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Thomas: Apostle to the Orient

About all that most people know about the apostle Thomas is that he was "The Doubter." "Doubting Thomas" is frequently imagined as a dour, pessimistic man, disinclined to believe, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, the man who tried to throw the monkey wrench into the engine of Easter joy. Actually, the information which the New Testament provides about Thomas does not lead the reader to such a conclusion. Like most of the Twelve, Thomas was simply mentioned a few times, but those incidents present a picture of a clearheaded man of courage and intellect.

We know more about the life of Thomas after Calvary than we do about any of the other apostles except for Peter and John.

The interesting fact about Thomas is that almost all of his ministry took place outside the Roman Empire and nearly all our sources about him are non-Western. Before we concern ourselves with Thomas's ministry in Osroene, Armenia, Iran, India, and Southeast Asia, let us examine what there is to learn about him from New Testament sources.

Thomas was merely mentioned as one of the Twelve by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John related four incidents in which Thomas was involved, some of which give small clues to his character. The first was associated with the raising of Lazarus. During the winter of A.D. 31-32, Jesus was run out of Jerusalem after teaching that "the Father and I are one" (Jn. 10:30). Jesus knew, and all His disciples knew, that the next time He set foot in Jerusalem He would be killed. A few months later, however, Jesus received word that His great friend Lazarus was critically ill. Lazarus and his family lived in Bethany, a suburb two miles outside Jerusalem, which was a four-day journey from the place where Jesus was ministering at the time. Although the message stated that Lazarus was very ill, Jesus told the Twelve that their friend was then in fact dead. Nevertheless, the Lord announced His intention of going to Bethany. Most of the Twelve were alarmed that their Master was going to risk their lives by going into hostile territory, especially when it was too late to help Lazarus. It was only Thomas who showed no reluctance to go. It was he who rallied the other apostles, affirming, "Let us go along, to die with him" (Jn. 11:16).

"Thomas was an awfully pessimistic man," someone might say. This was not necessarily the case. Thomas's pessimism was born of prudence and common sense. All the apostles knew that Jesus was a dead man if He set foot in Jerusalem — or near Jerusalem — again. They knew that there was a real possibility that they would be killed with Him. Thomas was not the only apostle who sensed that his life would be endangered if he went with Jesus to Bethany; on the contrary, he was the only one of the Twelve who, despite a clear and present

danger, was willing to put his life on the line for his Master. This incident revealed Thomas not as a man of doubt and distrust, but of prudence, courage, and loyalty.

The second mention of Thomas by John was set in Jerusalem just before the Passion. Jesus had gone to Bethany and raised up Lazarus; then, amidst stupendous demonstrations of acclaim following the miracle, He entered Jerusalem for the Passover. After the Last Supper, Jesus declared, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places; otherwise, how could I have told you that I was going to prepare a place for you? I am indeed going to prepare a place for you, and then I shall come back to take you with me, that where I am you also may be. You know the road that leads where I go" (Jn. 14:1-4).

Thomas did not know what Jesus was talking about and asked, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (Jn. 14:5). This prompted Jesus to declare, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me" (Jn. 14:6).

The most famous incident involving Thomas earned him the reputation of "The Doubter." The Lord had appeared after His Resurrection to all the apostles except Thomas, who was absent at the time when his ten colleagues were together. When told of the appearance of the Risen Lord, Thomas replied, "I will never believe it without probing the nailprints in his hands, without putting my finger in the nailmarks and my hand into his side" (Jn. 20:25).

Thomas's reaction was eminently reasonable. He knew as well as anybody else that people who were really and truly dead did not come to life again. Thomas had seen the tortured cadaver of his Master with its wounds in the hands, feet, and side. He had no doubts at all that Jesus was dead. As to His alleged Resurrection, what was he to believe? Perhaps his colleagues had seen a ghost. Perhaps they were telling him of a

purely intellectual or spiritual experience. Perhaps someone was playing tricks on them. Perhaps they were, for some reason, trying to make a fool of him. The proof that Thomas demanded was quite reasonable. He wanted to have the same experience that his colleagues had in order to prove to himself that the Resurrection was physical and material, rather than intellectual. When Jesus did appear to him and Thomas was convinced that he was seeing alive the same body that had died under torture on the cross, he was persuaded and declared, "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas's reaction was that of a sensible man. It is true that Jesus told him, "Blest are they who have not seen and have believed" (Jn. 20:29). The Lord was referring here to posterity, to those whom the Twelve would evangelize. Jesus does not have to make a special Resurrection appearance to each human being. The testimony of the Twelve, and other apostles, such as Paul and James the Righteous, is sufficient for subsequent generations. The Resurrection is experienced and questioned by men and women who are at first confused and incredulous. There is as much evidence for the Resurrection as there is for any other event of that time, such as the assassination of Caesar or the suicide of Cleopatra. The incident involving Thomas's "doubting" shows him a practical man of common sense who demanded empirical proof.

St. Thomas was mentioned a final time, in the twenty-first chapter of John, where he was included in the fishing expedition of the Sea of Galilee to which Jesus appeared after His Resurrection. He was simply named, and we learn nothing of his personality from this incident.

The only other information we have about Thomas from the New Testament is that he was called "*Didymus*," or "The Twin." Actually, this is simply a translation into Greek of the Hebrew name "Thomas," which also means "twin." This was obviously not a given name, but a surname, like "Peter" and "*Boanerges*." We learn from Eusebius as well as from early

Syrian writings that Thomas's given name was Judah, or Jude.

We do not know where Thomas was born. *The Acts of Thomas*, written about A.D. 200, describes Thomas as a carpenter and a member of Jesus' immediate family. All the other apostles we have discussed so far, except possibly James the Less, were fishermen.

Thomas had one of the most active ministries of any of the Twelve. Eusebius wrote that almost immediately after Pentecost, Thomas was instrumental in evangelizing the nation of Osroene, which lay to the north of Palestine, in what is now eastern Turkey, between the Roman and Iranian Empires. Eusebius cited documents which still existed in his day in the Archive of Edessa, the capital of Osroene, which described the conversion of Prince Abgar the Black, who ruled there between A.D. 13 and 50. Among those papers was a transcript of a letter which Abgar had written to Jesus. Abgar was ill with a distemper, impervious to the art of all the physicians of his day, and wrote to Jesus that he had heard "about the cures you perform without drugs and herbs." He continued:

> If the report is true, you make the blind see again and the lame walk about; you cleanse lepers, expel unclean spirits and demons, cure those suffering from chronic and painful diseases, and raise the dead. When I heard all this about you, I concluded that one of two things must be true either you are God and come down from heaven to do these things, or you are God's Son doing them. Accordingly I am writing to beg you to come to me, whatever the inconvenience, and cure the disorder from which I suffer. I may add that I understand the Jews are treating you with contempt and desire to injure you. My city is very small, but highly esteemed, adequate for us both.[1]

According to the papers on file in the Edessan Archive, Jesus had sent Abgar the following reply, orally, through the messenger who had dispatched the letter from the prince: "Happy are you who believed in me without having seen me! For it is written of me that those who have seen me will not believe in me, and that those who have not seen will believe and live. As to your request that I should come to you, I must complete all that I was sent to do here, and, on completing it, must at once be taken up to the One who sent me. When I have been taken up I will send you one of my disciples to cure your disorder and bring life to you and those with you."[2]

Eusebius recounted that it was Thomas who urged his colleague Jude Thaddaeus to go to Edessa to heal the king and preach to the people. Many believed, as we shall discuss in the chapter on Thaddaeus, that the records that Eusebius saw in the Edessan Archive were forgeries perpetrated to invent an "apostolic succession" for a church that later separated from Rome. However, there are very ancient traditions that not only Thaddaeus but also Thomas ministered in Osroene and the neighboring kingdom of Armenia. It is a fact that the Church of the East and Assyria has traced the succession of its bishops back to Thomas. Their first two bishops, Abris and James I, were first cousins of Jesus.

Thomas evidently left Jerusalem early and spent many years ministering in Osroene, whose inhabitants spoke Syriac (a tongue closely related to Aramaic) and where there were many Jews. He also made trips into the adjoining kingdom of Armenia. Thomas may have returned to Jerusalem briefly in the late A.D. 40s, before moving on to India.

The earliest source for knowledge of Thomas's ministry in India is a Syriac document, probably written in Edessa around A.D. 200, known as *The Acts of Thomas*. Described as a historical novel, a piece of fiction written for entertainment, it is based on historical fact. Thomas was a national hero for the Chris-

tians of Osroene and they enjoyed reading about the founder of their national Church. In addition to *The Acts of Thomas*, a document attributed to the third-century author Hippolytus also located Thomas's ministry in India as well as Iran,[3] and Eusebius, who wrote a century later, stated that Thomas was sent to Parthia (Iran) but does not mention India.[4]

When merchants and missionaries from Portugal arrived in India in the sixteenth century, they were astonished to find a flourishing community of Christians who steadfastly maintained that their Church, the Church of Malabar, had been founded in the first century by St. Thomas. In 1533, the King of Portugal directed all of his missionaries to take down the local history of the Christians. It was soon discovered that there was a substantial body of tradition about Thomas in India. There were some ancient books, written in Syriac, as well as songs and a huge corpus of oral tradition. Interviews were conducted with the bishop of the Church of Malabar, the Abuna, whose title meant "Our Father." He stated that Thomas was sent by Christ to India, that he had set out from Jerusalem in the company of Bartholomew and Jude Thaddaeus. While Thaddaeus and Bartholomew remained in the Middle East, Thomas arrived at the western coast of India, then went to China, where he founded a church in Peking. On returning to India, he converted "thousands and thousands" on the eastern coast before he was martyred.[5]

Some scholars scoff at these traditions. Christianity in India, they say, dates only from the fourth century, when missionaries arrived from Syria. It is their belief that since the Church in Edessa was almost certainly founded by Thomas, and traces its apostolic successors to him, the ignorant Indians gradually convinced themselves that the apostle had actually visited their land. Even the most cautious historian, however, will have to concede that the chances that Thomas was active in India are at least fifty-fifty. The dispassionate Bishop Leslie W. Brown declared in 1956:

> The tradition of St. Thomas's death in South India is not entirely disproved, and no other place in the world claims the event. We cannot prove that the Apostle worked in South India any more than we can disprove the fact; but the presence of Christians of undoubtedly ancient origin holding firmly to the tradition, the proof of very considerable commercial contact between the western world and the Malabar coast in the first century of our era, and the probable presence of Jewish colonies at the same time, may for some incline the balance to the belief that the truth of the tradition is a reasonable probability.[6]

Since Bishop Brown wrote, archaeological finds have indicated that Christianity in India certainly predated the fourth century. It has been discovered that Pallivaanavar, a king of southwestern India in the middle of the second century, was a Christian.[7]

Moreover, an ancient Syriac document, dating from the third century and called *The Doctrines of the Apostles*, recounted that "India and all its own countries and those bordering even to the farthest sea, received the Apostles' hand of priesthood from Judas Thomas, who was Guide and Ruler in the Church which he built there and ministered there."[8] A scholar named A. Mingana, writing in 1926, declared, "It is the constant tradition of the Eastern Church that the Apostle Thomas evangelized India, and there is no historian, no poet, no breviary, no liturgy, and no writer of any kind, who, having the opportunity of speaking of Thomas, does not associate his name with India."[9]

The Acts of Thomas revolved around the apostle's ministry in northwestern India — in what is now called the Punjab — at the court of King Gundaphorus. For years no one believed that

such a king ever lived, until, in the nineteenth century, coins dating to the first century were found in northern India bearing his name in Greek characters. We now know that Gundaphorus (or Gudnaphar) was an Iranian prince who ruled in the middle of the first century in what is now Pakistan and northwestern India. The Iranian Empire was then a loose confederation of principalities and the realm of Gundaphorus marked the southeastern extent. The Iranian (or Persian) Empire was generally called Parthia by the Romans, and this would explain Eusebius's identification of Thomas's field of activity as Parthia, rather than India.

In reconstructing Thomas's activities in north India, we will assume that *The Acts of Thomas* is relatively accurate in its essentials. Two scholars named Farquhar and Garitte wrote an interesting study in 1972 relating *The Acts of Thomas* to known historical facts.

Thomas evidently returned from Osroene to Jerusalem in A.D. 49, perhaps for the Council of Jerusalem. While in Jerusalem, he met a Jewish Christian named Abban or Habban, whom Farquhar and Garitte identified as Gundaphorus's royal trade commissioner. Abban had been trying to spread the Gospel among the Hindus and Zoroastrians as well as the Jews of Taxila, the capital city of Gundaphorus's realms. Abban encouraged Thomas to return with him to India. Gundaphorus was looking for a master carpenter to construct a royal palace, and Thomas was known as a master carpenter who specialized in making ploughs, yokes, balances, pulleys, ships, oars, masts, as well as houses.

According to *The Acts of Thomas*, the apostle was unwilling at first to go, even when Christ appeared to him in a vision. Thomas asked: "How can I, a Jew, go and preach the Truth to Indians?" "Fear not, Thomas. Go to India and preach the word there, for my grace is with you," said Christ.[10]

Farquhar and Garitte felt that the account in the apocryphal Acts about Thomas being captured by Abban as a slave when he

disobeyed the vision was fabrication. They also believed that Thomas and Abban sailed to Alexandria, an Egyptian port from which one hundred twenty ships sailed to India each year. In the spring of A.D. 49, the two men boarded a ship there and sailed up the Nile. After one day they arrived at the port of Andropolis. Eleven days after that they reached the port of Koptos, where they disembarked and traveled for a week in a caravan over desert terrain to the port of Myos-Hormos on the Red Sea. They left Myos-Hormos by ship in May and stopped at Okelis, on the east coast of the Red Sea, in early June. A few days later the ship reached the Gulf of Aden, where it picked up the full force of the monsoon winds blowing from the southwest. According to Farquhar and Garitte, "They would then have to endure more than a month of the worst sailing in the world, driven furiously over the tempestuous Arabian Sea by the irresistible monsoon, lashed by wild rainstorms, the heat and damp unendurable, many of the passengers sick and ill day and night."[11]

In mid-July, Thomas and Abban disembarked at Pattala, in northern India. Boarding a smaller boat, they sailed thirteen hundred miles north up the Indus River to Attock. From there they journeyed forty miles to the southeast on foot until in the late summer, after a trek of about five months, they arrived in Taxila. Known as "The Athens of India," Taxila was far to the north of Kalyana, where Bartholomew would later minister. Taxila traded with China as well as the Roman Empire. Greek was spoken there, as well as Indian and Iranian tongues. It was the home of a university where a number of eminent Hindu and Buddhist scholars taught.[12] Farquhar and Garitte were convinced that Thomas studied there and mastered the Punjabi language: "As soon as he was able to use the vernacular, he would meet groups of keenly interested educated men, from whose questions and answers he would learn a very great deal about the religious life of India; and day by day he would come to see more clearly how the grace of God had better be commended to the Hindu conscience and heart."[13]

Meanwhile, Thomas was engaged by Gundaphorus as a builder and architect. According to *The Acts of Thomas*, he was commissioned to build a palace and was given substantial appropriations. Thomas, instead of working on the building, traveled about the area, giving money to the poor, healing the sick, and teaching the "New God." When Gundaphorus heard about this, he summoned Thomas. "Have you finished my mansion yet?" he asked. Thomas replied in the affirmative. "Well," said the king, "when can we go and see it?" Thomas replied rather flippantly, "You cannot see it now, but when you depart this life you shall see it."

Thomas was about to be tortured to death by an enraged king when he was saved by an out-of-the-body experience of the king's brother Gad, who was suddenly taken ill and pronounced dead. When revived, however, Gad told his brother that he had seen the heavenly palace that Thomas had built for him. When he heard this, Gundaphorus believed and, along with his brother, was baptized.[14]

Thomas could have remained at Taxila for only a year or two, for it was in the early A.D. 50s that Gundaphorus was overthrown by the Kushans, who swept down out of China. The South Indians believed that Thomas arrived in their land in A.D. 52, so it is reasonable to assume that the apostle left Taxila when the Kushan menace became apparent. Farquhar and Garitte also believed that Abban and Gundaphorus gave Thomas letters of recommendation to the rulers of several South Indian principalities.

We must remember that India was not a united country in the first century. The subcontinent contained a number of independent kingdoms and principalities. The kingdoms of South India maintained close commercial contact with Rome in the first century. Large quantities of Roman pottery, beads, lamps, glass and coins have been uncovered by archaeologists at various sites there. They have found evidence that the princes of South India exported pepper, pearls, ivory, silk, spices, and textiles to Rome in return for glass, tin, lead, wine, and gold.

There were three major kingdoms in South India in the first century: Pandyas, Keras (or Kerala) and Colas (or Chola). They were agrarian societies, almost constantly at war. Most people lived in small villages headed by a sabha, or council, which conducted local affairs. The cities were more cosmopolitan. In such urban centers as Cranganore and Nelcynda there were Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Arabs, and Jews, as well as Hindus. When Thomas arrived by ship at Cranganore, he undoubtedly followed the apostolic practice of seeking out members of the Jewish community.

The inhabitants of the Malabar Coast of India (the west coast) have many traditions about Thomas. One tradition is interesting to compare with an incident from the Syriac Acts of Thomas. According to the Middle Eastern document, Thomas, while still at the court of Gundaphorus, was attending a banquet when he was punched in the face by a cupbearer. Thomas told the offender, "My God will forgive you this injury in the world to come, but in this world He will show forth His wonders, and I shall even now see that hand which smote me dragged by dogs." Shortly afterward the cupbearer went outside to draw water and was attacked by a lion, which killed him and mauled his body. A big black dog gnawed on the mangled remains and walked into the banquet hall with the cupbearer's right hand in his mouth.[15]

According to the South Indian version of the story, the apostle was present at the wedding feast of a local prince. In this version it was one of the king's ministers who slapped Thomas in the face when he saw the apostle in ecstasy. Thomas then announced a "temporal punishment so that you can avoid an eternal one." The man went outside to wash his hands and was attacked by a tiger. The minister was not killed, but his hand was bitten off. The man staggered, bleeding, into the banquet hall, followed by a dog carrying the severed member. According to this version, Thomas took the hand and miraculously reattached it.[16]

It is interesting to compare the versions. The second version was told to Portuguese missionaries as oral history. The first was written down in Syriac in the third century. Are these stories different versions of the same event which arose independently of each other? Or did Syrian missionaries, familiar with *The Acts of Thomas*, translate the story into the native Tamil language, making certain adaptations to local culture?

The Indians of Malabar in the sixteenth century savored another gruesome legend about the apostle. The story goes that a Hindu kicked Thomas, and, as a penance, the apostle put a curse on him so that all his descendants "carried their legs swollen, full of . . . knots and loathsome corrugations, filled with pus."[17] And so the natives blamed the widespread incidence of elephantiasis on St. Thomas!

Another story, which reveals the apostle in a somewhat less vindictive light, has to do with the resurrection of a dead boy. A Brahman priest, to spite Thomas, killed his own son and accused Thomas of putting a spell on the boy and thus ending his life. Thomas brought the boy to life again. After the child testified that it was his father and not the "holy man" who had done him in, the apostle asked the boy if he would rather live in this world or that from which he had just been summoned. When the boy replied, "The other," Thomas baptized him and the child died.[18]

The Rabban Song, which has been passed down orally by generations of Indian Christians, recounts Thomas's career in India in some detail. It states that the apostle arrived in India in late A.D. 49, stayed briefly, then went on to China. This generally agrees with several other Indian traditions. Such a trip would have occurred shortly after Thomas's arrival in South India. Farquhar and Garitte believe that it is unlikely that Thomas actually went to China proper — certainly not Peking — within the short space of perhaps a year allotted by the Indian narratives. They believe that he did evangelize in what are now Burma and Malaysia for a short time before returning to South India.

According to the Rabban Song, between A.D. 52 and 59 Thomas founded seven churches and baptized one king, forty Jews, and some three thousand Hindus. In the fall of A.D. 59 he went from the west to the east coast of India, where he settled for a time at Mylapore, and where he baptized King Choran of Lola and seven hundred other persons.

Early in A.D. 62, Thomas started a long series of missionary tours, similar to those that Paul had conducted in the Near East a few years earlier. He founded Christian colonies in the cities of Cranganore, Kottakayal, Kokomangalam, Kollom, Niranam, and Chayal. Like Paul, Thomas also had his greatest success in cities and towns. Between A.D. 62 and 69, Thomas and his disciples are reputed to have baptized more than 17,000 Hindus. The Rabban Song also catalogues the miracles worked by Thomas during this period: nineteen dead persons raised, 260 successful exorcisms, 230 lepers healed, 250 blind restored to sight, 220 paralytics cured, and 250 other persons ill with various incurable maladies healed. Thomas ordained priests and bishops, including Kepa, who came from the royal family of Kerala and came to be bishop of Cranganore.[19]

In A.D. 69, Thomas settled permanently in Mylapore. He was by then at least in his sixties and getting too old for extensive travel under rugged and primitive conditions. Allowing for some exaggeration in the Rabban Song and other sources, the apostle conducted a ministry similar to Paul's, with extensive travel and many miraculous occurrences. Even the Hindus considered him a "holy man." Indeed, according to *The Acts of Thomas*, the apostle was very much like Bartholomew and James the Righteous, given to fasting and long periods of prayer. He is said to have eaten only bread and water and never to have owned more than one garment at one time. This leads one to speculate that he too had once been a disciple of the Baptist. According to the traditions of the "St. Thomas Christians" of Malabar, Thomas forbade any sort of pictures or images, but decorated his houses of worship with the symbol of

the cross. This is interesting in light of the fact that the cross did not emerge as a religious symbol in the Roman Empire until the fourth century, after the Emperor Constantine abolished it as a means of execution.

According to most Indian traditions, Thomas died of stab wounds on July 3, A.D. 72. The Brahman priests of Mylapore feared that Christianity would eclipse Hinduism. Several of their number found Thomas praying in a cave near his home and wounded him with a spear. The apostle dragged himself out of the cave, struggled some distance to a nearby chapel and, in the presence of several of his disciples, grasped a stone cross. According to an account noted by Marco Polo, Thomas prayed, "Lord, I thank Thee for all Thy mercies. Into Thy hands I commend my spirit," and entered into rest.[20] So closed the remarkable career of a remarkable man, a man who should be remembered not for being a "doubter," but for his faith and zeal.

