The Infancy Gospel of Thomas: A School Text for Children[1]

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Recibido: 1 marzo 2025 / Aceptado: 24 junio 2025

ABSTRACT: In recent years, there has been considerable debate regarding the intended audience of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. R. Aasgaard has proposed that the text was conceived to be told to children in a domestic and familial setting, even as to describe it as «the first children's story of Christianity». However, without excluding children as recipients, U.U. Kaiser argues that the text may have functioned as «a children's book for parents». Nevertheless, the limited proportion of stories focused on the domestic and family sphere (18%), along with the fact that 60% of the text is dedicated to the educational activities of teachers and Jesus himself as «teacher», suggests that we are dealing with a school text intended for children. At the same time, its final author, possibly a Christian teacher, exhorts Christian parents to promote and entrust the education of their children to teachers of their own faith, rather than placing it in the hands of Jewish teachers.

Keywords: Infancy of Jesus, children's story, school text, teacher, parent.

[1] La traducción al inglés ha sido realizada con la asistencia de ChatGPT; agradezco la revisión de la misma a Peter G. Pandimakil y a Little-Caden Fearghal.

Estudio Agustiniano, Vol. 60 (2025) 233-259
ISSN: 0425–340X; ISSN–e: 2792–260X

DOI: 10.53111/ea.v60i2.1243

El Evangelio de la Infancia según Tomás, un texto escolar para niños

Resumen: En los últimos años, se ha debatido sobre los destinatarios del evangelio de la *Infancia según Tomás*. R. Aasgaard ha propuesto que este texto fue concebido para ser contado a niños en un entorno doméstico y familiar, llegando a considerarlo como «el primer cuento infantil del cristianismo». No obstante, sin excluir a los niños como receptores, U.U. Kaiser sostiene que el texto pudo haber funcionado como «un libro infantil para padres». Sin embargo, la escasa proporción de relatos centrados en el ámbito doméstico y familiar (18%), junto con el hecho de que el 60% del texto se dedique a la actividad educativa de los maestros y del propio Jesús como «maestro», sugieren que nos encontramos ante un texto de origen escolar dirigido a niños. Al mismo tiempo, su autor final, posiblemente un maestro cristiano, exhorta a los padres cristianos a promover y confiar la educación de sus hijos a maestros de su misma fe, en lugar de ponerla en manos de maestros judíos.

Palabras clave: Infancia de Jesús, cuento infantil, texto escolar, maestro, padre.

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (*IGT* or *Paidika*[2]), an apocryphal text, offers a vivid and picturesque portrayal of Jesus' childhood, from the ages of five to twelve. The narrative encompasses aspects of his daily life, including his play with friends, assistance to his parents, and school education. It also recounts episodes in which Jesus performs healing miracles and pronounces curses upon his adversaries, often with severe consequences. The work concludes with a pericope inspired by the Gospel of Luke concerning the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple (Lk 2:41–52).

For decades, scholarly inquiry into this gospel has focused primarily on its critical edition, the analysis of its textual tradition, and the determination of its original language[3]. This widely disseminated text, believed to have originated in Greek in the second century, was translated into various languages, including Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian,

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[2] Several authors adopt this title for the work, as it appears in the Greek recension *Gs* («childhood deeds» or «juvenile exploits»), cf. Davis, 2014: 21-26.

[3] Gero, 1971: 46–80; Voicu, 1997: 197-204; 1998: 7-95; Voicu, 2011: 401-417; Aasgaard, 2009: 8-11; Burke, 1998: 27–43: 2010: 3-171.

Georgian, Arabic, Old Church Slavonic, and even a metrical version in Old Irish. In recent years, critical editions have succeeded in establishing a plausible base text and reconstructing the genealogy and transmission of the different versions. It is worth noting that the early stages of transmission were both oral and written, with reciprocal influences between the two modes.

In contrast, the content of the gospel has received comparatively less attention, partly due to the disconcerting depiction of the child Jesus, often deemed theologically irrelevant from a Christological perspective[4] or even «scandalously banal.»[5] Ph. Vielhauer observes that the portrayal of Jesus in this gospel is unsettling: «With material and a style that is indescribably simplistic, it presents a far from idyllic and rather frightening character: an angry, insolent, and malicious child prodigy; an arrogant, unteachable know-it-all; a highly dangerous being, feared by those around him and alien even to his own parents».[6] Similarly, O. Cullmann contends that the depiction of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple is a grotesque exaggeration of his childhood wisdom when compared with the «sober» Lucan version[7]. This has led to him being described as an *enfant terrible*[8] or a «sacred terror».[9] As J. Meier (1991:115) remarks, «the portrait of this sinister superboy belongs more in a horror movie than a gospel». Although this negative evaluation has been somewhat tempered in more recent scholarship, it is still not uncommon to encounter assessments such as that of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* as at first glance a barbaric

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4 Burke, 2012: 388-400, here 393.

5 Schneider, 1995: 37: «Das Jesusbild der Kindheitserzählung des Thomas wird nicht nur in einem einfältigen Stil dargeboten, es ist auch theologisch unerhört banal. Es enthält wenig an Idylle, ist eher erschreckend».

6 Vielhauer, 1975: 675: „Der Wunderknabe jähzornig, schimpfend und bösartig, der Schüler altklug, unerzogen und arrogant, ein höchst gefährliches kleines Wesen, das von seiner Umgebung gefürchtet wird und seinen Eltern unheimlich ist".

7 Cullmann, 1959: 293: «Trotz des Mangels an gutem Geschmack, an Maß und Diskretion muß dem Sammler dieser Legenden, der das Thomasevangelium geschaffen hat, zugestanden werden, daß er über ein naiv-anschauliches Erzählertalent verfügt, besonders, wenn er Szenen aus dem kindlichen Alltag bringt».

8 Elliott, 1996: 106; Lapham, 2003: 130.

9 Upson-Saia, 2013: 1-39; Cousland, 2018.

piece of apocryphal declamation, filled with foolish miracle stories and episodes of homicidal violence that would shock any sane-minded individual.[10]

The difficulty in reconciling the miracles and the figure of the thaumaturge in this gospel with canonical descriptions has been particularly emphasized by Kr. Upson-Saia, who argues that «these narratives may have been composed by opponents of Christianity with the intention of undermining Jesus' authority by presenting a distorted image of his youth»[11] and that the text may have later been reworked, acquiring anti-Jewish elements in the process.[12]

Another line of investigation has explored the possible connection of the text with Gnostic circles, a hypothesis already suggested by Irenaeus (*Haer.* 1.20.1–2),[13] who associated it with Valentinian or Marcionite tendencies.[14] S.J. Voicu, for his part, proposes that the text may originate from the Judeo-Christian milieu of the Ebionites, given its omission of references to the virgin birth and its presentation of Joseph as clearly Jesus' biological father.[15] However, this attribution remains speculative,

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[10] Breen, 2011: 1: «This is an extremely, not to say exquisitely, detailed analysis of what at first sight can best be described as a barbarous piece of apocryphal doggerel, replete with silly miracle stories and examples of such homicidal violence as would shock any right-minded individual».

[11] Upson-Saia, 2013: 21: «The use of tropes of invective seem to confirm my suspicion that these stories were indeed intended to be scandalous and thus likely composed by opponents wishing to undermine Christianity by smearing its central figure. In order to sully Jesus' reputation, the author(s) followed the rhetorical custom of the day: they told tales of his exceedingly impassioned, unruly, and misanthropic youth».

[12] Amsler, 2011: 433-458. Cousland (2019: 657–678), for his part, argues that the strong emphasis on Jesus' paternity, wisdom, and glory in the «temple narrative» of the *Paidika* constitutes a response to the criticisms levelled against the second-century Church by opponents of Christianity.

[13] This document has been described for several centuries as Gnostic; cf. the history of scholarship from 1695 to 1956 in Burke, 2010: 45-79. A thorough critique of the Gnostic interpretation is presented in the doctoral dissertation of Chartrand-Burke, 2001: 292-298.

[14] Lapham, 2003: 130; Baars - Helderman, 1993: 191-225; 1994: 1-32.

[15] Voicu, 1998: 50. The Ebionite thesis is revisited in detail by Aarde, 2005: 826–850; 2006: 353–382; 2013: 611-626.

owing to the limited knowledge available about the Ebionite tradition. Nevertheless, since the early twenty-first century, a growing consensus has emerged suggesting that this gospel does not fit traditional models of deviation or «heresy» but rather belongs to the mainstream of early Christianity. Some scholars propose that it represents a particular strand within the early Christian tradition or, alternatively, that it should be viewed as a «forgotten marginal text, an abandoned orphan in the study of early Christianity».[16]

The text is anonymous and offers no clear indications regarding its geographical origin.[17] Determining its provenance is typically based on the language of the original version of the narrative. In this respect, it is likely that the text originated in the Greek-speaking world, within the context of late antique Christianity. R. Aasgaard, among other reasons based on the social setting depicted in the narrative, suggests a medium-sized rural village in the Eastern Mediterranean as its point of origin.[18] The text's connection with the Gospel of Luke has led some scholars to hypothesize a composition in Antioch of Syria.[19] Others, however, propose contexts such as Alexandria, Palestine, or Asia Minor, etc.

As this overview demonstrates, there remains ample scope for further research. The present article will focus on a relatively unexplored aspect of the text: its social context and intended audience. Determining the audience of such gospels is always a complex task, as it requires distinguishing between the various contexts in which these narratives were transmitted—often orally and across highly diverse settings—and the specific recipients for whom they may have originally been intended.

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16 AASGAARD, 2009: 3.

17 BURKE, 2010: 205-212.

18 Cf. AASGAARD, 2009: 171. A Palestinian origin has been proposed on several occasions—for example, VOICU (1998: 53), who asserts a connection between the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the Ebionites in that region.

19 BURKE, 2010: 211: «It is reasonable to suspect a place of composition within Luke's community or in a place in which Luke's gospel was held in high esteem». He advocates for Antioch, where the Gospel of Luke is believed to have been composed, and it is in that city where Chrysostom—the first secure witness to the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*—came into contact with the text at the end of the fourth century (p. 212).

1. Function and Intended Audience of the Work

In the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the narrative concerning Jesus' childhood—excluding the final episode in the temple—appears to unfold entirely within his native village in Palestine.[20] This setting is depicted as a small agrarian community, where Joseph works as both a carpenter and a farmer. The village itself is portrayed in such generalized terms that it could plausibly be situated in nearly any region of the late antique Mediterranean world. Indeed, the rural environment—reflecting the lived reality of approximately 80% of the population at the time—is described in such broad strokes that it would have been easily recognizable to a wide audience. However, beyond a few specific details, such as personal names and certain social practices, the text offers no clear or concrete markers that anchor it to a particular time or place. In fact, a Palestinian origin may be excluded, given that the teachers instruct the child in the Greek alphabet rather than the Hebrew *alef-bet*. The narrative appears to reflect the everyday life of Christians from lower or middle social strata in rural settings of the Mediterranean hinterland.[21]

Within this context, two closely related questions arise: What was the purpose of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, and who constituted its intended audience? Several hypotheses have been proposed in this regard. Was the text composed to satisfy the early Christians' curiosity about Jesus' childhood and to fill the biographical gap left by the canonical gospels? Was it produced by opponents of Christianity with the aim of undermining Jesus' authority and discrediting his figure? Did it intend to portray Jesus as a *puer senex*—a «wise child»[22] possessing the maturity and wisdom of an adult from a young age—or rather as a divine child experimenting with his supernatural powers?

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[20] *Gs* 1 locates the action in 'our region of Bethlehem, in the village of Nazareth,' revealing a geographical inaccuracy and a misunderstanding of the distinct locations of these two settlements.

[21] Aasgaard, 2009: 167ff.

[22] Burke, 2010: 289: «*IGT* depicts the young Jesus as mature and wise not because he is not really human but because in the eyes of the text's author and audience, these things make him human».

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* may have served multiple functions, most notably informational, edifying, and recreational. Some scholars have proposed the theory of «biographical supplementation», arguing that the lack of information on Jesus' early life may have motivated the composition of the text. In this view, the gospel served to fill a perceived narrative gap in the canonical accounts, responding to the demands of Christian readers, regardless of whether its content was regarded as historically accurate. Other researchers have suggested that the primary aim of the narrative was entertainment, noting its lively narrative structure, use of humour, and dramatic tone—features characteristic of Hellenistic novels, which often served a diverting function. However, rather than a merely playful account, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* seems to combine entertainment with instruction, thus enhancing its overall message for its audience.

The diversity of the text's content and intentions has led to varied proposals regarding its audience. Some scholars argue that the gospel was addressed to a popular readership—written by individuals with limited intellectual formation and uninvolved in the Christological debates that concerned the more educated circles of early Christianity.[23] While the author clearly possessed literary skill, it has been suggested that the work was intended primarily for a largely illiterate audience.[24] Nevertheless, given the generally low literacy rates in antiquity, drawing a strict line between a «popular» and a «cultivated» audience proves problematic, since texts were typically read aloud by literate individuals to listeners of varying levels of sophistication.[25]

More specifically, J.R.C. Cousland (2018: 106) contends that the primary recipients were Gentile or pagan converts interested in Christianity. According to Cousland, the exotic character of Jewish wisdom as presented in the text would have been appealing even to an audience with limited familiarity with Judaism, aside from a few relatively well-known elements

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[23] Elliott, 1996: 1: «Little of this literature maintains the restrained spirituality of the earlier writings that eventually formed the New Testament. Nor do these 'popular' books match the highly intellectual theology of the church father's treatises that are contemporaneous with them».

[24] Cousland, 2018: 108.

[25] Burke, 2010: 212.

such as the Jerusalem Temple, the Holy Scriptures, and religious practices like the Sabbath. In my view, the text was likely aimed at a Christian audience in a Hellenistic region in contact—and potentially in competition—with local Jewish communities. This would explain the presence of certain contentious passages involving the «Pharisees» (*Gs* 17).[26]

In recent years, scholarly interest in the narrative's intended function has grown, leading to more concrete and well-supported proposals. Of particular note is the study by R. Aasgaard and the critical response by U.U. Kaiser, published in an issue of *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament*.[27] The controversy at hand pits two contrasting perspectives against each other within the academic discourse: Should the *Infancy Gospel* be understood as the first Christian children's book, or was it equally intended as a captivating read for adults in the early Christian movement, particularly for parents? In what follows, we will outline their respective arguments and offer an additional proposal to enrich the discussion.

2. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*: A Narrative for Christian Children

The world depicted in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* does not reflect that of the historical Jesus, but rather that of early rural Christian communities. Nonetheless, the question arises whether it is possible to further specify the intended audience of this text. In this regard, R. Aasgaard argues that the primary recipients of the *Infancy Gospel of Jesus* (*IGT*) were Christian children, though he does not exclude the possibility that adults were also among its audience.

Aasgaard has extensively developed the thesis that the *IGT* constitutes a narrative particularly appealing to children in antiquity.[28] Although this hypothesis cannot be definitively verified, there are several arguments that support its plausibility, making it, in his view, a more convincing explanation than competing interpretations. While distinguishing between narratives intended for children and those for adults remains methodologically challenging, it is reasonable to assume that certain texts were

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[26] Álvarez Cineira, 2025: 14-17.

[27] Aasgaard, 2021: 79-89; Kaiser, 2021: 91-99.

[28] Aasgaard, 2009: 192-213; Aasgaard, 2009a: 84.

primarily directed toward younger audiences. To substantiate his claim, Aasgaard presents both *external* and *internal evidences* suggesting that the *IGT* was especially suitable for children, as outlined below.

2.1. External Evidences

Aasgaard draws on classical sources and early Christian writings that attest to the common practice of storytelling for children, the existence of narratives aimed explicitly at this demographic, and the circulation of Christian-themed stories. In Jewish and Christian milieus, such narratives were often complemented—or partially replaced—by biblical stories from both the Old and New Testaments. It is plausible that children in early Christianity were familiar with accounts of apostles, Christian heroes, and even child martyrs. However, what may have held the greatest appeal was the opportunity to hear stories about the childhood of Jesus—their central figure of reference. In this light, the *IGT* would have represented a particularly meaningful text for young Christian audiences.

Stories intended for children fulfilled multiple, and often overlapping, functions: entertainment, moral education, encouragement, deterrence, social cohesion, and even disciplinary control. These narratives were transmitted by various figures, including parents (both mothers and fathers), slaves, pedagogues, and especially elderly women, notably grandmothers (cf. 2 Tim 1:5).

Such storytelling occurred in diverse social contexts, especially within the domestic sphere, but also during communal Christian gatherings. Stories were told at family meals, during rest periods, before bedtime, and in public places such as workplaces, schools, markets, and streets. In liturgical or communal settings, Old Testament narratives and widely accepted Christian texts predominated, contributing to the construction of a shared cultural repertoire and theological identity. However, the boundaries between these contexts were porous, allowing for the circulation and reception of texts like the *IGT* in multiple settings.

As Aasgaard observes, «the most plausible context for the *Infancy Gospel* is the early Christian household: it offered opportunities for storytelling, a social environment similar to that depicted in the narrative, a diverse audience, and a multigenerational setting conducive to its transmission. At the same time, workplaces, informal communal gatherings, and

even public storytelling may have served as important secondary contexts for the dissemination of the text».[29]

In domestic environments, distinctions between child and adult audiences were often blurred, as cultural traditions were transmitted in multigenerational settings. The preservation of a narrative such as the *IGT* relied not only on the role of adults as oral and literary mediators, but also on the fact that they may have found such stories personally engaging. Just as extracanonical narratives circulated about the adult Jesus, his family, and his disciples, children also had access to stories about their own «heroes», chief among them the child Jesus.

2.2. Internal Evidences

Several internal features of the *IGT* further support its suitability for a child audience. These include aspects of its format, content, structure, and style. Its brevity would have facilitated comprehension and sustained attention, while its episodic structure—featuring sequences of Jesus' actions and the reactions they provoke—imbues the text with dynamism and narrative momentum. This episodic rhythm maintains a high level of tension and engagement, consistently showcasing Jesus' divine wisdom and miraculous abilities.

The *IGT* is unique among ancient biographical texts in that it focuses exclusively on the protagonist's childhood. The narrative unfolds within the everyday world of children, and its style is generally colloquial and accessible, marked by a simple lexicon and minimal use of obscure vocabulary. It also includes idiomatic expressions and proverbs that may have sparked curiosity and admiration.

The settings of the narrative—Jesus' home, other households, workplaces, public spaces, school, a stream, fields, and wooded areas—would have been familiar to children of the time, offering points of identification and enhancing the text's accessibility. Jesus' presence in these familiar contexts reinforces his appeal as a child-hero. The domestic and rural environments mirror those inhabited by most children in late antiquity.

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[29] Aasgaard, 2009a: 80.

The principal characters in the *IGT* are predominantly children. In addition to Jesus, other central figures include the son of the high priest, an imprudent boy, and James, Jesus' brother. Jesus' interactions are primarily with his peers: they play, argue, and quarrel. Parents appear in a secondary role, usually intervening to resolve conflict. Most characters with whom a child audience might identify—positively or negatively—are children themselves, though nearly all are boys.[30] Adults also appear in the narrative, chiefly in three roles: as parents, teachers, and observers.[31] As parents and teacers, their function is largely mediated through their relation to children or Jesus' own education.

The portrayal of central events indicates that the *IGT* is well-adapted to a child's experiential world. Jesus and his companions engage in activities that mirror common childhood experiences. The miracles described often occur in everyday contexts: household chores (fetching water, woodworking, harvesting), social interaction (play, schooling), and basic needs (food, rest). Moreover, the miraculous events reflect typical childhood dangers, such as dangerous animals (e.g., the serpent in *IGT* 15.1) or domestic and workplace accidents (e.g., the fall in 9.1, the axe blow in 16.1).

Taken together, the various episodes in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* exhibit a close connection to the experience of childhood. Both the events that happen to Jesus and his actions and reactions, as well as the descriptions of his everyday environment, reflect experiences, emotions, and challenges typical of children. Young audiences could recognize aspects of their own world in the narrative and resonate with the same joys and fears. Moreover, they could identify with Jesus' anger, share his desire for revenge, or even imagine themselves possessing powers similar to his.

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[30] KAISER, 2022: 111-126. STEWART, 2015: 1: «Boys earn such status through 'doing gender', that is, acting in ways that are assessed by others as meeting gendered norms… Throughout the text, Jesus is described more in terms of an adult male than a child».

[31] According to COUSLAND (2018: 105), «the 'crowds' and 'people' are understood to be synonymous with 'Jews'». Regarding the role of the crowd, cf. NARRO, 2013: 638: «En conclusion, la foule apparaît dans la narration afin d'accomplir un triple but dont le texte a besoin. D'abord, celui de témoigner les merveilles accomplies. Ensuite, celui de proclamer l'excellence du Christ et finalement, celui de faire participer les lecteurs dans le texte à travers la foule, avec laquelle quiconque pourrait s'identifier et participer au miracle divin».

The progression of Jesus' age throughout the narrative corresponds to general ancient conceptions of child socialization and gender roles. At five years old, Jesus is shown playing and attending school; at seven, he engages in domestic tasks traditionally associated with the female sphere; at eight, he participates in male-designated work in the workshop; and by the age of twelve, he is found in the temple, symbolically standing at the threshold of adult life. This developmental trajectory and gradual process of social enculturation lend the narrative a sense of authenticity that aligns with the expectations and experiences of children in antiquity.

The social values and theology reflected in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* also support the hypothesis of a child audience. The text notably lacks the theological debates typical of early Christianity, whether doctrinal, polemical, or apologetic in nature. Instead, it incorporates values contemporaneously associated with childhood, such as loyalty and filial obedience, alongside the prevailing codes of honour in ancient society. In this respect, «the theology is expressed in a way likely to appeal to children; it is presented—illustratively put—as a child's theology».[32]

R. Aasgaard concludes that the *IGT* is, at its core, a narrative aimed at a young audience. While the child's perspective is not constant, it constitutes a central thread throughout the work. The story is adapted both psychologically and pedagogically to the comprehension level of children and offers, albeit in a condensed form, a realistic portrayal of childhood in antiquity, and of Jesus as a child situated within that context. Its narrative world spans a broad social spectrum—from the privileged to the disadvantaged—yet is primarily situated within a lower-middle-class Christian setting. Specifically regarding Jesus, the narrative suggests that he had access to private education on at least three occasions. Aasgaard argues that «the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* may very well be Christianity's first children's story».[33] However, it is important to note that such a claim should not be assessed using modern criteria of pedagogically-oriented children's literature.

Building upon Aasgaard's line of interpretation, other scholars have also supported this reading. I. Kurzmann-Penz, for instance, posits that the

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[32] Aasgaard, 2009a: 92.

[33] Aasgaard, 2009a: 93. Aasgaard, 2009: 213: «IGT may very well be Christianity's first children's story»

Sitz im Leben of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* may have been the context of private storytelling within Christian households. In such a setting, children—already familiar with the fundamentals of the faith—would have incorporated the content of the text into their existing body of knowledge. In this vein, Kurzmann-Penz poses the following question: «Who, then, would be especially interested in stories about the childhood of Jesus, if not those most curious about people of that age—that is, children themselves?». Furthermore, the text's simple syntactic structure and what she describes as a «remarkably simplistic narrative style» constitute additional elements that support this interpretation[34].

Aasgaard's exploration of the possibility that children were active recipients—whether as listeners or readers—of ancient texts constitutes a valuable contribution to the field. Nevertheless, scholarly consensus remains elusive, as some researchers contend that the primary audience of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* was not children themselves, but rather their parents.

3. Parents as the Intended Audience of the Work

U.U. Kaiser concurs that the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* contains narrative material appropriate for a child audience and may well have been employed with that intent. However, she maintains that it cannot be definitively established that the text was originally conceived with this purpose as its primary aim. Its objective appears not to have been the composition of a gospel in the strict canonical sense, but rather the compilation of childhood episodes of Jesus, deliberately integrated into a continuous narrative tradition that reinterprets the account of Luke 2:41–52 and presupposes familiarity with that passage.

From her perspective, the world portrayed in the *Paidika* is neither exclusively comprehensible nor significant solely from a child's perspective. Moreover, R. Aasgaard's hypothesis—that the brevity, episodic structure, and subject matter of the text would render it unappealing to adults—is,

[34] Kurzmann-Penz, 2018: 80s.

in her view, unconvincing. On the contrary, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* demonstrates a notable narrative proficiency in capturing and articulating the perspective of a child protagonist. It is plausible that adult readers and listeners—particularly those from the lower social strata depicted in the narrative—may have found this aspect especially engaging, perhaps even to a greater extent than certain approaches in modern scholarship.

In addition, the text reflects a distinct Christological dimension that presupposes a more developed theological capacity on the part of its audience. In this regard, Kaiser disputes the claim that the text «barely reflects»[35] the theological concerns of early Christianity. On the contrary, she argues that the narrative engages directly with the question of how a human being can be divine and possess divine attributes—placing particular emphasis on the manifestation of such divinity during Jesus' childhood. This theological framework suggests that the primary audience of the text was unlikely to have been composed of children.

Furthermore, the complex transmission history of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* makes it difficult to ascertain with certainty the *intentio operis*, let alone the *intentio auctoris*, as each textual version may require independent analysis. In a 2010 article responding to Aasgaard's arguments regarding the potential appeal of stories portraying «their main hero as a small child» for Christian children, Kaiser suggested the possibility that these stories were in fact read by parents—an idea partly informed by her own experience as a mother.[36] A decade later, she revisited and developed the hypothesis that the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* may have functioned as a «children's book for parents»,[37] observing that it is difficult to determine

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[35] Aasgaard, 2009: 211: «*IGT* reflects few of the issues at stake in early Christian theological controversies, whether doctrinal, polemical or apologetic».

[36] Kaiser, 2010: 269: «Und was wurden Eltern eben dieser Kinder der Lektüre von EvInfThom entnehmen können? Mein eigener, neuzeitlicher Standpunkt lässt sich hier nur schwer heraushalten. Ob auch antike Eltern gestresst waren und ab und an ihre Erziehungserfolge angezweifelt haben, kann ich nur vermuten. Als Mutter eines sechs- und eines siebenjährigen Sohnes kann ich mir aber gut vorstellen, welche Entlastung es bringen konnte zu lesen, dass nicht nur die eigenen Kinder, sondern auch Jesus handgreiflichen Streit mit anderen Kindern hatte, Geschirr zerbrochen hat und frech und besserwisserisch den Eltern oder Lehrern gegenüber aufgetreten ist. Vielleicht war EvInfThom also eigentlich ein Kinderbuch für Eltern?».

[37] Kaiser, 2021: 91-99.

that children were the intended recipients merely on the basis of the text's theme (Jesus as a child) or on the representation of a world and a character tailored to a child audience. This difficulty is compounded by the likelihood that those responsible for child-rearing may themselves have found such stories «highly appealing».

Recurrent themes such as authority conflicts and the potential for childhood protest or resistance—elements that Aasgaard interprets as indicators of a child audience—could also, in Kaiser's assessment, suggest a readership composed of those who regularly contend with such expressions of disobedience and defiance: namely, parents. Likewise, Jesus' interactions with his teachers should not be interpreted as behavioural models intended for imitation by children, even if his indignation in the face of corporal punishment and contemporary pedagogical practices is comprehensible.

In conclusion, although Kaiser does not categorically claim that the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* constitutes a «children's book for parents», she regards it as productive to examine the reception of the text from a parental, in addition to a child-centred, perspective. This dual approach contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the text's audience and its function within early Christian tradition.

R. Aasgaard's proposal is unquestionably significant and merits close scrutiny, particularly in light of the central role of the child audience. Without doubt, children formed an important part of the text's reception. Nevertheless, it remains debatable whether the domestic sphere constituted the most salient context for the transmission of these stories concerning Jesus' childhood. While it is conceivable that certain parents passed on vivid episodes from oral tradition, the high rate of illiteracy among them renders it unlikely that most would have been capable of reproducing the three school-related narratives (*Gs* 6–8, 13 and 14[38])—especially considering the possibility of facing questions from their children about the meaning of the alphabetic letters.

For these reasons, I contend that the most plausible setting for the transmission of these stories is the school environment, as will be argued

[38] For the three school episodes (6–8, 13, and 14) in which three different teachers attempt to teach Jesus the alphabet at school, cf. Álvarez Cineira (2025: 13-29).

in the following section, while not excluding the likelihood that some of these narratives also circulated orally within domestic contexts.

4. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*: A School Text for Children

Beyond the difficulty illiterate parents—such as Joseph—faced in reading texts to their children, even when certain stories could be transmitted orally, it was problematic for them to explain Christological or theological concepts about Jesus. Nor did they possess the necessary knowledge to answer questions left unresolved in the narrative, such as the meaning of alphabetic letters, should their children raise them. This uncomfortable situation could render parents «ignorant» before the rest of the family, with the consequent loss of their honour as *pater familias*.

In this respect, both the content of the text and the length devoted to each element can help determine its *Sitz im Leben* and ultimate purpose. However, it is important to recognize that a single document may be oriented toward multiple aims.

From a formal-critical standpoint, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* comprises three main elements: a prologue, miracles, and speeches. The prologue shares common features to many prologues of ancient writings, giving the document a literary tone. It mentions the purported author (Thomas the Israelite), the intended audience (all Gentile brothers), and the content (the childhood deeds of Jesus). Although it stands as a chapter in itself, T. Burke's critical edition reduces it to barely four lines.[39]

Miracles constitute the distinctive feature of this gospel, comprising most of the episodes. They are divided into two broad categories:

1. **Nature miracles:**
- Purification of water from a puddle (*Gs* 2:1; 5 lines).
- Creation of twelve clay sparrows and their animation (*Gs* 2:2–5; 14 lines).
- Transportation of water in his mantle (*Gs* 10; 8 lines).

[39] Line numbering follows the critical edition of recension *Gs* as presented in BURKE (2010: 301–337). We have also adhered to his division of chapters and verses.

- Miraculous harvest (*Gs* 11; 5 lines).
- Miraculous fixing of a bed (*Gs* 12; 14 lines).

2. **Healing miracles**, further subdivided into:

- Curses:
  - Curse on Annas's son (*Gs* 3; 8 lines).
  - Curse on a careless boy (*Gs* 4; 11 lines).
  - Curse on the second teacher (*Gs* 13; 12 lines).
  - Blinding of the accusers following rebuke to Joseph (*Gs* 5:1; 6 lines).

- Healing miracles:
  - Resurrection of Zenon (*Gs* 9; 14 lines).
  - Healing of James from a snakebite (*Gs* 15; 8 lines).
  - Healing of a foot injury (*Gs* 16; 10 lines).
  - Two additional cures embedded within other episodes: healing of the cursed boy (*Gs* 8:2; 7 lines) and the revival of the second teacher (*Gs* 14:4; 4 lines).

Speeches—the third main category according to formal criticism—also occupy a prominent place. Notably, the discourses of the three teachers (*Gs* 6–8; 13; 14), with the first being the most elaborate. There are also shorter speeches responding to miracles, such as the rebuke of Joseph (*Gs* 5) and Jesus' dialogue with Zenon's parents (*Gs* 9). Additionally, the Temple episode (*Gs* 17:1–5) can be included in this category, although it is sometimes classified as a personal legend. Speeches appear in various forms:

- Dialogues: *Gs* 5:1–2; 6:1–3.5–7; 8–9; 9:2–4; 13:1–3; 14:1–4; 17:1–5.
- Aphoristic sayings: *Gs* 8:1.
- Short discourses: *Gs* 5:3; 6:4,10; 7:1–4.

There is a relatively regular alternation between the principal episode types (miracles and speeches) and their subtypes, affording variety without compromising narrative cohesion. Variation in episode length

further contributes to structural diversity. Moreover, several episodes are interrelated (e.g., the puddle, sparrows, and Annas's son), providing interpretive cues that underscore both Jesus' miraculous power and the range of reactions he elicits.

If we classify these episodes by social context during Jesus' childhood (ages five to twelve), several environments emerge:

a. Family and Domestic Sphere

Within the domestic setting, the child participates in age-appropriate daily tasks. For example: helping his mother fetch water, aiding his father, who engages in the occupations of a smallholder farmer and a carpenter, with sowing wheat and with carpentry—most notably by miraculously repairing a bed. Also included is the episode where Jesus and James collect wood, during which James is bitten by a snake and healed by Jesus.

These accounts depict Jesus as a young collaborator in the household and occupational duties of his family, conveying a positive disposition within his immediate context. Yet, within the gospel's total of 261 lines (T. Burke edition), these four domestic episodes occupy just 35 lines—approximately 13.5% of the text. Nevertheless, the paternal figure appears recurrently throughout the work and, in certain episodes, is even rebuked by his son in a tone that may be regarded as disrespectful (*Gs* 5: 12 lines). When this passage is included in the analysis, the proportion of lines devoted to familial matters rises to 18% of the total content of the gospel. The limited portrayal of family scenes calls into question whether the home was intended as the primary context of transmission. One would expect more child-targeted domestic vignettes, with greater maternal and sibling interaction, if that were the case.

Aside from the father's limitations in reading the text —in the specific case of Joseph, he is depicted as illiterate[40]— or in responding to the questions posed by his son, the scant presence of familial scenes in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* casts doubt on the notion that the domestic sphere was the primary context envisioned for its transmission. Had this

[40] The limited literacy of Joseph and Mary appears to have motivated their decision to entrust Jesus' most basic education (teaching of the alphabet) to a professional.

been the case, one would expect a greater number of edifying narratives centred on family life, as well as more prominent interaction with the mother and, in particular, with Jesus' siblings, with the aim of offering a behavioural model for children. It is important to remember that a young child spends most of their time interacting with siblings of similar age, whether at home, in school, or at play.

b. Childhood Scenes of Play and Interactions with Peers

The narrative situates Jesus in a playful context from its earliest scenes. The account begins with the clearing of water from a puddle (*Gs* 2:1; 5 lines), followed by the crafting of twelve clay sparrows (*Gs* 2:2–5; 14 lines). These two harmless activities are succeeded by two episodes of curses directed at his peers: the curse upon the son of Annas (*Gs* 3; 8 lines) and the curse upon a careless boy (*Gs* 4; 11 lines). Within this same section on play, the incident of Zenon is also recounted, where, following accusations by the boy's parents, Jesus resurrects him (*Gs* 9; 14 lines). Additionally, the narrative describes the aid Jesus provides to another boy who suffers a foot injury while cutting wood (*Gs* 16; 10 lines).

In total, 54 lines are devoted to the realm of play and Jesus' interactions with his peers and other children, representing 20.6% of the text. This proportion indicates that Jesus' childhood, in its recreational and social dimensions, occupies a significant place within the gospel, reflecting the expectations of a child of that age.

c. Educational and School Contexts

Joseph's interest in Jesus' education recurs throughout the gospel, evidenced in three enrolment attempts at ages five and eight. While some scholars interpret these as variants of a single episode,[41] the traditional oral pattern suggests they were conceived as three distinct episodes. Moreover, if only one had existed, the pivotal success achieved with the third teacher would be lost.

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[41] GERO, 1971: 63–64.

Although these episodes may at first appear to recount a teacher's attempt to educate Jesus, their primary function is, in fact, to present Jesus as the teacher of his own instructors. This section comprises four episodes set in educational contexts, culminating in the gospel's final narrative: Jesus teaching the elders in the temple at the age of twelve (*Gs* 17; 27 lines). In this account, the temple no longer functions as a cultic space for the celebration of Passover, but is instead transformed into an academic, quasi-university setting. This climactic scene is preceded by three episodes in which Jesus assumes a didactic role in front of his own teachers.[42]

The first educational scene, set when Jesus is five years old, is the longest in the entire gospel, comprising a total of 96 lines (*Gs* 6–8). The significance of this passage is underscored by T. Burke, who asserts that «it is highly likely that the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (*IGT*) was constructed around this key episode».[43] The second and third episodes, which take place when Jesus is eight years old, are considerably shorter and display distinct characteristics: in the second, the punishment inflicted by the teacher provokes Jesus' anger, leading him to strike the man dead (*Gs* 13; 12 lines); in the third, the new teacher, aware of Jesus' extraordinary nature, decides from the outset to become his disciple and listen attentively to him (*Gs* 14; 24 lines).

In total, the school scenes amount to 159 lines, representing 60.9% of the gospel. While these narratives revolve around the theme of instruction, they also incorporate elements such as miracles and familial dialogues, particularly with Mary and Joseph (*Gs* 17). The prominence of this theme suggests that Jesus' educational dimension constitutes the central focus of the gospel, reinforcing his portrayal as a prodigious teacher from early childhood. The disparity in length and percentage is significant and may offer clues about the context in which these narratives were employed. It is quite plausible that the text functioned as a school resource used by Christian teachers to convey, through engaging and ironic stories, the image of a wise and intellectually curious child Jesus. An illustrative example appears in the third educational scene, where it is mentioned that

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[42] Álvarez Cineira, 2025: 27-34.

[43] Burke, 2010: 199.

the teacher took the child by the hand to lead him to the classroom, and that Jesus was delighted to go (*Gs* 14:1).[44] In this educational context, the teachers themselves would have responded to students' questions about the nature of the letters or elaborated on certain Christological and theological aspects underlying the narratives.

If, as T. Burke argues, the first school scene together with the episode of Jesus in the Temple formed the core of the gospel, it is difficult to claim that this lengthy, complex, and at times tedious narrative for a child was composed or transmitted within a domestic setting. In my view, this scene reveals the intervention of a professional educator in its composition and structure. It seems unlikely that an illiterate father could have produced a narrative of such scope. One might object that a scholastic origin is questionable, since the educational methods depicted do not align with modern pedagogical expectations. However, in antiquity—both in the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds—it was commonly accepted that a teacher could employ punitive methods.

These school episodes may reflect the amount of time children from families with sufficient economic means to afford a teacher's fees devoted to formal instruction. However, the effort required by study, along with the punishments imposed by teachers, meant that such episodes were not among the most memorable or joyful moments of childhood. If the intended purpose had been to entertain children within the domestic sphere, they would likely have preferred stories about playing with friends in streets and public squares. The very fact that three attempts at schooling Jesus are narrated suggests that attending school was not particularly appealing to a child. It is noteworthy that the interest in Jesus' schooling largely originates with the teachers themselves. In the first scene, the teacher Zacchaeus approaches Joseph to request that he entrust his son to him in order to instruct him in the letters (*Gs* 6:1). A similar structure appears in the third educational scene, where another teacher addresses Joseph with the same request (*Gs* 14:1). Only in the episode involving the second teacher does the initiative come from the father (*Gs* 13).[45] This suggests that the prima-

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[44] Burke, 2010: 330, n. 5 observes that this indication is absent from certain versions.

[45] It is striking that Joseph does not appear to have attempted to enrol his other children in formal education, although one could argue that the narrative is exclusively focused on Jesus. Nevertheless, if James had been older and received formal instruction, he

ry stakeholders in Jesus' education were the teachers themselves. Given that the educational system of the time was private and that a teacher's livelihood depended on the number of enrolled students, it is understandable that such figures would have had an interest in portraying Jesus as a student. The narrative may thus function as a strategy for the legitimation and promotion of Christian educators, serving at the same time as a persuasive tool directed toward both parents and students.

One might object that the school-based origin of the text is questionable, since the portrayal of the teachers is far from flattering: the first is publicly humiliated by a child, while the second dies—possibly as a result of the child's anger. If these episodes had been composed by teachers, one might expect a more favourable depiction of their profession, which here appears as a high-risk occupation. However, this characterization can be interpreted as a confrontation between two models of instruction: that of Jewish teachers—represented by Zacchaeus and other instructors—and that of Jesus as teacher (third educational scene, *Gs* 14, and Jesus in the Temple, *Gs* 17), serving as a paradigm for Christian educators. This contrast suggests a deliberate critique of the Jewish educational system[46]. Beyond their satirical and entertaining aspects, these narratives also contain an exhortative component aimed at Christian parents who still maintained ties with Judaism. They implicitly discourage entrusting the education of children to Jewish teachers, who are portrayed as hypocritical, incompetent in their interpretation of the Law, and prone to punitive disciplinary methods.

This warning takes on particular significance in diaspora communities such as Alexandria, where numerous Jewish educational institutions existed and may have been regarded as viable options for the instruction of Christian children. This would have been especially relevant for

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might have served as a model or precedent for Jesus' schooling; conversely, if he had been younger, Jesus could have played an exemplary role for his brother.

[46] Burke (2010: 199s) suggests that Christians might have seen themselves reflected in the young Jesus, as the community itself was undergoing a clumsy infancy, frequently clashing with its elders (Judaism as well as non-Jewish belief systems) over disputes concerning teachings and practices. The portrayal of Jesus in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, therefore, could have been conceived as a historical allegory—a personification of Christian claims to superiority—with the child's curses functioning as a veiled threat against anyone opposing the community.

Jewish-Christian groups who maintained close ties with Judaism. By contrast, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* appears to advocate explicitly for education under the guidance of Christian teachers, thereby reinforcing an early Christian educational identity[47].

5. Conclusion

After examining the various possibilities regarding the intended audience of this *Infancy Gospel of Jesus*, we can conclude that Christian children constituted its primary readership, in line with R. Aasgaard's interpretation. Although it cannot be ruled out that some of these stories were transmitted within the domestic sphere by parents, I consider that the text was conceived for a school context. The extensive educational material (60.9%) supports this hypothesis, suggesting a *Sitz im Leben* connected to teaching.

It is likely that the authors were Christian teachers interested in promoting the education of Christian children, a task entrusted specifically to Christian educators. While some of these teachers may have had access to classical texts—such as fragments of Homer, florilegia of foundational authors, or didactic material adapted to the school level—it is highly probable that they employed narratives about Jesus' childhood to spark their students' interest in learning more about this figure. Through these stories, Jesus is presented as a hero in multiple dimensions and, above all, as a true teacher, even from an early age. Just as Jewish schools used texts from the Old Testament, these narratives adapted for a child audience would have served to transmit a Christian version of their 'Sacred History,' and especially of its protagonist.

In this regard, the teacher Jesus, as a paradigm of the Christian educator, is depicted as one who surpasses those attempting to instruct him, especially Jewish teachers who in the narrative appear as ignorant of the Law and the parables of the prophets. Likewise, the text addresses and challenges the parents, represented by the figure of Joseph, urging them to ensure their children's education under the guidance of Chris-

[47] Álvarez Cineira, 2025: 33-34.

tian teachers. The narrative emphasizes Joseph's effort to guarantee his son's training, presenting him as a model for other parents, particularly in rural contexts where manual labour and youth participation in agricultural or artisanal tasks were more highly valued than formal schooling. On the other hand, the attitude of the teachers reveals their interest in attracting disciples, since their livelihood and recognition depended largely on this.

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