An Introduction to the Iconic Illuminations of the Gospel of Thomas
and the Sapiential Use of the Analogical Imagination

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The purpose of this introduction is describe a new form of creative expression that brings together texts from the ancient Christian world and a contemporary form of iconic illumination. It is also meant to stimulate the creative imaginations of human beings in the realm of the sacred arts as well as initiate the productive use of the imagination as an analogical means of spiritual interpretation.

We live in a world of forms—beautiful forms, natural forms—each one part of a vast web of patterned and intricate beauty. In the Gospel of Philip, the writer says: Truth did not come to us in this world naked. Rather it was clothed with symbol and image, for it cannot be received in any other way (Analogue 44). Images and symbols are the metaphoric clothing that both veil and reveal deeper truths. Typically in our world we have difficulty seeing the truth behind forms. We can easily discern the surface of things. We can even describe its immediate features, but because we have not been properly trained, often we cannot “read” the truth lying behind (or enfold within) the form. We simply have trouble seeing truth in this way.

In the traditions of perennial wisdom (Sophia Perennis), iconic images and poetic speech have been the primary means of conveying spiritual truth. Specifically, we might think of this form of poetic speech as “bent discourse”—language that has been turned from its normative purpose of portraying reality along the horizontal axis and put at the disposal of describing the vertical axis instead. Such speech includes many of genres of wisdom literature: proverb, aphorism, poetry, parable, and mythic narrative. Iconic images serve another purpose. They act as windows opening out onto (and bring us into direct contact with) worlds, realities, energies and presences existing along the vertical axis of transcendence and immanence so we can see and get to know them. Each image becomes an entry point—a doorway—into those vertical realms that has direct influence upon us. Poetic speech and iconic image are vehicles that invite us into themselves and carry us into the many levels and dimensions that lie along the vertical axis. These two forms of communication and discourse are the primary modes of wisdom communication. Without them we are restricted to rational discourse or discursive thought, which is much slower, less direct, and more ponderous form of transmission for spiritual truths.

Using the primary mode of poetic speech, Yeshua, the Master of first century Jewish wisdom, taught us the truth of his visionary seeing. In the West however, over time, our culture has replaced poetic speech and iconic image with rational thought and logical discourse as the primary means of transmitting wisdom. It is imperative now that we receive them back again. We not only need to learn to use our outer eyes and ears (our scientific and analytical minds) to read truth, we need to enter more deeply into our kardial core and learn to see and hear from within. We need to be trained to see and listen in a way that initially appears at odds with our standard western education.
This form of sapiential discourse used in the ancient world was called mash’al in Hebrew, or misal (mithal) in Arabic. These two Semitic terms describe the “clothed form” that the Gospel of Philip is talking about. What is required to understand and use them well are trained inner eyes to see and ears to hear. The first proficiency is called eikasia (the ability to read the truth behind or contained within an image or icon, eikon). The skill to hear truth spoken poetically at the level of the heart, the second proficiency, we could call akousia, or deep listening. Truth or wisdom becomes available to us using these two means of perception in order to connect us to sapiential truth.

Combined, these give us a capacity that we would not otherwise possess through ordinary consciousness. Working together these skills are sometimes called the “the analogical imagination,” referring to the heart’s intrinsic ability to read and understand wisdom through iconic images and to hear and translate poetic speech into insight. We possess these innate capabilities in much the same way that a new-born baby has an inherent ability for language. To use human speech, all a child needs is to be exposed to an environment in which language is being spoken. This ability is built into our very genetic structure. In the same way, the heart has its own innate capacities, but it needs to be bathed in a sea of images, symbols, metaphors and poetic language in order to exercise its unique ability to receive truth or wisdom (Sophia Perennis). As the Gospel of Philip suggests, in truth, it cannot be properly conveyed or received in any other way.

Icon and Poetry as an Intermediary and Sapiential Art

When humankind began to awaken to Wisdom’s voice, this sapiential transmission through poetry and icon was available across the earth. Our ancient texts say that human beings have responded accordingly. Hebrew tradition speaks about Sophia’s voice calling out to us and playing in the field of the human world since our creation. Christian tradition tells of the Logos speaking deeply and directly to the human heart from our beginnings. Poetry has been called our “first speech, which is the perennial call-and-response between these human and divine realities. Images painted in caves and carved into petroglyphs were our first recorded iconic expressions attempting both to reveal and portray our experience of the Ineffable. In some form these have continued into the present moment. And it is now, perhaps, at this critical moment in history, that humanity is most deeply in need of them. We are not without this iconic impulse and poetic transmission in the contemporary world. We already possess the necessary inner instrumentation to see and to hear this sacred, sapiential art.

Sacred art can be defined, then, as that which evokes and supports an inner movement within us to make contact with cosmic Reality. It pushes us beyond the narrow limitations of our ability to see and hear and sets us upon a path of spiritual evolution. But we must remember that conveyance of sacred art’s energies is through “clothed forms,” images and symbols expressed in icons and metaphoric speech. In his important work on iconography Richard Temple says that these are the intermediaries necessary to awaken the heart and move humanity forward toward its destiny,

*Ancient tradition holds that the cerebral mind is not the instrument for apprehending higher knowledge and the realities of the cosmos, nor can the*
kingdom of Heaven be known by the senses. Another faculty, only the embryo of which exists in us, has to be developed. This is the highest aim a man can have: to develop that faculty and become the recipient and guardian of that higher knowledge. Such an aim demands the participation of the whole of himself. At the same time, knowledge of the higher world can and does reach the ordinary level of humanity, but it appears among us in partly hidden forms, in the guise of something readily acceptable, where only seekers will look for a higher meaning. Thus an intermediary level exists; it is not the inconceivable Divine Realm, neither is it at the level of our animal nature. It is the world of traditions, ceremonies, rituals, symbolic myths and allegories; symbolic architectural and pictorial images, symbolic numbers, sometimes expressed in forms, or music, or colors (Richard Temple: Icons and the Mystical Origins of Christianity, 13).

In his foreword to the same text, Jacob Needleman makes another critically important point that cannot be overlooked if we are to properly understand the power of an icon and the speech of a poet. He says that such art not only awakens us, it is by its very nature a doorway at whose threshold stand other presences who come to meet and greet us and then lead us beyond ourselves into the horizons and pathways of other worlds:

If during or after the reading of this book, one makes the effort to ‘just look’ at icons, one may undergo a fleeting, but extraordinary experience. From trying to see the icon, one may suddenly sense that one is seen by it. For a moment, we are under the regard of a greater presence. The language of religion may speak of this seeing presence as located “in heaven”—but unmistakably, the call is to receive its action upon us from within. All ideas, all prayer, all ritual and all the compassionate traditions of mankind are meant to guide us again and again towards this experience which alone can bring “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.

It is often the sense of this seeing “Presence” which is the missing element in contemporary religious experience. We are willing to practice our religious life (or even to follow a spiritual path) without a sense of Presence. Without it, however, we are severely limited and diminished. With Presence we are guided, and our worlds opened into new meanings, new insights, and out onto a path that leads to personal wisdom, the creation of qualities that strengthen our being, and to freedom from the limitation of our egoic and cultural programming. Clearly it is important to welcome Presence when it arises, but how will we know it? When Presence appears at the threshold of our world it is accompanied by a telltale sign of its authenticity, the sign of beauty.

The Sign of Beauty

From the ancient psalms onward there has been a recurring theme that describes God as the Most Beautiful One. The psalmist declares,

Open wide your gates and doors, O humankind,
Open everything
and let God’s glory in.
This God whose beauty streams to us
in majesty so strong.
A God who battled chaos and who won!
Yes, open everything to God
Let no door be shut.
Let beauty flood and fill the world!
This king of majesty, this queen of light,
The Lord of All,
The God of everything that is, your God,
The Radiant One, Most Beautiful!
(Psalm 24: 7-10)

As this translation suggests, God overflows with majesty, glory, and beauty. And as other of the Psalms say, the created universe, reflecting that glory, majesty, and beauty, is also exquisite and beautiful (Psalm 8 and 19 are only two examples). Everywhere we look we can confirm this to be true. Our eyes take in the beauty of the world around us from the tiniest patterns in nature to photographs of the cosmos from the Hubble telescope.

Even in their austerity, the ancient desert fathers and mothers said that their passion was for philokalia (the quest for the beauty of God). Two traditional terms, shekhinah and the doxa, found in the Hebrew and Christian traditions describe God in precisely this same way. Similarly, in the Islamic world the word kibriyah describes God’s beauty and majesty. Andrew Harvey in his work on Jalaluddin Rumi’s Poetry says,

(The word Kibriya) ... means Divine Glory, Divine Grandeur. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote: ‘God’s grandeur will flame out like shining from shook foil.’ ... (and) the ultimate knowledge is a knowledge of Kibriya, of the Divine Glory manifesting in everything as everything. And before that knowledge, one is just heart struck, washed away with wonder, with awe, with rapture, with mad joy (The Way of Passion, 48-49).

Reflecting this grandeur and beauty, the temples, mosques and churches of the Abrahamic traditions are adorned with mathematical perfection and precision in every imaginable way. Islamic and Medieval Christian architecture is some of the most pristine and beautiful of these forms in the world. Their purpose is to reflect the beauty and majesty of God, “the Beautiful One,” and to inspire the spiritual human quest so that we too embody and perfect the beautiful and the good within ourselves.

Iconography and the Analogical Imagination

Humans put their image-making capabilities to use through works of creativity and artistic expression. Artists, poets, musicians, dancers, and actors of every kind manifest the creative genius of humankind through this very real gift. It is an endowment that we each possess in some manner. In the sacred arts, however, this gift is used to convey higher realities, divine qualities, and the wisdom and beauty of Ultimate Reality itself.
Because Ultimate Reality expresses itself to humankind through direct revelation and inspiration, the exercise of the Creative Imagination is the necessary means we human beings possess for putting it into forms that can be useful for all of humanity. And because we are also meant to receive its truth through these revelatory and inspired forms, then the use of our heart’s own innate ability (the Analogical Imagination) is determinative in how we receive and interpret this form of truth. We have a capacity for both, and both have been active in creating a new and contemporary form of iconic illumination.

**Iconic Illuminations**

This new form of illumination has, we believe, been pioneered in the modern creation of St. John’s Bible, the first completely handwritten and illuminated Bible to have been commissioned by a Benedictine Abbey since the invention of the printing press. St. John’s Abbey in Minnesota in collaboration with scribes in a scriptorium in Wales have created a breath-taking display of sacred beauty. The panels illuminating this magnificent text are inspired iconic art combining traditional and contemporary images. This work is similar in style and sensibility to another digital expression of illumination that has recently arisen.

In her mysterious stimulus of human creativity, Wisdom has helped to inspire a fresh, new form of iconography. Through what Lynn describes as the careful seeing and deep listening of Alison Hine and her unique artistic eye, what we are calling “Iconic Illuminations” has come into being. We are using these to illuminate the Gospel of Thomas and the other texts from the **Luminous Gospels**. Digitally produced, these images layer multiple arrangements and representations creating a singular iconic image. Over a period of months Alison was able to illuminate the entire Gospel translated by Lynn C. Bauman. Together we have collaborated to produce these images which are clearly iconic and metaphoric. Though each image may contain some elements of the literal saying, their intended purpose is to symbolically convey their sapiential content. The result is a colorful and beautiful set of images illuminating the wisdom of these Gospels. Though some may be stark and even graphic, each one attempts to express metaphoric depth and not mere literal representation.

Every logion from the Gospel of Thomas has at least one iconic image conveying its inner meaning. Some of them have more than one. There exist now a total of over one hundred and sixty images whose purpose is to enable the viewer to see through to the wisdom in these sayings of Yeshua. From the use they have already enjoyed, it is clear that they are a distinctive means of gaining sapiential insight through the process of **eikasia**. For some time now we have listened to the words of these ancient texts, but this new expression takes the verbal representations and gives them visual power allowing us the opportunity of engaging them with the inner eye. We have also discovered that they provide a unique means of transmitting sapiential insight that pairs the poetic speech of Yeshua’s words with their iconic expressions so that individuals who learn to read the images have a more direct access to Yeshua’s wisdom.

**The Creative Process**

This outpouring of creative energy required the convergence of many factors. As we collaborated together we made many important discoveries. The first discovery was that we
shared a compatible aesthetic eye. Alison says, “We discovered that we spoke easily and comfortably across wide swaths of metaphysical and spiritual experience and understanding.”

Lynn had just completed his extensive commentary on Thomas. In addition to Alison's own far-reaching spiritual inquiries, she had recently become familiar with the technique of layering photos using the application called “Brushes” on her iPad. Google searches allowed Alison access to thousands of photos and images on the Web. The idea, then, of creating iconography emerged out of a kind of synchronicity of complimentary skills and the surprising ease of collaboration.

Alison began her work with each Logion without a preconceived idea about how to capture its essence. “This discipline took some getting used to,” she explained. “As we went along, it became clear, however, that this was a kind of inquiry process. For example, each logion generated its own search questions.” Alison then went looking for photos of trees, stars, persecution, transcendence, the absolute, pearls, pigs, on and on. Google generates hundreds of images most of which were irrelevant, ugly, even pornographic—or just plain wrong. But then a photo or image would catch her attention as a kind of ‘yes’ and the creative dance would begin. There were many false starts; more Google questions, moving and layering the photos, dissolving and erasing them until there was another ‘yes’ or something suddenly “popped” into view. Sometimes the iconic image appeared in a rush. Sometimes the images went back and forth via email between us until there was another ‘yes’ from both of us. Alison explains that sometimes the work would loop backwards in the Gospel to previous images but mostly the process went from one logion to the next. Gradually a vocabulary of imagistic elements emerged. Photos from earlier images would drop in, then disappear, only to reappear later.

The pace at times seemed breathtaking and almost overwhelming. Alison says, “I often went to bed with the images and woke up with images in the middle of night.” She explains that she had never experienced such a creative explosion. “And I had never considered seriously that I had an artistic eye,” although she has dabbled with art at other times in her life. And it never occurred to her, as Lynn kept insisting, that she was “writing” as an iconographer.

It was clear to both of us that this outpouring took two sets of eyes and two individuals coming from different spiritual backgrounds and life experiences to sustain this creative endeavor. Lynn with his many years of contemplation of Thomas offered Alison a kind of ground or supportive field of understanding without which Alison felt this work would have faltered. Alison provided a level of expertise and intense attention to artistic detail and commitment to the spiritual unfolding.

The preponderance of the time our seeing fundamentally converged. More often than not we were both astonished. Where did these images come from? Who knew? All we knew was that they were truly gifts offered to us generously and graciously, and the result was a new and expressive form of digital art. Now, as Alison reflects on this experience she says, “Personally for me these images are some deep expression of love, beauty, mysterious truth and, I hope, an opening into living presence and a recognition of who and what we are. Call that wisdom, direct knowing, opening, connection that is my deepest hope for these images.” Finally, as we experienced this creative process, it also became clear to us that not only was a new and
expressive form of digital art emerging that was powerful in its own right, but that this form could be extremely important in transmitting both Alison’s hope and the perennial wisdom contained in these ancient texts.

A Modern Digital Genre

You will notice when viewing these images that they are multi-layered. Using a digital format gives the iconographer the ability to change the opacity and allow light to have maximum effect. As in traditional iconography, the “writer” of an icon adds color and light one layer at a time across the surface of the image. In our work, images are drawn from every genre, artistic style, tradition and variety of art. The multitude of images now available in digital form and is the iconographer’s “brush” with which he or she “writes” (which is the traditional term for iconographic painting) to express the meaning and wisdom of the icon. Juxtaposing contemporary images with traditional images gives the iconographer almost unlimited range, so discipline must be exercised. What is put in and what is left out and where it falls on the page is determined by an inspired eye. It was clear to us that inspiration is at work: something was being drawn down into our world from what has been called the Imaginal Realm (Mundus Imaginalis). In that experience the iconographer is informed not only from his or her own work and training as an artist, but as in all sacred art, receives inspiration from elsewhere—above and beyond—which is sometimes thought of as a “download” from another, higher Realm.

As they emerged, some of the images were mosaic in form—assemblages of images that were juxtaposed or stood out independently from one another to resemble a collage of disparate forms. We might think of this form as a digital mosaic or virtual-collage. Other images were more like Impressionist paintings where all the layers were blended into one single, smooth expression that resembled the style of Impressionism. We could imagine this form to be iconic-impressionism. In either case the purpose was not only to capture an image and its consequent associations and feelings, but to convey spiritual energy, understanding, insight and depth. These iconic illuminations were meant to be both evocative and, at times, deliberately provocative—even shocking. In each instance, however, the purpose was to lift viewers outside of their normal associations and carry them into new worlds of seeing and into inner worlds where they might be taught and guided by Wisdom herself so as to hear wisdom’s voice afresh (akousia).

Eikasia—Training the Inner Eye

Every culture and society “trains” its members to see things in a unique and particular way. No two cultures see beauty in the same way—in fact, no two people see it exactly the same way either. The idea of Beauty, however, is universal. There is probably no culture (nor person) that witnesses a glorious, shining, multi-colored sunset and does not declare it beautiful. So what we see first when we look at a new iconic illumination is through a cultural lens based upon our cultural and aesthetics conditioning. What we see next is limited by on our own personal tastes and proclivities. We might call these first two the “cultural and egoic-eye.” They are both relative and, in the end, cannot be the primary basis for receiving wisdom’s gift.

At this stage, however, we cannot help ourselves. We pass judgments on what we see based on the cultural and egoic lens through which the images pass. We must start there, with our first
impression, and notice what we see, what we consider beautiful or compelling (or horrifying), and then what we like and dislike about the image. It is important not to bypass this first step in seeing. We have to acknowledge it, and then if possible, transcend it in order to enter another, fuller way of seeing called eikasia.

To receive greater insight through an iconic illumination, however, we must exercise (and learn to use) a second form of seeing beyond our first naivé. This second step (eikasia) allows us to move beyond the limitations of both our cultural and personal programming, and pass through the image to grasp its meaning and wisdom in a fresh way. Imagine that these iconic illuminations with their respective images are both pictures of the soul and also windows into another Reality—the Imaginal Realm where, according to Perennial Wisdom, Image and Icon have a life of their own. We must not only look through these windows, then, but allow the light streaming through from that Realm to illuminate our own souls, remembering that what is beyond us is intimately in resonance with our own becoming, with the spiritual evolution of our being. These images are meant to stir and to stimulate new harmonies (as well as fresh dissonances), allowing us to hear and receive these transmissions in a completely new way. The spiritual eye informs the inner ear, and the inner ear speaks to the eye of heart, and together the Analogical Imagination is able to move forward and gain spiritual footing on a path of spiritual understanding and transformation guided by input from the Imaginal World.

An Outline of the Contemplative Process

It is clear that this work requires, then, a new process of looking and receiving that is contemplative in nature in a manner similar to Lectio Divina. We might even give it a new name, Visio Divina. This process will take time. It should not be rushed, and it means that we proceed with a long, loving look through the images into our own hearts and into the heart of Wisdom to receive from her what she is now willing to give through both poetic word and iconic expression. Below is a brief outline of what we believe to be the necessary steps in this process of contemplation that uses both iconic image and poetic word. It addresses how we work between them, through the stages our first and second seeing."

1. Listen to a short passage of a wisdom text in a contemplative way.

   • Read the passage slowly, carefully and deliberately twice or three times with a silent space between the readings.
   • Sit listening and reflecting for a period of time after the final reading.
   • Ask the listeners what word they heard or first impression they have received from the reading.
   • Allow ample time for this collective reflection.

2. Show the iconic illumination representing the passage.

   • Allow viewers an opportunity to deeply look at the image in a period of silence.
   • Ask each individual what they see first and how it affects them.
• Progress around the circle during these first rounds of seeing and response would be best with a minimum of discussion and cross-talk. Allow each person to speak or pass and then move on to the next individual.

• After this first round of observation it may be important to discuss the nature of the critical “eye of judgment” (or even the “artistic eye” trained to see things a particular way) that may need to be set aside in order to penetrate the image into a deeper level of seeing.

• Following the first round of response, ask the participants what their further reflections are based on what others have seen and said and the comments made about viewing an icon without the “eye of judgment.”

• A third and a fourth round of commentary may be important. We have found that by contemplating these images and the text in rounds supports a subtle but important field of mutual contemplation and presence. What we might call a “cyclonic inquiry” creates a kind of flow between spoken word and silence that allows agreements, contradictory reflections, confusions, reactions and questions to be held in the contemplative space. This holding of a certain level of tension supports the movement from discursive discussion to deeper opening, insight, wisdom and presence.

3. Read the passage again while looking at the iconic illumination.

• Ask how the image changes their first hearing and understanding of the passage.
• Ask what meanings they now hear from the passage that they might not have heard before.
• Ask how the reading changes their seeing—remember, the two are “in dialogue” in some fundamental way.
• Give ample time for further reflection, moving in rounds from person to person, but allowing individuals to “pass” if they are not ready to speak.
• As there is opportunity, ask how the second stage of seeing is beginning to emerge—the stage in which true wisdom speaks to and takes root in the heart. This second stage comes into view through intuitive leaps, non-verbal awareness, periods of further inner silence and presence, and a kind of “appearance” where insights previously hidden in the text or the image become known.
• In the final rounds of reflection ask for a word or brief phrase that captures both your felt experience and your sense of the collective presence.

4. Further Questions and Reflections. Ask...

• In what ways does the truth or wisdom of this passage change or challenge you?
• What needs to be addressed in your day-to-day life, or in your practice in the inner and outer worlds?
• Where do you sense this truth might be taking you?
• How does it affect you in the body? Where and how do you feel it? What sensations does it create in you?
• Ask folk to write their further reflections and learning outside the gathering in a journal, which they can then share when the group reassembles.
• Ask folk to work with one of the questions one-on-one and then to share with the group what they have discovered.
• Ask what wisdom they are now carrying away from this experience that they did not have before.
• Ask how it needs to be embodied and integrated into their personal life.
• Ask how what they have seen reflects the inner state of their soul.

What has been described in these pages (and in this process) is an opportunity to enter into these ancient wisdom teachings through the eye of the heart and not simply the eye of the mind. The eye of the heart is another gate (perhaps the primary one) giving us a more direct access that bypasses the circumlocutions of words. By looking at the iconic illumination we can immediately see the whole truth of things in relationship to its many parts. This use of the analogical imagination lends weight and substance to another of the heart’s functions, intuitive cognition, which is the ability to grasp the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Through these two means (the analogical imagination and intuitive cognition) a new synesthetic power emerges, which the heart already possesses, that gives us access to wisdom from the Imaginal Realm.