gnostic quality of the sayings), 25 (There are no realistic details here.) 26 (Unlike the Gospels, the sayings of *Thomas* are not given publicly, nor is the reaction of the audience related), 27 (Another surprise. Half or so of *Thomas* is from the Gospels, but he left out the moral teachings!), 28 (*Thomas* has a mystical bent, and few if any moral teachings, yet still manages to bore us with a few platitudes – sayings no. 58, 62, 67, and 70 strike me as rather tedious and shop-worn, for example.), 30 (Sayings not borrowed from the Gospels may be mildly shocking to those not familiar with other forms of esotericism, but it is hard to imagine a modern person really following the Jesus of *Thomas*. “When 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, and when you make male and female into a single one . . . when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand . . . then you will enter (the kingdom).” Nor is it clear to me what a modern disciple of *Thomas* would do.) 31 (Little in *Thomas* exhibits the mildness or reasonableness that the Jesus of the canonical Gospels often shows: “Isn’t it right to do good on the Sabbath?” “No one who gives a cup of water in my name will lose his reward.” In fact, the Jesus of Thomas comes across as a rather pompous and fanatical person.) 32 & 33 (Thomas is not widely quoted, nor have its words turned into proverbs, because they are in fact inferior.) 34 (There is little drama in *Thomas*.) -35 (“Every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.”)

“Maybe:” 4 (*Thomas* describes a person named Jesus who could be *vaguely* historical person, or could be entirely fictional), 24 (The guru of *Thomas* damns the Pharisees and “the flesh that depends on the soul” and “the soul that depends on the flesh,” (in other words, non-dualists) and once claims to “ache for the children of humanity,” but otherwise signs of emotion are few – certainly nothing like in the Gospels.) 29 (“Jesus” uses poetic hyperbole occasionally here, though rather clumsily, except when he borrows from the Gospels.)

## I. B. Thomas ,theological characteristics.

“Yes:” 37 (“Where there are three deities, they are divine. Where there are two or one, I am with that one.” “I disclose my mysteries to those (who are worthy) of (my) mysteries.” However, the “Jesus” of *Thomas* speaks as if he has absolute authority, though more in the style of Rajneesh or a know-it-all talk-show host, than the calm authority of a good teacher or policeman who himself is under authority, as Jesus speaks.)

“No:” 36, (There is little about the Old Testament here), 38 (There is nothing about Jesus’ death, and no sense of mission), 39 (No healings are related), 40 (Nor miracles at all) -41 (There is little sense here of eschatological change brought about by Jesus – “If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the . . . kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds of the sky will precede you . . . the kingdom is within you and outside you” – most of it sounds rather irrelevant to the stream of history, 43 (There is nothing about redemption though the cross here.), 44 (Nor about the resurrection.), 45 (*Thomas* does not mention Old Testament prophecy.)

“Maybe:” 42 (“I am the one who comes from what is whole. I was granted from the things of my Father.” This may imply oneness with God . . . or may not.)

## **II. A. Epic of Gilgamesh, non-theological characteristics**

“Yes:” 2, 8, 24, 34.

“No:” 1, 3-5, 7, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17 – 23, 25—33, 35 (The hero exhibits occasional fear of women, occasional desire, but no particular compassion.)

“Maybe:” 6, 10, 13, 16.

## **II. B. Epic of Gilgamesh, theological characteristics**

“Yes:” 38 (they have the same mission – to overcome death); 42 (the hero “reached divinity” in some sense)

“No:” 36, 39, 40, 43, 45

“Maybe:” 41 (Is the Epic a founding myth for Babylonian culture, and therefore imply something resembling a retrospective eschatology?), 44 (a vague kind of resurrection may

occur)

### **III. A. *Analects*, non-theological**

“Yes:” 3, 5, 6, 11, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 27, 31, 33

“No:” 4, 7, 8, 9, 13, 17, 23 (Confucius does attempt to influence political process), 26, 28 (while he does lapse into platitudes occasionally, most of his teaching is of a high quality), 29 (understated irony, rather than hyperbole, seems his favored style of humor), 30, 35 (women are largely ignored, except to be married away to chosen disciples).

“Maybe:” 1 (The early part of the *Analects* appears to have been compiled by early disciples after his death, though since Confucius died at a much older age than Jesus, this might still be later relatively to the events they record than the Gospels), 2 (some narrative), 10 (some historical figures do appear, whether accurately portrayed or not, I don’t know), 12 (Confucius gains a guru-like following, but does not appear to teach mass audiences), 14 (Confucius does often praise, but may sometimes flatter political rulers a bit), 21 (less elliptical than the Gospels), 32 (The quality of Confucius’ sayings, while not unmatched, and sometimes seemingly prosaic, is mostly high, and played a unique role in China), 34 (Some drama appears in the *Analects*).

### **III. B. *Analects*, theological**

“Yes:” 36 (Confucius dialogued with Chinese tradition in a similar way to how Jesus dialogued with Jewish tradition.)

“No:” 37, 39-45

“Maybe:” 38 (Confucius felt he had a mission from God, but it didn’t include death. In fact he felt God would protect him from death until it was complete.)

IV. **A. *The Life of Cnaeus Julius Agricola*** (A first-century biography of the Roman emperor Domitian by the historian Tacitus.)

**Non-theological characteristics:**

“Yes:” 1, 2, 8, 9 (the locations being Rome and Britain), 10, 16 (Tacitus accepts the authority of the emperor), 18 (probably), 25, 27 (There is a bit of moralizing in *Agricola*), 31, 34

“No:” 3, 4, 5, 7, 11, 12, 13, 17, 21, 22, 23 (Both the author and his subject are both political figures), 24 (*Agricola* comes across as restrained and dignified in manner – not emotionally expressive, in other words), 29 (There is no hint of hyperboli here.), 30, 32, 33

“Maybe:” 6 (Unlike the Gospels, the “plot” is quite clearly defined; as in the Gospels, *Agricola* is free of novelistic coincidences), 15 (Domitian appeals to pride, what could be called a base motive, but also the martial virtues of courage and honor), 19 (The text does not prove the subject’s interest or disinterest in the common man, though his speech shows some understanding of the common soldier), 20 (The quotes in this text are not introspective enough to show whether *Agricola* is self-aware), 26 (Crowd reaction is given realistically, as in the Gospels, but Tacitus does defend his subject, unlike in the Gospels), 28 (“Better is an honorable death than a life of shame,” heroic and appropriate, but none too original – the speech Tacitus relates gives no evidence of original sentiment), 35 (Domitian is portrayed as having had a good relationship with his wife and daughter, but few details are given. Durant notes that Tacitus “Has no conception of . . . the status of women.” (*Caesar and Christ*, 435)

#### **IV. B. *The Life of Cnaeus Julius Agricola*, Theological Characteristics:**

36-45: There is no hint of any theological characteristics in this work.

V. **A. *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana***, Philostratus (220 A. D.) (This work, the alleged biography of a traveling Greek sage and wonder-worker, can best be described as B-class science fiction, *Star Trek* meets *Airplane*. The Indian sages even have a cloaking device around their city. Because it resembles the Gospels in being the chronicle of a probably historical contemporary of Jesus who did “miracles,” it is sometimes mentioned as a possible Gospel parallel.)

#### **V. B. *Apollonius*, Non-theological characteristics:**

“Yes:” 2, 6, 20, 27 (*Apollonius* offers moral lessons . . . lame ones.)

“No:” 1 (Philostratus writes later than the Gospel authors relative to his subject), 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 (Apollonius mildly flatters Indian sages), 17 (I found no sign of harsh words to the powerful in the portion I have read so far), 18 (Apollonius loved to hang out with kings and sages, rather than common folk), 19, 21, 22 (Rather than answering questions, the subject mostly asks them), 23, 24 (Apollonius is limited in his emotional expressions – mostly pretty “cool”), 25 (Intense narrative unrealism . . . One realistic touch is that the sage speaks to an Indian king through an interpreter, though this is rendered mysterious by the fact that it is earlier claimed that he speaks all languages without having studied any of them), 26 (crowd reactions are phony, phony, phony), 28 (Apollonius’ teachings are often platitudinous – even silly), 29 (tall tales, yes, hyperbole, no), 30, 31, 32, 33, (Apollonius’ ideas are easy to get to the bottom of), 35 (There is no particular interest in women here, in any sense.)

“Maybe:” 3 (The sage’s disciples serve as straight men, as in the Gospels, but the narrative itself is in no way understated), 15, 16, 34 (There is occasional light drama here, but without tension.)

#### **V. Apollonius, B. Theological Characteristics:**

“Yes:” None.

“No:” 38 (Apollonius’ travels are a long, undirected “picnic,” as Chesterton described them), 41, 43, 44, 45

“Maybe:” 36 (Apollonius often refers to his Greek forebearers, but blathers in a manner that is universal to nincompoops), 37 (the sage has pedagogical authority, but it seems to flow entirely from the fantasy of his biographer, rather than any inherent sense of gravity, import, or value to his teachings – there is no obvious reason why the Indian kings put up with him), 39 (It is not clear from what I’ve read so far that Apollonius does miracles, though the Indian gurus use magic), 40 (Some of those guru’s miracles appear frivolous, such as levitation, though a magical explanation is given to claim otherwise), 41 (unclear).

**VI. *Journey to the West*** (*Journey to the West* is the classic Chinese tale of how the Monkey King and his companions traveled to India for the Buddhist Scriptures. A delightful story, it is part spiritual allegory, part kung fu movie, and all fun. What it shares in common with the Gospels is that it is centered around a historical figure, the Buddhist monk Xuan Zang, who did make a journey

westward for Scriptures, and that supernatural events occur.)

**A. Non-Theological characteristics:**

“Yes:” 2 (narrative), 5, 9, 16, 18, 34

“No:” 1 (*Journey* was written about a millennia after the actual trip), 3 (Nobody is a straight man here, and absolutely nothing is understated), 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35 (Women gain few leading roles in this story, except as seductresses).

“Maybe:” 10 (Emperor Tang Taizong appears, though I am not sure he resembles his historical inspiration here), 24 (the monk Xuan Zong is highly emotional, especially crying at his many eminent demises, but in a formulaic and shallow, if humorous, manner), 26 (Fear and relief are the main “crowd reactions” expressed here . . . a bit vaguely), 28, 31

**VI. *Journey to the West*, B. Theological Characteristics:**

“Yes:” 36 (*Journey to the West* is deeply and brilliantly grounded in Chinese tradition), 41, (The fetching of Buddhist Scriptures is perceived as effecting the dawning of a new era for China), 45 (The journey seems to have been fated or planned beforehand, if not prophecied in the Biblical sense.)

“No:” 37 (Everyone has to earn authority by winning fights, here), 39, 42

“Maybe:” 38 (Xuan Zang and the Monkey King are going on a mission, though not one intended by themselves to end in death), 40 (Xuan Zang helps people whenever he can, but his disciples do a great deal of killing, with his sometime approval), 43 (While Xuan Zang does not ultimately die for the sins of the world, this is a journal of ongoing redemptive suffering), 44 (Xuan Zang often escapes death in a manner very much LIKE a resurrection . . . Even to the point of needing to exit the underground caverns of monsters who are going to eat him. The symbolism clearly parallels the event of the Gospels.)

**Data Summary Non-theological yes – no – maybe; Theological yes – no -- maybe:**

*Gospel of Thomas*: 4—28—3 \*\*\* 1—8—1

*Analects*: 15—12—8 \*\*\* 1—8—1

*Epic of Gilgamesh*: 4—27—4 \*\*\* 2—5—2

*Agricola*: 11—16—7 \*\*\* 0—10—0

*Apollonius of Tyana*: 4—27—4 \*\*\* 0—5—5

*Journey to the West*: 6—24—5 \*\*\* 3—3—4

The first thing that is clear from this data is that none of these purported parallels really resembles the Gospels. The document that comes closest to resembling the Gospels overall is the *Analects* of Confucius, which shares 16 characteristics to a large extent, 9 others to a lesser extent: 25 out of 45. Even characteristics that nominally match, however, tend to differentiate the two works, often to the advantage of the Gospels in terms of historical believability, as I have argued elsewhere. For example, while Confucius did not always allow himself to be restrained by social convention, and his actions sometimes “embarrass” later Confucianists, he did not exhibit anywhere near the social freedom that Jesus showed in regard to the Sabbath or interacting with women.

Of the other texts, *Thomas* matches the Gospels the least, (8, including maybes) despite the nominal advantage that it is the only other text that is about Jesus, (which wins it one point *pro forma*), its alleged status as a Gospel, and its great popularity among skeptical scholars. After that come two “tall tales” – *Apollonius of Tyana*, (9) and *Epic of Gilgamesh* (12), then *Agricola* (17) and *Journey to the West* (18).

But something even more interesting is revealed when we analyze these textual resemblances by theological and non-theological characteristics. Now we find that the more historical a text, the more it resembles the Gospels in non-theological characteristics. The *Analects* has 23 such markers, *Agricola* 18, while *Thomas* has only 7, *Gilgamesh* 8, *Apollonius* 8, and *Journey to the West* 11. This appears to be because many (but not all) of these characteristics are in fact markers of historicity, or can be taken as such.

Others are markers of genius, which is why *Journey to the West* shares a fair number, *Thomas* the fewest. Genius in the Gospels also points to a single great figure from whose lips the Jesus sayings of the Gospels must derive. So does the contrast between Gospel narrative and the

words of Jesus, especially in the Synoptics. The contrast with *Thomas* on this point goes to prove that there was not a huge inventory of literary genius in the early Church that could throw out Sermon on the Mount quality sayings on a whim.

The details I have given in section I prove much more than my summary at this point. The argument for the historicity of the Gospels on literary grounds is extremely powerful, in my opinion. Analyzing it in this way and counting characteristics is merely a rather pedantic way of summarizing or quantifying these facts – probably a foolish act, like appraising Charles Dickens by counting the jokes in the *Pickwick Papers* and assigning them a number from one to ten. But we are a foolish age.

Actually the Gospels show more of the kind of realistic and anomalous detail scholars look for – “dissimilarity” – than the *Analects*, as I argue in *True Son of Heaven*. But the present point is that the *Analects* are far closer to the Gospels in terms of non-theological characteristics than are *Thomas* or *Gilgamesh*. Many of these characteristics relate both to the literary selective value of a text (why it would be chosen by sensible judges), and also to historicity. (And of course qualities that demonstrate historicity are good reasons to select a purported historical text, for those who have the sense to recognize those qualities.)

By contrast, the text that most resembles the Gospels in terms of theological characteristics, is the farcical Chinese allegory, *Journey to the West* (7). Apollonius resembles the Gospels very slightly in five characteristics, all very weak, Gilgamesh in 4, more significantly, Thomas in 2, the *Analects* in 2 (like Jesus, Confucius believed in and trusted God, and believed himself called by Him to save his country – as he did, in a more limited sense), while the most “realistic” of these texts, the Greek biography of Agricola from the same age as the life of Jesus, which resembles the Gospels to a real extent in some biographical aspects, is completely void of theological characteristics. Interestingly, Gilgamesh appears a bit closer to the Gospels in terms of “theological” content than the *Analects* or *Thomas*. (4 “yes” or “maybe” for Gil, 2 each for the *Analects* and *Thomas*. One might even add 39 and 40 if “miracles” are interpreted broadly to include “mighty works” of a romanticized hero, and bring this number to 6.) At the same time, Gil is far away from the Gospels in terms of historically-relevant characteristics. (About a tie with Thomas, however.)

What this shows, I think, is that the Gospels are “true myth.” They represent psychological and spiritualities that animate the most sensitive and beautiful myths that people have created . . . and show how God made dreams come true, the Tao become flesh and dwelling in the temporal sphere among us, full of (mythological) grace and (historical) truth.

It appears that while *Thomas* could theoretically have been axed for want of theological agreement with the Gospels, as is alleged by critics, there were really no good reasons to include it on any other grounds. There are no obvious textual reasons to see *Thomas* as a valuable addition to the canon, either as a source of moral teachings, historically believable events in Jesus' life, or anything else. In fact, the only reason to include it, would be theological – an affection for Gnosticism. What is most obvious is the utter disconnect. *Thomas* most likely died of neglect, a natural victim of survival of the fittest, rather than of theological eugenics.

*Thomas* does not even much resemble the Gospels in those very few characteristics that they seem at first to share in common. *Thomas* lacks a tidy plot, as do the Gospels – but that is because the Gnostic Gospel has no plot at all. The Jesus of *Thomas* speaks with self-assurance, as does the Jesus of Luke – but in *Thomas*, it sounds like the self-assurance of a crank, not a sage. *Thomas* resembles a true Gospel in that Jesus teaching comes in response to questions – but without any of the sense of narrative realism of the Gospels; the disciples are merely rhetorical devices in *Thomas*. And those are the “similarities.”

All in all, it is hard to imagine a book less like the Gospels than *Thomas* – even with his frequent borrowing of Gospel sayings.

It is amazing, really, than any skeptics can read the “*Gospel*” of *Thomas* and not be immediately gripped by the vast differences. The fact that the early Christians did not include it in the canon, should increase our respect for them. The fact that some modern scholars cannot tell the difference and stupidly call *Thomas* a Gospel, and an early and respectable one at that, should perhaps cause us to revise our opinion of those scholars in a different direction. If these men cannot see at a glance that *Thomas* is not a Gospel in any sense, nor a reliable source for the life of Jesus, then it confirms what C. S. Lewis deduced about Biblical critics for other (good) reasons: “Whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to lack literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading.”

The upshot of this comparison is to confirm the common sense intuition that the Gospels are a class of highly idiosyncratic texts. If this trend holds true over comparison with other texts, (and I believe it does) it will show pretty dramatically that the Gospels are a world apart both from mythology, and from apocryphal treatises and dialogues. Again, the simplest explanation for those differences is that the Gospels are basically reliable records of an unusual person, who did combine the traits noted in the Gospels.

At the same time, a few similarities with *Gilgamesh* and *Journey to the West* point to the Christian idea that in the Gospels, myth becomes fact. This is the concept that myth can be a kind of seeking for God, a poetic sketch of divine truths that become reality in Christ. But that argument needs to be left for another day.