



Spring 4-30-2013

"This I say not as one doubting": Traditions of the Apostle Thomas from the Beginning of the Common Era through 800 CE

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“This I say not as one doubting”:
Traditions of the Apostle Thomas
from the Beginning of the Common Era through 800 CE

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Religion 491: Senior Honors Research
April 2013

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Abstract

The Apostle Thomas survives in Western Christian tradition today as the disciple who refused to believe in the resurrection without placing his fingers in the holes of his Messiah's hands. His story is used as a warning for those waiting for the second coming: a symbol of those who do not believe Jesus rose again and will look foolish when he returns. Thomas is remembered as the disciple you do not want to be, for "[b]lessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29b).

Historically, Thomas has a richer identity. A number of the New Testament apocryphal texts were named for the "doubting" disciple, including *The Book of Thomas the Contender*, *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas*, and *The Gospel of Thomas*, yet these traditions do not address Thomas's doubting story from the Gospel of John. In fact, Thomas becomes the favored disciple in *The Book of Thomas the Contender* and logion 13 of *The Gospel of Thomas*. In *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas* the disciple leaves Rome to evangelize in India where he is eventually martyred.

Whether or not Thomas actually traveled to India is a debate that will be addressed in the paper, but it is important to note that a Thomasine Christian tradition has maintained strong roots in India, especially in the state of Kerala, since at least 372 CE and possibly longer. He is still revered in South India as the messenger that brought Christianity to the country and pilgrims travel to his tomb in Mylapore. As the longest-lasting Thomasine tradition in the world, it is an essential avenue of exploration

when considering Thomas's influence in antiquity.

We know that the expanse of the Roman Empire allowed ideas from all over the Eastern Hemisphere to travel quickly and blend into one another: the mass convergence of thought at the Library of Alexandria demonstrates this phenomenon. Yet despite the unity of ideas across regions, scholars have discussed Thomas in India separately from Thomas in the Mediterranean aside from the debate over his journey's historical legitimacy. This paper would contribute to the field by examining the continuity of Thomasine traditions with only chronological boundaries, not geographical ones as is traditionally done with Thomas.

This paper discusses the earlier history of Thomas as a religious icon, from his initial appearances in the 1st century through its earlier developments in India, and evince not only the historical progression linking those traditions, but also the thematic development. Because documentation is lacking on groups that used the Thomas texts in Rome, analysis of the traditions in the Mediterranean will be a hermeneutic, deep reading of texts to establish a theological position to which we can assume Thomasine Christians adhered. The Thomasine traditions in India, by contrast, do not have a textual tradition; in fact, texts do not begin to appear in South Indian Christianity until colonization in the 16th century. So discussion of Thomas's history in India will surround the stories passed through oral tradition, archaeological discoveries, and the scholarly discussion of its history up until this point in time. Moving from the familiar Thomas to his Mediterranean origins, to his legacy on the other side of the world, I

hope to sketch a concept of Thomas's cultural identity beyond his moment of doubt and beyond the common geographical boundaries that scholarship places upon him.

Maps



Christian Communities ca. 100 CE



Roman Trade Routes to India - First Century CE

Northwest India Hypothesis: King Gundaphar's Coins Found in Taxila



South India Hypothesis





Kerala and the Malabar Coast



Mylapore in Tamil Nadu



But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

-John 20:24-25

Introduction

The Apostle Thomas survives in Western Christian tradition today as a symbol of uncertainty, referred to in contemporary culture not by his Biblical designation, “Thomas the Twin,” but “Doubting Thomas.” His only story in the New Testament is an example of a disciple one should *not* emulate for “[b]lessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29b). Yet since the discovery of apocryphal codices at Nag Hammadi, Thomas’s reputation has been redeemed, if not in Western Christian tradition at least in academia. Now with five known texts ascribed to the apostle Thomas, scholars are attempting to reconstruct his significance for Christianity in the Roman Empire before the texts associated with him were officially denounced by the orthodox churches as heretical. Associations to Thomas in antiquity were clearly problematic enough for the orthodoxy to suppress any mention of him that was not demeaning to his faith. Between the castigations of the orthodox heresiologists and the recently discovered sources they criticized, however, Bible scholars are able to

assemble an idea of what legacy Thomas retained in certain Mediterranean Christian communities.

On a different continent, Thomasine scholarship has developed in a drastically different form. Since colonization, when the Portuguese encountered the self-designated St. Thomas Christians in Kerala, India, the academic world has sought to uncover the mysteries of its arrival. The unique traditions of South Indian Christianity today have given rise to suppositions about its arrival and early development, usually as a method for establishing the contemporary churches' context. While some doubt the arrival of Christianity in India before 800 CE, different suggestions for its arrival (including the possibilities of its arrival with traders in the 4th century, with the apostle Thomas on a mission to North India, or with him on a mission to South India) suggest different possibilities for the nature of the Thomas tradition's migration into Asia.

Discussion of the apostle Thomas has remained regional, working either in the Mediterranean or in India, with occasional overlap regarding *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas*. Methodologically, this segregation is understandable: the two regions require different language skill sets and the resources available for comprehending the Mediterranean traditions (primarily textual) require a different sort of interpretive approach than the resources available in India (primarily oral traditions and non-textual archaeological findings). Yet at some point during Christianity's rise, ideas traveled across the world at the speed that goods were traded. The Pauline epistles show that within twenty to thirty years of Jesus' death, Christianity had spread as far as

Alexandria, Antioch, Corinth, and Galatia through sea trade. The monumental convergence of thought at Alexandria by itself is enough evidence to the efficiency of global communication. With the entire known world tied economically to Rome, religion and philosophy traveled and assimilated between cultures rapidly.

Once the interchange capabilities are considered, the dissociation between Thomasine traditions in the Mediterranean with those in India appears to be a massive oversight. Regional distance at the beginning of the common era was not so vast as to warrant exclusion of one set of traditions from another within the same timeframe. By analyzing Thomasine traditions within the constraints of time as opposed to location, one can organize a map of community values across the Eastern Hemisphere and analyze where they maintained integrity and where they morphed and diverged.

Methodology

Because information on ancient Indian Christianity is difficult to date prior to the 9th century, the constraints of time will extend through 800 CE with more a more general chronology established for Indian Christian tradition and more detailed chronology laid out for the Mediterranean Christian tradition. Discussion of Thomas's history in India will comprise of the region's oral tradition, archaeological finds, and the scholarly discussion of its history up until this point in time. Analysis of Thomas in the Mediterranean will concentrate primarily on the hermeneutics of *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Book of Thomas the Contender*, and *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas*

as well as the condemnations of orthodox heresiologists against the texts and those affiliated with them.¹ With general themes established in the separate Thomas communities, parallels can be identified to define the ancient Thomas legacy.

Because this project spans across a few different fields of religious studies, early Christianity and Indian religious traditions, many of the terms and locations that are familiar to scholars in one field may be unfamiliar with terms from another field. To avoid confusion over specialized language, I have included a glossary that covers methodological terms, theological terms, historical people, events, and texts, and characters referenced in some of these texts. I have also included maps at the front of this paper to provide geographical references. With this list of terms as a resource, I hope to more easily bridge the gap between religious sub-fields when reading this paper.

The Gospel of Thomas

Perhaps even before Thomas became the doubtful disciple of John's Gospel, he was Thomas the Twin (Didymos) who recorded "the hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke" (*Gospel Prologue*). *The Gospel of Thomas*,² a non-narrative gospel that

¹ Two other texts exist bearing the name Thomas: *The Apocalypse of Thomas* and *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. These texts will not be discussed for reasons of dating. *The Apocalypse of Thomas* dates in the 9th century without any clear thematic connection with the Thomas texts from the first three centuries (*Apocalypse of Thomas* 645). *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, by contrast, does date in its earliest versions within the time frame under discussion; however, the text was not attributed to Thomas until the 10th century, thereby making it a Thomas tradition more contemporary to *The Apocalypse of Thomas* than to *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Book of Thomas the Contender*, or *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas* (Chartrand-Burke 28).

² For the sake of brevity, *The Gospel of Thomas* will be abbreviated to *Gospel*; other gospels will be

compiles various sayings of Jesus, was written sometime between the mid-1st century CE and 140 CE. Arguments for a later composition of the gospel center around the gnostic or pre-gnostic themes that can be found in the *Gospel* (DeConick “On the Brink” 94).³ These opinions were most popular in the 1950’s and 1960’s during early criticism of the text, though Richard Valantasis and Risto Uro date it around the same time as the canonical gospels (Uro 34).⁴ Most of the recent scholarship on the topic, however, still dates the Nag Hammadi text at about 140 CE; however, it dates the *Gospel*’s earliest version to around the time that Paul wrote his epistles (DeConick 94-95, Meyer *Secret Gospel* 18-19).

We do not have much context for the sayings, other than the ones mentioned in the canonical gospels, but the sayings themselves provide enough information for scholars to make inferences about how it was composed and for whom. Both scholars Marvin Meyer and April DeConick argue that the *Gospel* we have today is not the original version of the text and that a core, or “Kernel,” gospel can be derived from it (DeConick “Early Christian Gospel” 113-122 and “On the Brink” 93, Meyer *Secret Gospel* 18-19). DeConick, recognizing the difference in the *Gospel*’s rhetorical style from the narrative gospel, uses it to inform her reading of the text:

Traditionally, we have thought of an ancient “author” as someone who

denoted by their full names, i.e. The Gospel of John.

³ For a list of scholars and arguments for an earlier dating of *Gospel of Thomas* see DeConick “On the Brink of the Apocalypse,” 94 n. 5.

⁴ Uro defends his dating around the philosophical trends of the time, such as Epictetus and the Stoics which he believes are more appropriately applicable than gnostic thought to *The Gospel of Thomas*.

collects materials from oral and written sources and edits them together, preserving much of the original source material. . . Within the last decade, rhetorical critics have challenged this understanding of the ancient compositional process, arguing that the scribal culture that began to dominate the transmission of ancient Christian literature in the late second century has been imposed upon the earlier compositional period. This earlier period, it is argued, is better understood as a “rhetorical culture” enlivened by a creative interaction between oral and written composition. It is a culture that uses both oral and written language interactively *and* rhetorically in the compositional process (100).

Her reading of the *Gospel* considers the sayings almost as index cards for a speech: each saying is a marker in a larger sermon. The sayings themselves are not verbatim records; “beginnings and endings of the recitations were frequently modified to link subjects, provide commentary, or extend the argument” (DeConick 102). Sermons would have been expected to develop with every new recitation, some sections lengthened, others abbreviated, or embellished with action and interaction with the audience (DeConick 102).

Even without the spoken content, much can be inferred from the existing text of these sermons, both the logia that comprised the original text and those added in following decades, for later content of the *Gospel* was influential enough to warrant its

concealment before the advent of the 5th century. If DeConick and Meyer are correct about the gradual evolution of the *Gospel*, then communities associated with this particular Thomas tradition developed with it. Attention will be given to differentiation between the original and revised *Gospel*, but because of the limited surviving version of it, most of this analysis will evaluate the general themes found in the text and what values would have been held by the community reading.

What makes the *Gospel* ideal for understanding these values is the rhetorical structure of the text: the key points of these sermons were about what “Jesus said” about salvation and discipleship. “Jesus functions as the ‘spiritual guide’ of the elect” and in many of these logia gives instructions for salvation (Marjanen 216). Logion 3 explains the misguided nature of much salvation seeking: “If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the kingdom is in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside you and it is outside you” (*Gospel* 3:1-3). Salvation, according to this passage, is much closer than many realize. “Jesus said, ‘One who knows everything but lacks in oneself lacks everything’” (*Gospel* 67). Furthermore, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you” (*Gospel* 70). Salvation, then, is born from within the self, not from the actions of Jesus, as we find in the canonical gospels (Marjanen 217).

So with the act of crucifixion salvifically unnecessary, the *Gospel* must establish a different connection between Jesus and his disciples; Jesus does not identify as a savior, at least in the way orthodox Christianity understands it. He identifies himself as

the source of divine enlightenment: “I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all has come forth, and to me all has reached” (*Gospel 77:1*). This self-identification gives context to Jesus’ identification of his disciples: “If they say to you, ‘Where have you come from?’ say to them, ‘We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established [itself], and appeared in their image.’ If they say to you, ‘Is it you?’ say, “We are its children, and we are chosen of the living Father”” (*Gospel 50:1-2*). What does Jesus say about the chosen elite? In logion 49 he says, “Blessed are those who are alone and chosen, for you will find the kingdom. For you have come from it, and you will return there again” (*Gospel 49:1-2*).

The “chosen” in this final passage have an eternal quality that the canonical gospels do not ascribe to them. Only in the Gospel of John does the canon acknowledge an eternal nature: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1-2). In John’s gospel, Christ’s essence is eternal, but in Thomas’s gospel, so are the essences of Jesus’ disciples. “Jesus said, ‘Blessed is one who came into being before coming into being’” (*Gospel 19:1*). Perhaps Jesus is only blessing himself in this passage, but every beatitude in the the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are addressed to Christ’s followers. The more likely interpretation of logion 49 indicates an eternal essence of the disciples. Jesus, in fact, does not ever imply his own superiority above his disciples. In logion 13, Jesus corrects his disciples about regarding his relationship with them by stating, “I am not your teacher” (*Gospel 13:5*). Marjanen describes the

point of this sermon (in this version) to be that “there should be no barrier between Jesus and his disciples or the elect, whether it be that of a title, or that of power or position” (216). If the relationship between Jesus and his disciples is not that of a teacher-student, then it must be understood in a different form.

Perhaps the best way to reconstruct the relationship between Jesus and the Christians of this Thomas tradition is through the study of their asceticism, for this version of the *Gospel* maintains an encratic approach to salvation. Today we understand encratism, the belief that absolute sexual abstinence was required for salvation, through the limited mention of them in the writings of Irenaus, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius (“Encratites” 123-126). “The encratites can only loosely be called an identifiable sect, having more of the characteristics of a movement that transcends many sects,” states Hultgren and Haggmark (123). Currently there is no information available on the individual churches that practiced encratism; the heresiologists only discuss the practice, not the churches that endorsed it.

Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, encratism can be understood through the writings attributed to the encratites, not just the denouncements from the orthodoxy. The *Gospel* available to us, even without the spoken context of the surrounding sermon, includes enough information in some of the logia that the motivations behind the encratic way of life are more easily deduced. Logion 7 reads, for instance, “Blessed is the lion that the man will eat, so that the lion becomes man. And accursed is the man whom the lion will eat, and the lion will become man”, in which

some scholars like Marvin Meyer interpret “lion” to be a metaphor for “passion” (*Gospel-Eccles* 15-16, Meyer *Secret Gospel* 29). Jesus also says, “you will say, ‘Blessed is the womb that has not conceived and the breasts that have not given milk’” (*Gospel* 79:3). In two different logia, the saying appears, “Woe to the flesh that depends on the soul. Woe to the soul that depends on the flesh” (*Gospel* 112:1-2, cf. *Gospel* 87:1-2). More than in the canonical gospels, in which Jesus’ statements on the issue are generally ambiguous, in the *Gospel* childbearing and sexuality compromise one’s spiritual life.

The *Gospel* encourages its audience toward a solitary lifestyle. The second verse of logion 23 states, “And they will stand as single people,” where “single people” is translated from the Coptic *oua ouot*, meaning “one alone” (DeConick “Restoration” 191, *Gospel-Eccles* 20, Hartin “Search for the True Self” 1007). The word, *monachos*, which DeConick understands as synonymous to *oua ouot*,⁵ is used in other passages, such as logion 16:

Jesus said, “Perhaps people think that I have come to impose peace upon the world. They do not know that I have come to impose conflicts upon the earth: fire, sword, war. For there will be five in a house: there will be three against two and two against three, father against son and son against father, and they will stand alone [*monachos*].” (*Gospel* 16:1-4)

⁵ DeConick “Restoration” 191

The word “alone” here literally translates to “the unique ones” which is also interpreted as “solitary,” “monk,” or “virgin” (DeConick “Restoration” 190, *Gospel-Eccles* 70, Hartin “Search for the True Self” 1007). DeConick translates this final phrase as “and they will stand as celibate people” (“Restoration” 190). According to her, “M. Harl and F. E. Morard have shown in their studies, *monachos* in [*Gospel of*] *Thomas* results from the Greek translation of the Syriac term *ihidaja*, meaning single unmarried person, a celibate living in a holy community” (190, Uro “*Thomas* an Encratite Gospel?” 157-158). We see this word appear once more in the context of marriage in logion 75: “Jesus said, 'There are many standing at the door, but those who are alone will enter the wedding chamber’” (*Gospel*). This passage explains why absolute celibacy is so important to the audience of the *Gospel*: these Christians remain celibate in anticipation for divine marriage.

Not everyone agrees with the encratic reading of the *Gospel*. Risto Uro believes the passages typically cited to support an encratic reading are in actuality too ambiguous to attribute an encratic agenda to it. He sees the interpretation as anachronistic, based on comparisons to later Thomasine texts (*The Book of Thomas the Contender* and *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas*), current knowledge of the later Syrian Church, sparse commentary made by the heresiologists about encratism in general (though not in the context of the *Gospel*), and a contentious translation of *monachos* (Uro “*Thomas* an Encratic Gospel?” 156-158). He postulates that the ambiguous nature of the language may reflect the ambiguous position that the community

took regarding marriage and sexuality but disagrees with the general association made between encratism and the *Gospel* (Uro “*Thomas an Encratic Gospel?*” 161). “This kind of difference of opinion underlines the difficulties in reconstructing the social context for the gospel,” he says (Uro “*The Social World*” 27). Even DeConick removes the more encratic logia from her evaluation of the earliest Kernel *Gospel*, indicating that encratism is suspected to be a later development in this Thomasine tradition (“*Early Christian Gospel*” 113-122).

Some scholars also read elements of gnosis, a soteriology based on revealed knowledge in the *Gospel*. Logion 1 opens the text with “Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death,” immediately setting the text in the terms of discovering sacred knowledge (*Gospel* 1:1). Jesus accuses the Pharisees and scholars of having “taken the keys of knowledge and have hidden them” (*Gospel* 39:1). He also says that he will “disclose [his] mysteries to those (who are worthy) of [his] mysteries”⁶ (*Gospel* 62:1). In logion 13 the disciples try to explain the nature of Jesus and after Thomas admits that he cannot describe him, Jesus takes him aside from the others and speaks to him secretly. “When Thomas came back to his friends, they asked him, ‘What did Jesus say to you?’ Thomas said to them, ‘If I tell you one of the sayings he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me, and fire will come from the rocks and consume you’” (*Gospel* 13:1-8). The sayings to which Thomas refers remain secret to both the other disciples as well as the readers/hearers of the *Gospel*

⁶ Parentheses included for clear translation by translator.

sermon. It appears Jesus selects only a few elite to whom knowledge may be revealed.

Knowledge, however, is not always revealed; many passages emphasize achieving gnosis through knowing the self. The third logion states “When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father” (*Gospel* 3:4). Jesus says in logion 70 “When you give birth to that which is in you, this what you have will save you. If you do not have that which is in you, this which you do not have in you will kill you” (*Gospel-Eccles* 67). The implication of this passage is that the only path to salvation requires knowledge of the self, which is only stated more boldly in logion 67: “Jesus said, ‘One who knows everything but lacks in oneself lacks everything’” (*Gospel* 67). “[The *Gospel of*] *Thomas* sees the soul or the divine light in everybody, or at least in all the elect” (Marjanen 217).

The accuracy of referring to *Thomas* as a gnostic gospel is disputed, though, and with good reason. DeConick does not include logia 1, 3, 13, 67, and 70 in her outline for the Kernel gospel (“Early Christian Gospel” 113-122 and “On the Brink” 93).⁷ Additionally, Uro argues that though there are “Gnostic-pleasing” logia in the *Gospel*, a strictly gnostic reading is perhaps insufficient (“The Social World” 34). As a result, some scholarship has read the text with alternative perspectives on its ascetic elements.

With both the encratic reading and the gnostic reading of the *Gospel* being contested, Valantasis analyzes many of the more problematic passages of the text,

⁷ See footnote 2

including many seemingly contradictory ones, in terms of asceticism (but not necessarily encratism). He understands the *Gospel* to concern itself less with the method of transformation and more with the transformation itself:

The asceticism relies not so much on the specific renunciatory practices, but rather on the articulation of a newly fashioned self, one inconsistent with the past, one confidently knowing the all, one new and sufficiently different from the old to be spoiled by contact with it. . . It does not matter here whether the new self is gnostic or whether the practices align with modern understandings of encratism. Only the positive agenda for creating a newly refashioned self in conflict with the old self matters in describing the gospel as ascetical. (Valantasis 63)

This interpretation, despite Valantasis's later dating of the *Gospel*, is conducive for arguing an early version of the text as a series of sermons more preoccupied with immediate transformation than with the details of the transformation. DeConick's evaluation of the Kernel *Gospel of Thomas* outlines five different speeches, regarding "eschatological urgency," "eschatological challenges," "exclusive commitment to Jesus," "the selection of the worthy few," and "the imminent kingdom of God" ("Early Christian Gospel" 117-122 and "On the Brink" 105-109). These sermons prioritize the importance of conversion and what that transformation entails, but the details are not specifically outlined in the Kernel gospel; explicit instructions would have to be elaborated upon by the speaker (or added into later replications of the *Gospel*).

The more general nature of the Thomas sermons is appropriate for the ministry of the earliest Christians. Many of the Pauline epistles spend extensive time addressing problems and questions from churches that were not addressed in the initial teachings. Epistles like 1 Corinthians and Galatians illuminate the lack of cohesive teaching between the leaders of the Christian movement, as evinced in the disagreement between Paul and Peter. Strong theological consensus in the church did not begin to form until the Greek apologists. The sermons from the *Gospel* would not have been teaching specific ways of life for its audience to adopt.

We can postulate at least two different types of communities from these readings of the *Gospel*: an early community more preoccupied with conversion and immediate transformation, and a later community that specified what values went along with that transformation, such as gnosis and encratism. As the *Gospel* sermons developed to address the more advanced questions of the community, the text was revised to accommodate the more specific theological needs of the community. So while the original text of the *Gospel* may have corresponded with what eventually became the canon, the Thomas tradition in the Mediterranean rapidly developed a more radical interpretation of spiritual transformation.

The Thomas tradition in India appears to have evolved from a theology more akin to the older, original *Gospel* tradition than the later, more zealous ascetic tradition that appears to have developed by the mid-2nd century, for while the historical values of the St. Thomas Christians in India have commonalities with the soteriology of

the earliest Mediterranean Thomas Christians, evidence from India shows no traces of encratism or other values associated with the later Mediterranean Thomasine traditions. Nevertheless, while the trajectories of Thomas Christians in the Mediterranean and those in India diverged substantially, those directions remained grounded in similar roots.

The Book of Thomas the Contender

Written at least fifty years after the latest version of the *Gospel*, *The Book of Thomas the Contender*⁸ was likely composed circa 200 CE by Christians in Tatian's philosophical theological tradition (DeConick 194, "Encratites" 125, Gonzalez 109-110, Turner "Introduction" 174, 177). A former student of Justin Martyr, Tatian promoted encratism and asceticism that was embraced in Edessa, Syria by a substantial Christian community, as evidenced by the literature surviving from the period (DeConick 194, Drijvers 172, "Encratites" 125, Gonzalez 109-110).

Irenaus describes Tatian in *Against Heresies* as having become "very pessimistic about human nature and tended toward gnostic exegesis regarding the creation of humankind, seeing creation as the work of an alien force or evil God" ("Encratites" 124). The legitimacy of Irenaus's assertions has been disputed by those considering the *Book of Thomas* in conjunction with its contemporary, *Acts of the Apostle Thomas*. In contrast, it is supported by vague references to "the Pleroma," a

⁸ *The Book of Thomas the Contender* will appear under the abbreviation *Book of Thomas*.

philosophical theme recognized from Plato and other adopters. However, the only dualism that can be confidently deduced is one of “body vs. spirit,” not “knowing-God vs. creator-God” (*Book of Thomas* 138:33, Drijvers 172, Hartin “Search for the True Self” 1009). Han J. W. Drijvers describes Tatian’s theology as “ethically and anthropologically (bodily) rooted in dualism within a strictly monotheistic framework” (172). Yet the *Book of Thomas* never fully develops its theological positions, leaving scholars to piece together the text’s values through its limited contents and speculated historical context (Hartin “Search for the True Self” 1009).

As judged by John Turner, *Book of Thomas* appears to be a combination of two separate texts, brought together “without perfect consistency—by a later author” (Turner “Introduction” 174, “New Link” 110). Verses 138.4-142.21 constitute the first section, a revelation dialogue imparted by Jesus to Thomas, perhaps the missing dialogue from logion 13 of the *Gospel* or, at the very least, alluding to it. The second section, 142.21-145:23, begins a lengthy exposition by Jesus that may be a 3rd century narrative transcription of a sermon or sayings gospel not unlike the *Gospel* and likely attributed to Mathaias, who is mentioned only at the beginning of the text (Turner “Introduction” 174-175, “New Link” 110-112). This latter section likely had nothing to do with Thomas, but the community for which the author was writing must have held values consistent with both the sayings gospel as well as the revelation dialogue and the two were conjoined.

For the purposes of the 3rd century Thomasine Christians in Edessa, the union

of these two texts brought context for the less specific aphorisms of the second half of the text⁹ with the more explanatory style of the first half.¹⁰ Section A quickly establishes that “it is not fitting that you be ignorant of yourself” and that Jesus is “the knowledge of the truth. So while you accompany [Jesus], although you are uncomprehending, you have (in fact) already come to know, and you will be called ‘the one who knows himself’” (*Book of Thomas* 138:11-15). In the narrative, this knowledge is being bestowed upon Thomas; however, Thomas represents the disciple Christians should embody. “The reader of the dialogue is to identify with Thomas, who, although he knows that the Savior is the ‘knowledge of the truth’, is nevertheless ignorant of the real truth, ‘that which is hidden’, but . . . is about to know the real truth about himself—he will be not merely a ‘disciple’, but he will be ‘perfect’” (Turner “New Link” 113-114).

11

This “truth” is the evanescent nature of the body and the liberation of the soul from the inevitable cycle of decay that is the material world. Regarding the body’s imminent demise, Jesus explains:

For that which guides [the fool], the fire, will give them an illusion of truth, and will shine on them with a [perishable] beauty, and it will imprison them in a dark sweetness and captivate them with fragrant pleasure. . . it has fettered them with its chains and bound all their limbs with the bitterness of the bondage of lust for those visible things that will

⁹ To be referred to here on out as Section B, as designated by Turner

¹⁰ To be referred to here on out as Section A, as designated by Turner

¹¹ Quoted references found in the *Book of Thomas* 138:4-36

decay and change and swerve by impulse. . . as they are killed, they are assimilated to all the beasts of the perishable realm. (*Book of Thomas* 140:20-36).

The ignorant souls will perish in death, but the wise “will be nourished by the truth,” which one discovers at the end of the text to ultimately mean freedom “from the sufferings and passions of the body,” “rest,” and eternal union with God (*Book of Thomas* 140:16, 145:12-16).

With this mind-body/material world-spiritual world dualism explained and established in Section A, those following Thomas in the 3rd century are prepared to understand the wisdom imparted by Jesus in Section B and understand the practical application of this divine knowledge is predominantly asceticism. Jesus refers to the human body as a “cavern” or “prison” within which the spirit is “captive” (*Book of Thomas* 143:11, 21-22). He frequently refers to the “insatiable” burning that threatens to destroy the soul (*Book of Thomas* 142:40, 143:1-7, 15-16, 18-21, 32-35, 144:14-16). He says, “Woe to you who hope in the flesh and in the prison that will perish! . . . Your hope is set upon the world, and your god is this life! You are corrupting your souls!” (*Book of Thomas* 143:11-15). At the closing of the book, he advises, “Watch and pray that you not come to be in the flesh, but rather that you come forth from the bondage of the bitterness of this life. . . For when you come forth from the sufferings and passions of the body, you will receive rest from the good one and you will reign with the king” (*Book of Thomas* 145:8-14). The pleasures of this world and

this body are abject in this text.

Like the passages from the later version of the *Gospel*, the *Book of Thomas* includes encratic passages in its instructions for asceticism with far heavier emphasis on the practice than is seen in the *Gospel*. In Section A, Jesus reflects on intercourse's only function as perpetuating the cycle of perishability (*Book of Thomas* 138:39-139:12). "Woe to you who beguile your limbs with fire!" he says and "Woe to you who love intimacy with womankind and polluted intercourse with them!" (*Book of Thomas* 144:9-10, 14). The body is a "beast," like the lion in the *Gospel*, that should be restrained.

Patrick Hartin remarks on the title of the text as a book of Thomas, "the Contender," the word deriving from the verb "to compete in a contest," which was used in Greek translations of Jewish and Christian texts to describe a martyr's "striving until death" ("Search for the True Self" 1012). As Hartin sees it, "Thomas is one who has engaged in a contest, a struggle, where he contended against the passions of the body and his fellow Christians are urged to shun the enticement of the body and adopt sexual abstinence" ("Search for the True Self" 1013). Asceticism separates the fools from the wise, according to the *Book of Thomas*, and these 3rd century Christians would have been eager to prove themselves "the elite" worthy to unite with God (Turner "New Link" 114).

With revelation as the emphasis of this text's first part and instructions for transformation the priority of the second portion, the *Book of Thomas* can be

understood to argue a revelatory-transformative soteriology: those elected for salvation receive Jesus' divine knowledge and if they transform their lives accordingly, they join the elite that unite with God. The community would have prioritized the knowledge revealed to Thomas and recorded in the text so that they too could join the elect. Most of these themes appeared in another text used by the community around the same time, reinforcing the ideals that the *Book of Thomas* lauds.

The Apocryphal *Acts of the Apostle Thomas*

The *Acts of the Apostle Thomas*,¹² the longest of all the Thomasine texts, possesses much of the same appeal. The book tells the story of the apostle's mission to India, where he travels from kingdom to kingdom, spreading the gospel message until his martyrdom. In the first half of the text, acts 1-8, Thomas converts a king, confronts the serpent from Eden, exorcises demons, and brings a dead woman to life, among other things. In the second half, acts 9-13, the conversion of the woman Mygdonia results in a feud between Thomas's converts and the king, Mazdai. At the end of the book, Thomas is martyred, but even in death, he heals the king's son, resulting in the conversion of Mazdai.

Current scholarly consensus places the book's origins in Syria, specifically Edessa, sometime between 180 and 230 CE (Johnson 171, Kallarangatt 5-8).

¹² *Acts of the Apostle Thomas* will be abbreviated to *Acts*.

Authorship of the text is debated; some subscribe to the opinion of St. Ephrem and St. Augustine, who attribute its authorship to Bardaisan of Edessa, (or one of his disciples) a philosopher and the first Syrian Christian theologian (“Bardaisan” 786, Kallarangatt 8, Puliurumpil “Writings of St. Ephrem” 7). Others attribute it to the Manichaens, dualists that drew influence from Bardaisan’s theological ideas. At the time of the *Acts* composition, many Christians were migrating from the Syrian Church to Manichaeism and certain persistent themes of the text, such as encratism, would have pertained to this type of congregation(s) (“Bardaisan” 787, Kallarangatt 6, Kelly 13-14, Puliurumpil “Writings of St. Ephrem” 7). The predominance of the text in conjunction with the *Book of Thomas* suggests that Edessa had “a complex collection of loosely connected groups toward the end of the 2nd century” (qtd. Hartin “Search” 1018).

Many of these conjectures can be drawn from the *Acts* alone. Patrick J. Hartin explains that by studying a composition’s linguistic form and content, its function can be deciphered (“Role and Significance” 240). Based on this method, he assesses the function of *Acts* is “not to provide a diary of the life and deeds of the apostle Thomas. Instead it intends to illuminate reader’s discipleship through a reflection on the discipleship of the apostle Thomas” (Hartin “Role and Significance” 240). Therefore, the content and writing should offer insights about the community drawing from the text.

The linguistic form, for instance, indicates what sort of audience would have used this text. The surviving *Acts* are written in Greek, but the earliest copies were most likely Syriac. It is written in popular language, for lay people and theologians

alike, with both Greek and Semitic linguistic influences (Johnson 204, Warren 114, 118, 120, 124). The accessibility of the text suggests that it was written for more egalitarian Christian populations, which would have included the Manichaens and other sects that subscribed to a gnostic soteriology, but this interpretation is incomprehensive.

Asceticism, for instance, is a primary theme in the *Acts*, just as it is in the *Book of Thomas*. Joseph Kallanrangatt observes that “[t]he author considers it as a noble and higher reality to speak of the [apostle] and he feels proud of feeling one with an apostolic community” (15). This pride is evident throughout the entirety of the *Acts*. For instance, twice in the the second act of the apostle, Thomas takes part in the Eucharist with new believers, imploring them to “share with me in this Eucharist and blessing of the Lord, and be made perfect in it” (*Acts* 26-29). For *Acts*, though, asceticism is not an optional lifestyle: it is *the* Christian lifestyle as exemplified by the apostle. Thomas chooses not to eat or drink at the wedding as he has been sent to work, not to celebrate (*Acts* 5). He is described as “continually fast[ing] and pray[ing],” even during communal meals (*Acts* 20, 29). Thomas advises abstaining not just from sex, but also from “avarice and the service of the belly” and in prayer cries, “Let not my continual prayers and fastings perish” (*Acts* 28, 145).

Of all the ascetic practices promoted in the text, absolute sexual abstinence is reinforced most. Thomas’s sermon in act 12 condemns marriage and sex, in part on the basis of children, “the end of which is destruction”:

if you get many children, then for their sakes you become robbers and

avaricious, (people who)¹³ flay orphans and defraud widows, and by so doing you subject yourselves to the most grievous punishments. For the majority of children become unprofitable [and unhealthy]¹⁴. . . Even if they are healthy, again will they be unserviceable, performing useless and abominable deeds; for they are caught either in adultery or in murder or in theft or in unchastity, and by all these you will be afflicted. (*Acts* 12).

This passage demonstrates that to some degree, abstinence is encouraged based on the argument that sex leads to children which lead to immorality. Yet the moral tests associated with children are secondary to the true sin of sex: union with anything other than Jesus. The new converts in many of these stories, before anything else, commit their sexuality to their savior. The apostle's first act is his blessing of a newly wedded couple, who receive a revelation from Jesus to remain celibate in their marriage (*Acts* 9-16). When Mygdonia converts in the ninth act, she refuses to have sex with her husband any longer (*Acts* 82-99). Tertia in the eleventh act makes the same commitment to celibacy as soon as she is converted (*Acts* 134-137). In the thirteenth act, the man Vazan is exemplified in his marriage because “before [he] was joined in marriage [he] knew no other woman... indeed [his] wife has lived with [him] in chastity during this time” (*Acts* 150). Thomas teaches:

[a]bstain then first from adultery, for of all evils this is the beginning,

¹³ Parentheses included for clear translation by Hennecke.

¹⁴ Brackets of my own insertion for the sake of summary.

<and from murder...> then also from theft... <and from intemperance... and from avarice>... <and from slander>... and from all disgraceful deeds, especially those of the body, <and from horrid intercourse and couch of uncleanness >, whose outcome is eternal condemnation.¹⁵
(*Acts* 84)

The way that Thomas begins and ends his teaching in this passage tells clearly the priorities of the community for which the book was written. The first of the evils listed is adultery, even before murder, and the final “disgraceful deed” mentioned is sexual intercourse. This passage starkly contrasts to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians that condemns “fornication,” “adulterers,” and “sodomites,” and instructs each husband to “fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband,” condemning certain forms of sexual activity, but allowing for others (1 Corinthians 6:9 and 7:1-40). Thomas condemns sex itself, regardless of marriage, as an act “whose outcome is eternal condemnation” (*Acts* 84). Encratism leaves no room for ambiguity in determining eternal salvation.

The act of physical sex and physical marriage is substituted with one’s divine marriage to Christ. This idea is exemplified in the first act when the newlywed bride and groom are visited by Jesus in the bridal chamber (*Acts* 11-13). The bride explains her new-found faith as being “bound in another marriage. And that I have had no intercourse with a short-lived husband, the end of which is [remorse and bitterness] of

¹⁵ Brackets <> are used to indicate corrections or restorations made in translation based on the Syriac text by Hennecke.

the soul, (is) because I am yoked with [the] true man”¹⁶ (*Acts* 14). When Mygdonia's husband attempts to have sex with her after her conversion, she is veiled, an act of modesty to preserve her chastity, which is a formality dropped with one's husband (*Acts* 97). The opposite happens with the new bride, though. The night after her wedding and conversion, her father finds her in the bridal chamber with her husband “sitting opposite one another, the bride with her face unveiled” (*Acts* 13). Her face is bare because she is in the bridal chamber where she was wed to her savior.

This spiritual monogamy is not just represented by the marriage relationship, but also through two other relationships: that of a master-slave relationship and that of twinship. The text begins with Thomas resisting his assignment to minister in India until Jesus sells him as a slave to an Indian merchant (*Acts* 1-2). When the merchant sees Thomas, he asks him, “Is this thy master?” to which Thomas answers, “Yes, he is my Lord” (*Acts* 2). Even after Thomas is sold, he belongs to Jesus, though, for Jesus “purchased him by death on the cross, [so] Thomas’ task is to do Jesus’ will” (Hartin “Role and Significance” 242). The apostle is identified as the “[t]win brother of Christ” and this relationship reinforces the same sort of responsibilities. The writings of St. Ephrem, whose hymns referenced the *Acts* frequently, establish a Syrian understanding of twinship associated with activity and behavior (Hartin “Role and Significance” 248). Thomas, who even resembles Jesus physically, “shares in Jesus’ work of salvation;” he is Jesus’ earthly representation on earth (*Acts* 11, 34, 39, Hartin “Role and

¹⁶ Brackets [] indicate a conjecture or emendation. (Included in Hennecke’s translation.)

Significance” 246).¹⁷

The emphasis on relationship for the readers of the *Acts* is perhaps the most telling of how they interpreted their own Christianity. Both in marriage and in twinship, there is a sense of unity and oneness, that a Christian should be one with Christ. Thomas is Jesus, except Jesus has transcended to a higher realm and Thomas is his image on earth; Jesus is Thomas’s “true self, the heavenly image or counterpart with whom the self will be reunited after death” (Hartin “Role and Significance” 250). The goal for a Christian then, according to the text, is to unite with one’s “true self,” rejecting union with the corrupted other and favoring a sort of spiritual endogamy, where one marries within the self.

From the marriage metaphor, the conceptual progression leads to the consummation of that marriage, euphemistically termed in Biblical language as “knowing” one’s spouse. One need not overextend to make the leap from marrying the self to knowing the self, which is why encratism and gnosis parallel one another throughout the Mediterranean Thomasine traditions. Emphasis on knowledge and truth saturate the *Acts*. The apostle declares, “[f]or thou alone art the God of truth, and no other; and thou art he who knows all that is unknown to the many” (*Acts* 25). When baptizing in the second act, Thomas sings “Come, thou that dost reveal the hidden mysteries” (*Acts* 27). Jesus is described as “the Son of Truth” and the Father is

¹⁷ Hartin’s article takes this theme further to establish a theological component of heavenly counterparts in twinship. For more on twinship and mirror images, see both “The Character of Thomas in the *Acts of the Apostle Thomas*” and Hartin’s “The Search for the True Self in the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Book of Thomas*, and the *Hymn of the Pearl*.”

described as “the God of truth [*sic*]” (*Acts* 34, 39). An ass refers to Thomas as “apostle of the Most High and fellow-initiate into the hidden word of Christ, who dost receive his secret sayings” (*Acts* 39). Mygdonia explains Jesus as “he who seeks out those imprisoned in ignorance, and delivers those held fast in error” (*Acts* 98). Mygdonia’s willingness to endure imprisonment for her newfound faith, attests to her values: remaining “imprisoned in ignorance” is far more dreadful to her than the physical body being caged.

In her discussion of the *Gospel of Thomas*, Marjanen emphasizes that “it is not actually Jesus whom the elect [Thomas Christians] are supposed to know. . . Instead, it is crucial for the disciples of Jesus to find the knowledge of themselves” (214).

However, the true selves that Thomas Christians are supposed to “know” are their Christ-selves. Salvation, according to the *Acts*, is all about unity. Sacraments like the eucharist symbolize the physical union with that self, the self that must then embody the life deeds and message of the gospel. Upon death, if one be so privileged to not just live like Christ, but suffer like Christ as well, may those believers cry out like Thomas to his twin, his spouse, his emancipator:

My Lord and my God, and hope and redeemer and leader and guide in
all the lands, be thou with all who serve thee, and lead me today, since I
come to thee! Let none take my soul, which I have committed unto
thee. . . Lord, I have fulfilled thy work and accomplished thy command.
I have become a slave; therefore today I receive freedom. Do thou

now give it to me <completely>! But this I say not as one doubting, but that they may hear who ought to hear. (*Acts* 167)

At the conclusion of such a saga, those “who ought to hear” would have heard a message to celebrate their inevitable death, to reject and not contribute to the physical world, and use their remaining time alive enacting the work of Jesus, by guiding others to knowledge of him.

The soteriology asserted in the *Acts*, therefore, is not exclusively gnostic. Instead, it may more accurately be described as revelatory-transformative: only through revealed knowledge of the divine self within and the subsequent adoption of a cruciform life procures salvation.¹⁸ A new convert may partake in the eucharist as a physical demonstration of uniting with Jesus, but it is through imitation that one transforms into their Christ-self, and it is the Christ-self that the ideal members of the Syrian Christian communities would have striven to be.

The combination of two texts to form the *Book of Thomas* attests to this soteriology as well. With Section A concentrating on the revelation of Jesus to Thomas and Section B discussing the details of what it means to live a cruciform life, the communities reading these texts would have had two books with distinctive rhetorical structures communicating similar messages and esteeming many of the same ideals: encratic asceticism, spiritual monogamy, self-knowledge, and unity with the divine.

¹⁸ I use the word “revelatory” as opposed to “gnostic,” though the emphasis on revealed knowledge and truth are consistent for both terms. My hesitation to label the soteriology as “gnostic” in this case is the anachronistic cultural connotations that have come to be associated with it.

Despite the fact that *Acts* sets Thomas's ministry of this theology in India, these values are not found in any evidence we have of ancient Indian Christianity. On the other hand, the writer of *Acts* was likely aware of a Christian presence in India at the time of composition, suggesting that the Mediterranean Thomas Christians had some connection with India. Whether it was as early as late-2nd/early-3rd century, however, remains a point of contention in Thomas scholarship.

Thomas in India

Surprisingly to many readers, Thomas's impact on Christianity in India was more substantial than it was in the Mediterranean, at least from the standpoint of longevity. While the Thomasine texts were smothered into near insignificance after Athanasius's condemnation of certain "heretical" texts in 367 CE,¹⁹ a Thomas tradition survives in India to this day and appears to have a history deep in antiquity. Understanding India's Thomasine traditions, however, requires a vastly different approach than that taken to discern Thomas in the Mediterranean. Whereas the only remaining evidence of Thomas communities in Rome lies in the texts of heresiologists or those discovered at places like Nag Hammadi, India provides almost no texts whatsoever: the only texts we can reference are Syrian ones that allude to India. Thomas's tradition has instead survived through oral tradition, so the methods used to

¹⁹ See Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter for his proposal of the canon.

understand it cannot derive from hermeneutics and instead rely on accounts from the St. Thomas Christians, Syrian references to Thomas in India, the Portuguese colonizers, and sparse archaeological findings.

There is no consensus as to how and when the Thomas tradition began in India. The *Acts of the Apostle Thomas* dates the arrival to the middle of the 1st century CE, but its fantastic accounts make it historically unreliable and the text remains ambiguous on geography. Scholars have taken a few different positions on the Thomas tradition's nature of origin in India: either the apostle himself really did establish the first churches on the subcontinent, the Syrian immigrants brought Christianity to India along and superimposed their own tradition of Thomas's journey to India upon the place they settled a few centuries later, or that India had no concept of Thomas as a part of their history until the Portuguese arrived (Rao 139). In light of the Portuguese's relative ignorance of St. Thomas traditions in Syria, or even in the *Acts*, this claim is not well-supported (Moolan 28). As will become evident with deeper investigation into the South Indian Thomas tradition, the Portuguese spent a substantial amount of time trying to reconcile the tradition they gathered from Keralans with the Syrian Thomas tradition, with which they were unfamiliar until a decade after excavating what they thought was Thomas's tomb. Any assertion that the Portuguese planted the idea of Thomas's ministry to India results from later redaction.

More plausible is the theory that the arrival of Syrian merchants in the late 4th century brought the Thomas tradition with them, as two sea trade routes to India were

heavily used: one through Syria and the Persian Gulf, the other via Egypt and the Red Sea (Kurian 90). With the pre-existing Syrian tradition that Thomas ministered in India, coupled with the fact that the earliest archaeological evidence of Indian Christianity dated at 372 CE, it is feasible that Syria's immigrants brought the tradition with them early in antiquity (Kurian 92, Rao 141). The Roman trade routes 4th century merchants would have used to get to India, however, were also active in the 1st century; as a result, many scholars argue for the tradition that the apostle Thomas himself traveled to India and have consulted the limited evidence to build a case for that (Kurian 90). Even among those that believe in Thomas himself, there is contention over details.

Correlations between the apocryphal *Acts* and archaeological evidence have led some scholars to place Thomas in Northern India sometime in the middle of the 1st century. Others argue for his arrival in South India in 52 CE, based upon oral tradition, songs, sacred places, and knowledge of Rome's trading relationship during the 1st century. Regardless of how it arrived, Christianity itself had a foothold in the subcontinent well before the arrival of colonialism and evidence suggests that the Thomas mythos was there as well.

The Western or Northwest Indian tradition holds that Thomas arrived by sea with an Indian trader to King Gundaphar, whose reign allegedly extended parts of India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Punjab (Puliurumpil "North Indian Mission" 17). As the story in *Acts* goes, the king hires Thomas to build him a palace and the apostle gives all the funds for the project to the poor, building the king a palace that Gundaphar may see

“when thou dost depart this life” (*Acts* 21). Infuriated, Gundaphar who throws him in prison and decides to have him flayed and burned alive. That night his brother, Gad, dies, goes to heaven, and sees the palace Thomas built for Gundaphar. He returns from the afterlife just long enough to request an apartment in the heavenly palace and both men repent (*Acts* 17-29). This story supposedly takes place in Taxila, (modern day Pakistan) where Gundaphar would have reigned (Puliurumpil “North Indian Mission” 17).

The Northwest India hypothesis has very little archaeological support; the region’s long history of invasion would have likely destroyed any cities or significant places of worship, as seems to be the case with many lost traditions in the region. Taxila alone has been subject to numerous invasions throughout history and if there were any Christian places of worship there, they were destroyed (Puliurumpil “North Indian Mission” 19). As a result of insufficient evidence, scholarship largely ignored *Acts of Thomas* as a document of historical merit until the discovery of coins in 1834 bearing the names Gadapharna, Gondaphara, Gondaphorasa, Gondaphorus, Gudaphara, Gudapharnasa, and Gudapharasa, “different forms of the same (?) name” or the same two names, as *Acts* mentions both Gundaphar as well as Gad (Placid 242, Puliurumpil “North Indian Mission” 19). The coins also date Gundaphar’s death in 51 CE. Combined with a discovery in 1872 of a document associated with Gundaphar, dating at 46 CE, there is confirmation that this king was at least a contemporary of the apostle (Puliurumpil “North Indian Mission 19).

Although *Acts of Thomas* is still regarded as an embellishment of anything historical, it has now received more attention from scholars endeavoring to read between the lines. Regarding the historical references in *Acts* to an empire that collapsed 130 to 180 years prior to the text, Kallarangatt surmises that the author “must have found in Edessa a written document which contained the facts in question—a document which must have been contemporaneous or almost contemporaneous with the facts” (11). James Puliurumpil argues for the presence of the apostle in Gundaphar’s kingdom based on the archaeological find and the depiction in *Acts*. This opinion aside, he makes a compelling point regarding the writing of the book: “From a deep study it is clear that Gundaphar of Taxila is the king of Acts of Thomas. During that time there should have Christians [*sic*] in the kingdom of Gundaphar . . . This presence of the Christians must have been a reason for the author to connect these places with the story of Thomas” (“North Indian Mission” 20). With Syrian Christians being more familiar with Northwest India and the author clearly knowledgeable enough in history to identify Gundaphar from two centuries before, there is reason to believe that a Christian community in North India was known to Syria , possibly during Gundaphar’s reign and Thomas’s lifetime, possibly later.

Other than the inferences scholars can make between archaeological finds and the contents of the *Acts*, Christianity has no evidence for existing in Northwest India prior to colonization. If there was a Thomas tradition there, the only knowledge we would have of it would be from the *Acts*, which should only be read skeptically. One

theme from this chapter of *Acts*, though, deserves note: the emphasis on charity to the poor and needy. When Thomas redistributes the king's money to the poor, people report to the king that:

Neither has he built a palace or done anything else of what he has promised to do, but he goes about the towns and villages, and if he has anything he gives it all to the poor, and he teaches a new God . . . his works of compassion, and the healings which are wrought by him without reward . . . and the quality of his faith, show that he is righteous or an apostle of the new God whom he preaches. (*Acts* 453)

Salvation in this story is associated here with practical redemption of those in poverty, a preoccupation that scholar V. V. Thomas feels needs to be emphasized in distinguishing the Western/Northwestern Indian Thomas tradition. "It is rare that we speak about this imitation by Thomas of Jesus in his table-fellowship with the outcastes and untouchables, his partiality for the poor, and in his understanding of his mission as good news to the poor and dispossessed," (Thomas 19-20). Considering the social stratification of India at the time, the significance of saving the disadvantaged, both spiritually and practically, would have been a huge draw for converts.²⁰ This reasoning allows for sensible speculation on the tradition that may have existed for a short time in

²⁰ We see this pattern in the massive conversion of the lower castes to Christianity with British missionizing during the colonial era. Churches from the European tradition offered equality and opportunities for low caste converts that they could not find elsewhere, such as education and employment: "When they embraced Christianity and ceased to be Hindus, they were no longer governed by caste rules and treated as untouchables"; at least, this idea was the hope upon conversion (Alexander 553).

Northwest India, but ultimately, it is only that: a speculation that perhaps should be attributed more to the Thomasine tradition in Syria that we know existed rather than a hypothetical Northwest Indian Thomas tradition.

Most scholars interested in the Northwest Indian hypothesis prioritize the existence of a Thomas community in the region rather than guessing at the nature of it. Their goal revolves around Thomas's journey as it relates to the *Acts*. Because the book states that after Gundaphar's conversion Thomas travels by land to Mazdai (the setting for the second half of *Acts of Thomas*), some scholars inclined toward the Western tradition assert that Mazdai was located somewhere else in Northwest India and have excluded South India as a possible place of Thomas's travels (Placid 243). Yet Fr. Placid argues that there is not enough evidence in the book to affirm or deny the Northwest Indian mission in conjunction with a South Indian one: "There is nothing in the Acts from which one may conclude that the kingdom of Mazdai was not in South India. The Acts do not make any distinction between North and South India . . . Location of incidents mentioned in the Acts is rendered difficult by the geographical vagueness and the romantic character of the Acts themselves" (Placid 243). In fact, though Syria produced the *Acts* and was far more familiar with Northwest India, they never sought out the apostle's tomb there; instead, they venerate the tomb in South India (Placid 243). Puliurumpil augments that argument and asserts that both journeys occurred, the voyage beginning in 48 CE to Northwest India and Thomas arriving in South India in 52 CE by a trade route across land ("North Indian Mission" 15, 19,

Placid 230).

With such overwhelming evidence of ancient South Indian Christianity compared to the guesswork needed to consider Northwest India, it is of no surprise that many are unwilling to reject the South Indian hypothesis. According to South Indian tradition, which is believed to have originated in India, Christianity arrived by sea at or near Cranganore in Kerala in 52 CE with Thomas (Fernando 59, Kurian 91, Rao 139, Thomas 18, Mundadan “Traditions” 5). There he met a group of Brahmins drawing water in Palayur while reciting their prayers and asked them to prove their religion by suspending the water in mid-air. When they failed, he did what they could not and instantly they converted (Placid 232, Thomas 18). Supposedly, the first church established was the Malankara Church, named for the island of its location. From there he continued to establish seven other churches along Kerala’s Malabar coast, ministered in China, and returned to India where he was eventually martyred (Kurian 91, Thomas 18). Confirmation and refutation of this tradition is still largely dependent upon guesswork; for instance, whether the caste system had reached Kerala by the middle of the 1st century is unknown (Leonard 62). Regardless, South India provides far more evidence with which to work, because the Thomas tradition still survives in this region.

No documentation or explicit mention of the Malankara coast exists in the *Acts*; however, *The Doctrine of the Apostles*, a contemporary of the *Acts*, states “India and all its (own) countries, and those bordering even to the farthest sea, received the

Apostle's Hand of Priesthood from Judas Thomas, who was guide and ruler of the church he built and ministered (to) there..." (qtd. McLees 53, qtd. Placid 241). This passage is taken by some as a suggestion that Syria recognized Thomas's ministry extending to the south. Additionally, the seven original churches of Kerala were established at known trading centers in the region, ports that were frequently used for sea trade, though there were also well-used land-trade routes to South India from north and north-western regions of the subcontinent (Kurian 91, Placid 230).

There is also definitive evidence of Christian presence in Kerala as early as the 4th century (Rao 139-141). Four copper plates, dating at 372 CE, 774 CE, and, the last two, 849 CE detail recognition of Syrian Christian groups by the Hindus. The plates include information about the economic, social, and religious privileges granted to the community, recognizing the recipients as "a merchant guild" (Kurian 90-92, Rao 141). The first of these plates was granted to Thomas of Cana, a trader that migrated from Persia to Kerala (Fernando 61, Kurian 92, Rao 141). Thomas of Cana is credited with converting Cranganore to Christianity, bringing "bishops and priests from Syria to take care of the spiritual welfare of the people," and, if one believes Keralan Christianity predated him, brought Syrian Christianity and Keralan Christianity into conversation (Fernando 61, Leonard 63). The Syrians introduced Kerala to Syriac liturgy.

Christians in South India came to be called, and are still referred to as, "Syrian Christians," despite their wholly Indian identity and the fact that their connection with the Syrian Church was weak at best, ultimately secondary to the influences of culture in

Kerala than on church doctrine (Fernando 61, Kurian 91).²¹

Scholars arguing for Christianity's arrival before Thomas of Cana (and specifically for the arrival of the apostle) cite genealogies, oral traditions, songs, and sacred places as evidence. Throughout Malabar one can find Brahmin-Christian families with lineage traced all the way back to the moment in Palayur when Thomas converted the praying Brahmins (Placid 232-233). The title of Arch Deacon in the Malankara Church is inherited by the Pakalomattom family, who claim this lineage (Kurian 91-92). Some priests "call themselves the 40th, 48th, 80th, priests in their respective families, the supposition and belief being that the first ones were ordained by Thomas" (Placid 234). Even into the 20th century, the Palayur region was recognized by Hindu-Brahmins, who named the place as a "cursed forest" because of Thomas's "magical powers," as a place not to eat, drink, or take ablutions because of the happenings carried down through the oral tradition (Placid 232-233).

Oral traditions like this one remain strong in Kerala. A chapel stands on the island of Pallipuram because that ground was the landing place of a cross supposedly touched by St. Thomas after it was thrown into the water by enemies of the Christians (Placid 233). A mountain in Malayattur is venerated because Thomas is said to have prayed there and left the sign of the cross on a rock. These stories are acknowledged by Hindus and Christians alike, expressed in lore, song, and, on rare occasions, the

²¹ Although Christians in Kerala are referred to interchangeably as "Syrian Christians" and "St. Thomas Christians," for the purposes of clarity between groups and geography (and to recognize the distinct identity that Keralan Christianity holds apart from its Syrian affiliation) this paper will refer to Christians in South India as "St. Thomas Christians" and not "Syrian Christians."

written word (Placid 234).

One song, called the “Song of Thoma Rabban” is one passed down in one of the original Thomas converts. Though the current form of the text dates around 1601, it is believed that the original form of the song comes from much earlier; the lore attributes the original writing to a disciple once or twice removed from the original Brahmin converts (Placid 233, 235). In summary, it tells how Thomas landed in Cranganore in 50 CE and was paid by a Chola king to build a palace, the same story that is claimed by the Western tradition for Northwest India, but taking place in the South. The songs deviate from the *Acts*, setting his martyrdom on a small mount near Mylapur, where he was stabbed by Hindus with a spear on July 3rd, 72 CE for refusing to worship Kali (Fernando 59, Moolan 22-23, Placid 235). In the *Acts*, Thomas is martyred by King Mazdai when his teachings result in her vow to marital abstinence, which some speculate as an ending born from a Syrian encratic agenda (McLees 49-50).

This distinction in the martyrdom tradition is not merely separated between east and west: even in South India, two separate traditions have developed. The Chaldeo-Malabar tradition has songs, folklore, and written annals that disagree on the nature of his death, one story depicting him being accidentally killed by hunters, all the others stating it as a deliberate martyrdom. The right arm of the apostle also has a story associated with it: it refused to be buried with the rest of the body and became an auspicious custom for people to kiss the hand of Thomas. Different stories maintain different account of what happened to the hand. Supposedly, the arm withdrew into the

ground when the Christians of the area were driven out by enemy kings or when a Moghul king attempted to cut it off (Mundadan "Traditions" 16). Mylapore has its own martyrdom tradition associated with Thomas, delivered orally throughout the generations. While his death is understood to be the plotted murder of jealous Brahmins who thrust a lance through him, the location of his body is under dispute. Christians in India told the Portuguese that Thomas's body was never removed from his grave (Mundadan "Traditions" 18).

Though the Portuguese believed the relics of St. Thomas to be in India upon their arrival, tradition in Syria had a different story, predating the Portuguese by over a millenium (Mundadan "Traditions" 20). The *Acts* claims that although the apostle was buried in India after his martyrdom, one of "the brethren" had taken the body back to the West; because there were no bones to be found by King Mazdai, who was responsible for his execution, it can be inferred that the entire body was removed (*Acts* 170). In St. Ephrem's 42nd hymn, the relics of Thomas are said to be moved to Edessa by a merchant (Pulurumpil "Writings of St. Ephrem" 5). Ephrem, Syrian and born at the beginning of the 4th century and died June 9, 373 CE, was familiar with *Acts of Thomas* as indicated by numerous references he makes to the book in other hymns, including a suggestion in the "Madrasha II" implying that King Mazdai constructed a shrine over the empty burial place of the martyred apostle (Mundadan "Traditions" 9, Pulurumpil "Writings of St. Ephrem" 9-11).²² The travel writings of the

²² One should note that despite Ephrem's obvious familiarity with the *Acts* as well as the overlap between them and the content of his hymns, he disdained the teachings of Bardaisan, who he

pilgrim Egeria, whose diary provides scholars a perspective on Christian custom the Holy Land between 381-384 CE when she travelled, reference the shrine of St. Thomas in Syria: “In the name of Christ our God we arrived safely at Edessa. On arriving there we visited without delay the church and the martyrrium of Saint Thomas” (qtd. McLees 51; qtd. Moolan 28). The account goes on to explain her performing devotion and reading passages from the *Acts* at the shrine (McLees 51). St. Jerome alluded to Thomas’s ministry to India in the late 4th-early 5th century when he wrote, “Christ lives everywhere, with Thomas in India and with Peter in Rome” (qtd. Fernando 59). By 593, Gregory of Tours stated that Thomas “suffered in ‘India’, that his remains were removed to Edessa, and that in ‘India’ where they rested ‘stand a monastery and a church’” (Placid 237; Mundadan "Traditions" 9).

The Churches in Syria also marked August 22, 394 CE as the auspicious date of the relic transfer (Puliurumpil “North Indian Mission” 9). Though they recognized, like the Chaldeo-Malabar and Mylapore traditions, July 3rd as the day the apostle “was pierced with a lance in India” just as the Malankara Church did (the sharing of language, liturgy, and mercantile interest between the Syrian merchants and St. Thomas Christians in Kerala suggests Syria and South India may have also shared lore in antiquity), Syria claimed to possess the complete relics of the apostle Thomas (Moolan 28, Kurian 91).

The Portuguese believed they found Thomas when they excavated the tomb in 1523, finding a “(1) some bones in a very decayed state, (2) a piece of iron and a piece

believed to have written the *Acts* (Kallarangatt 8, Puliurumpil “Writings of St. Ephrem 7). This discrepancy suggests to us that even within the tradition of Thomas, there were theological splits.

of wood (imagined by the Portuguese as the parts of the lance which had pierced the body of St. Thomas and killed him), (3) an earthen vessel (*kalam*) filled with earth”; but once the Syrian tradition’s claim that the relics had been transferred came to light in 1533, the Portuguese had two relic stories to reconcile (Mundadan "Traditions" 14, 20; Moolan 26-27). When confronted with the story from the west, the Mylapore Christians responded to the Portuguese that “[i]t was true that in olden times people came from Armenia asking for the body of the Apostle, but the people of the place gave them the body of a disciple of the Apostle and thus deceived them” (Mundadan "Traditions" 18). Unwilling to choose one story over the other, they adopted a compromising theory---that *some*, but not *all* of the relics had been moved to Edessa. Scholars like Rev. Prof. John Moolan and A. M. Mundadan agree with this interpretation (“Cultural Communication” 27-29; 21). According to Mundadan:

From the way the Portuguese describe the relics it would appear that they discovered the entire skeleton. But this, I think, should rather be attributed to their imagination than to the true findings for the following reasons: (1) It is repeatedly asserted that the bones were very decayed and were crumbling pieces; (2) a box measuring one span in length and half a span in height proved too large for the whole of the relics.

(“Cultural Communication 14)

Because there would be no way to contain an entire body’s worth of relics in such a small container (a span being the width of a human hand from thumb tip to little finger

tip), some hold the same position that the Portuguese settled on in the 16th century.

Some scholars argue against the integrity of the tomb's alleged history.

Thomas-skeptic T. K. Joseph favors the theory that the tomb was actually the burial site of a Muslim holy man, supporting this theory by the North-South direction of the tomb (not an auspicious direction for either Hindus, Jews, or Christians) and that Muslims had claim over the tomb when it was excavated for the first time (Mundadan "Traditions" 8). While the argument for auspicious cardinal directions is valid considering India's history with *vastu* being incorporated in temple and tomb architecture for thousands of years, exceptions to religious convention in architecture have been found in places like Khajuraho, where the Chaturbhuj temple faces west, unlike every other temples that faces east, according to the conventions of Hindu architecture.²³ While Christian church architecture in Kerala was certainly influenced by *pagodas*, the pyramidal temples built by Hindu, Jain, and other local religious communities, there is no strong evidence that the principles of *vastu* were treated as strictly by Thomasine Christians as they would have been by Hindus and other religious groups in the area (Rao 142, Mundadan "Traditions" 8). Additionally, the tomb predates Islam. The size and dimensions of the bricks are identical to those used in Arikamedu in 50 CE, a construction technique abandoned by the 2nd century (Moolan 26).

The problem posed by a Muslim keeping the tomb is not really a problem at all either: it is a very Euro-centric argument that a Muslim would never revere the site of a

²³ Knowledge of *vastu* and religious architecture conglomerated from lectures given by Dr. Mary Storm, including on-site lecture at the Chaturbhuj in Khajuraho.

Christian holy man. In Kerala, pluralism²⁴ has been the norm for centuries.

Contemporary examples of interfaith holy figures can be seen in much of Corinne Dempsey's work on Kerala. In her article "Lessons and Miracles from Kerala, South India," she talks about three Keralan "saints"---one a Jew, one a magic-user, and one a Catholic nun renowned for healing a Muslim boy---who are visited, worshiped, and prayed to by Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Jains.

Pluralism is hardly a new phenomenon in Kerala, so arguing against the tomb's authenticity because of Muslim presence is insufficient. Because of their formidable presence as an economic force in Kerala, ancient St. Thomas Christians could not be ignored by the Hindu culture surrounding them. The plate granted to the Syrian Christians in the 4th century indicates their presence as an economic force in Kerala, to the degree that St. Thomas Christians could not be ignored by the surrounding Hindu culture (Rao 141). According to S. N. Rao, "Thomas Cana was assimilated into the dynasty of the dominant clan as a chieftan---The Christian church was recognised equivalent to a Brahmin temple---The Saint Thomas Christians enjoyed the status equivalent to that of the groups holding the highest places in the hierarchy of the time" (141). Specifically, the St. Thomas Christians appeared to hold a place in society roughly equivalent to the Nairs, the landowners of the caste system, (Kariyil 29, Kurian 94). It appears that at the time in Kerala, there was no present Vaisya caste, that would have been charged with management of trade and commerce, so the economic activity

²⁴ Pluralism in Kerala ranges between "theological pluralism" and "cooperative/practical pluralism." For more on pluralism in Kerala, see sources by Corinne Dempsey cited above.

of the Christians was mutually beneficial to the Hindu community (Leonard 62, Mundadan “Cultural Communication” 248). They engaged with a bulk market of the Keralan foreign trade: salt, sugar, oil, and spices like pepper, ginger, turmeric, cardamom, and cinnamon (Kurian 90-92, Rao 141). Even when a substantial Brahmin group arrived in Kerala in the 8th century, the Christians, who were not inclined toward proselytizing and who provided military services and money to the Hindu kings, were not a threat to the newcomers (Amaladas 22, Chandran 128, Leonard 62, Rao 141-143).

These Brahmins did, however, reinforce the caste system in the community, which adjusted some customs in the St. Thomas Christian Church (Rao 142). The churches adopted “rites of passage” from the Nambudiri Brahmin caste, the indigenous Brahmins who adhered to strict purity codes (Kariyil 29, Rao 145). They maintained their status within the Hindu society by adhering to these codes, resulting in separate churches for Pulaya and Paraya Christians, who held the lowest social status in the community (Chandran 128-129).

Other institutional aspects migrated from Hinduism into early Keralan Christianity. In fact, Hinduism incorporated itself so thoroughly into the customs of the early St. Thomas Christians that they are described as “Christians of Mesopotamia in faith and worship and ethic but... Indians in all else” or “Hindu in culture, Christian in faith, and Syrian in worship” (Amaladas 16, Kurian 93, Rao 142). Like Hinduism, it had no interest in proselytization and “seems to have remained a relatively small, isolated

community content to live in fellowship with other religious traditions while keeping its faith in Jesus Christ as a distinctive social mark. Like other Eastern and Oriental churches it tended to be ethnic, confined to the Kerala community” (Fernando, 65). Regarding spiritual consciousness, monasticism was present also present in early Keralan Christianity, speculatively in an Indian ashram style (Amaladass 20). The church administration modeled the assembly (*yogam*) structure of Hindu temples (Amaladass 16, Leonard 63). In addition to adhering to their caste-appropriate purity codes, diet, etc., they placed and illuminated crosses outside the churches as the Hindus used “huge brass or granite lamps” to light the main gates of the temples (Amaladass 16, Rao 142). They celebrated feasts with “flag hoisting, use of musical instruments, use of umbrellas and torches” and even celebrated Hindu festivities for *Onam* by participating in mock fighting for the harvest (Amaladass 16, Mundadan “Cultural Communication” 250, Rao 142). Ceremonies for the dead that involve “ritual washing of corpses of the dead, ritual baths of the relative of the dead” were adopted by the church (Mundadan “Cultural Communication” 249).

Rituals were so closely related between the religious communities that Nairs were buried in Christian churches and marriage between members of different communities was acceptable until the arrival of the Portuguese, specifically the Synod of Diamper in 1599 (Kurian 94, Mundadan “Cultural Communication” 246). Pre-Portuguese marriage rituals also differed greatly from other church traditions, such as the custom in the East Syrian churches that used a wedding ring (Rao 142). St.

Thomas Christians used, and still use, a thread taken from a swatch of cloth and cut, called a *thali*, for wedding ceremonies. They also ritually bath after four days of marriage before the couple may reenter the church (Amaladass 16, Mundadan “Cultural Communication” 249, Rao 142).

Between the archaeology, lore, and the surviving traditions in South India, a few conclusions can be drawn about the South Indian Thomas tradition prior to the 9th century. First, it had a long history of pluralism due to its economic cooperation with other religious traditions in the area. Second, that they held a very specific socio-economic role in Kerala as a Christian community. Third, that the influence of Kerala’s native religions on Christianity extended not only to rituals or economic role in interreligious community, but also to the hierarchical system of the church itself. Unlike the Northwest Indian Thomas tradition (or Syrian tradition, if you prefer), current understanding of ancient South Indian Christianity shows not just a deemphasized approach to salvation and charity for the dispossessed, but an exclusivist position toward them that V. V. Thomas considers a significant problem for their claim as founded by Thomas, whose ministry according to the Northwest Indian tradition was based entirely on lifting the disenfranchised:

Looking at this background of Thomas, one can raise questions about the claim that the St. Thomas Christians make. While not completely rejecting their claims, I do want to say that this definitely has some deep implications for Indian Church history to this day. This very

understanding has kept St. Thomas Christians as a closed community and as a result they did not go down to the level of the low caste people in those days, nor to the so-called untouchables with whom the high caste Hindus would have nothing to do. (20)

V. V. Thomas concedes that a burgeoning community of Christians in a Hindu society may not have had much choice regarding exclusivism, as inclusion of low-caste individuals would have jeopardized their economic privileges (20). Perhaps the community's adaptation to its socio-economic environment ensured the tradition's survival. If the hypothetical church in Northwest India did not vanish due to invasion, it easily could have dissolved because of its low-caste base, since they would not have had the resources to maintain a church without any influence on the surrounding non-Christian community. The Christians of South India claim their history began with the conversion of Brahmin families, giving them automatic advantages in establishing a lasting tradition.

Finally, it must be noted that though the South Indian Thomas tradition appears incompatible with the Northwest Indian tradition assumed by the story in the *Acts*, the *Acts* themselves switch the focus of Thomas's ministry from the needy and abject to the wealthy and royal. The entire second half of the *Acts*, beginning with Mygdonia's conversion, ending with Thomas's martyrdom and King Mazdai's conversion, tells of Thomas's ministry to society's upper echelon. So even if Thomas's Christianity manifested very differently between North and South India, the two traditions are not

necessarily incompatible with one another, especially if those traditions are being interpreted through the lens of *Acts of the Apostle Thomas*.

Conclusions

April DeConick's *Kernel Gospel of Thomas* testifies to the less doctrine-oriented message of early Christian missionaries. The emphasis on immediate transformation and commitment to Jesus was the priority of these missionaries, with details of practical application to be embellished either in the context of the sermon or in letters responding to later question, like what we see in the Pauline epistles. DeConick's *Kernel Gospel* outlines a sermon that was probably common to missionaries of the early church, an outline of salvific necessities with clarifications left to the judgment of the speaker ("On the Brink" 239).

Assuming the premise that the apostle Thomas or a contemporary of his arrived in India as compelling evidence suggests, quite possibly a sermon quite similar to the *Kernel Gospel* was the message heard by the first Indian converts; however, with so few teachers from the Mediterranean, Indian culture would likely have revised and repressed the less complementary themes of the early Christian message within a matter of generations. Themes like eschatological urgency became more difficult to impart even to a Mediterranean Christian audience as more generations passed without witnessing "[t]he heavens and the earth roll up in [their] presence," which would have also made the imminent kingdom at the end of the *Kernel Gospel* not seem so imminent

(*Gospel* 111: 1). Matters of persecution and final Judgment in “eschatological challenges of discipleship” also seem to have fallen to the wayside. Additionally, “exclusive commitment to Jesus” did not survive in the Hindu world as it did in the Roman world. Despite similar polytheistic competition, Christianity in the Mediterranean stemmed from an exclusively monotheistic tradition that thrived at the time and in the place of its development. Christianity developing in India had no other monotheistic model to look to other than a small Jewish population until an influx of Muslim immigration to Kerala in the 10th century (Kurian 95). By the time that occurred, Indian Christianity had imported most local Hindu customs, including celebrations for Hindu gods (Mundadan “Cultural Communication” 250). Commitment to Jesus was never dropped, but amended from an “exclusive” commitment to a “primary” commitment.

Yet Christianity, in one form or another, stuck. As Thomas Aykara and John B. Chethimattam opine, the apostle would not have met the challenges faced by missionaries in the Greek, Roman, and Jewish world:

St. Paul had to fight the Judaisers on the one hand and the highly developed philosophical ideas of the Greeks on the other. Against the Jews he had to show how Christ’s salvific work marked a complete break with the legalistic approach of Judaic religion while against the Greeks he had to show that the Cross of Christ which was foolishness for them was God’s wisdom . . . In India St. Thomas did not have any

such special challenges to meet . . . the only obstacle he would encounter [there] would be a jealous attachment to tradition even in its least details. (63)

Aykara and Chethimattam ascribe this “jealous attachment” to the Jewish community in Kerala that Thomas likely would have sought after upon arrival, but they underestimate the powerful attachment that Indians would have to their own traditions even after conversion. Though “the only obstacle,” local tradition would be the primary culprit for the original sermons’ redaction and reduction. Still, certain elements of Christianity were conducive to Keralan culture.

If nothing else in the original sermons to Indian converts survived, the revelatory-transformative soteriology remained consistent. DeConick’s *Kernel Gospel* emphasizes Jesus’ desire for the hearer to seek his revealed truth and urges immediate transformation, although Valantasis reminds us the method of transformation does not appear to be the priority (DeConick “Early Christian Speech” 117-118, Valantasis 63). The Mediterranean Thomas traditions and the Indian Thomas traditions attest to this soteriological foundation through their common flexibility in doctrine and common preoccupation with spiritual elitism in conjunction with practiced sacraments like the Eucharist.²⁵

Both of these soteriological themes developed in radically different ways as the geographically separate communities developed. In the Mediterranean, Thomas

²⁵ The Eucharist is demonstrative of transformative soteriology as outlined by April DeConick in “How We Talk About Christology Matters.”

traditions became preoccupied with revealed truth, where spiritual authority could come from anyone and elitism was determined by those possessing knowledge, not unlike the surrounding Greek and Roman culture that venerated knowledge and those with it. By the time the *Book of Thomas* and the *Acts* were written, the revelation within the Thomasine churches dealt with not just the urgency of transformation, but also the manner of that transformation, specifically in the form of encratic asceticism.

These soteriological themes brought to India materialized in different ways. With an initial message of urgency to transform without much doctrine to determine how, a fleeting time-period of exposure to a teacher (for Thomas legend gives him a maximum of twenty years' ministry in India), and no other prominent monotheistic communities to hold them accountable, India's earliest Christians would have looked to the surrounding religious cultures to understand how to transform their lives spiritually. With revelation already emphasized in the surrounding Buddhist and Vedic traditions, receiving the doctrine directly from the divine would be hardly unfamiliar; neither would spiritual elitism, which would manifest differently than the Mediterranean Thomasine traditions. In contrast to authority and elitism in the west, driven primarily by thinkers and ideas, Indian Christianity appropriated the culture's pre-existing system of elitism in the form of the caste system, although the North Indian hypothesis potentially allows for a socially egalitarian presence in Thomas's Indian Thomas legacy.

Egalitarian or otherwise, Thomas came to represent a spiritual authority for communities bearing his name in both regions. The Mediterranean traditions claimed

Thomas for themselves as the disciple who truly knew Jesus in a more revelatory sense, whereas the Indian traditions declared him for themselves as the disciple who knew Jesus practically. More importantly, in both traditions he became an emblem of certainty: in one case, a model of immediate transformation in Jesus, the doubting disciple reformed into Jesus' mirror/twin image on earth and recipient of his divine knowledge; in the other case, a testament to the South Indian churches' apostolic authority. Thomas's final prayer aspired to leave a legacy not of doubt, but of certainty—a legacy that for centuries reached across continents, but one we are still recovering today.

Glossary

The Acts of the Apostle Thomas - a narrative of the apostle Thomas's mission to India

asceticism - a lifestyle of abstaining from worldly pleasures, including things such as food, sex, material wealth, to enhance one's spiritual life

Athanasius - heresiologist writing in Alexandria in the early 4th century

Bardaisan - Syrian philosopher and theologian from the late 2nd century, best known for his knowledge of India

The Book of Thomas the Contender - a revelation text of which Thomas is the recipient of Jesus' divine knowledge

beatitude - a teaching of Jesus associated with joy, e.g. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

Brahmin - a member of the scholar caste in India; in Kerala, this group includes the Hindu **Nambudiri Brahmins**

caste system - a system of social stratification, typically referred to in the context of India

encratism - a belief in some early Christian churches that absolute sexual abstinence is required for salvation

eschatology - school of thought preoccupied with the final events of human history

dualism - in this paper, a Platonic philosophy incorporated into some early Christian traditions, often in terms of a creator-god in opposition to a knowing-God; in *The Book*

of Thomas the Contender, we see less of this dualism and instead a soul-body dualism emphasized

Edessa - ancient Syrian city where *The Book of Thomas the Contender* and *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas* were supposedly written and where some or all of the apostle Thomas's relics are allegedly located

Egeria - a 4th century pilgrim who traveled to the holy land and recorded her travels

Gad - brother of King Gundaphar

gnosis - a Greek word used to denote Christian traditions that emphasized insight, spiritual knowledge, or divine revelation, often overgeneralized in scholarship to include all heterodox churches. In this paper, it is used to discuss knowledge/revelation-centric ideas exclusively and should not be conflated with demiurgical Christian traditions, denoted for their belief in a creator god distinct from the God of Jesus the Messiah

The Gospel of Thomas - a sayings gospel and the earliest known Thomasine text

Greek apologists - the early Christian writers that defended their faith against critics

Gregory of Tours - 6th century hagiographer

Gundaphar - king in North India during the 1st century and possibly the king mentioned in *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas* that converted to Christianity when Thomas built him a palace in heaven

heresiologists - members of the orthodox Christian church that deemed certain Christian leaders, groups, and texts heretical

hermeneutics - the study and interpretation of texts; also **exegesis**

Irenaeus - 2nd century heresiologist writing in Gaul

Kerala - state in South India where Thomas supposedly founded seven churches

“Kernel” gospel - a core gospel hypothesized by April DeConick and intended to identify the earliest sayings from *The Gospel of Thomas*

logion - (pl. **logia**) a saying accredited to Jesus

Manichaeism - a dualistic theology not exclusively Christian, though a prominent influence upon some Christian theology

Mazdai - the king responsible for Thomas’s martyrdom in *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas*

Mygdonia - the woman converted by Thomas in the ninth act of *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas*

Nag Hammadi - a city in Egypt where thirteen Coptic codices were found, including *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Book of Thomas the Contender*

Nair - one of the high castes in India

Northwest Indian hypothesis - the hypothesis that the apostle Thomas traveled to North India in the mid-1st century for his mission

Onam - a festival celebrated in Kerala for the god Vishnu

pagoda - a pyramidal temple found in Indian religious architecture

Pauline epistles - letters written by the apostle Paul in the Christian New Testament, ca. 50-60 CE

Pleroma - the totality of divine powers, more numerous than the orthodox Trinity, in

some ancient Christian traditions such as the Valentinians and the Sethians

Pulaya and Paraya - castes in South India that have often faced discrimination

revelation text - a text in which Jesus reveals secret, divine knowledge to a chosen individual

revelatory-transformative soteriology - a salvific theology based upon gnosis/revelation and spiritual transformation

sayings gospel - a non-narrative gospel including only what Jesus said, not what he did

soteriology - the study of salvation; my soteriological methodology for this paper will be based off of April DeConick's soteriological model outlined in "How We Talk About Christology Matters."

South Indian hypothesis - the hypothesis that Thomas's mission took place in South India

St. Augustine - a church father, theologian, and philosopher from the 4th century

St. Jerome - 4th century theologian and historian in the Roman Empire

St. Ephrem - a Syrian writer and theologian from the 4th century

Synod of Diamper - Portuguese council gathering in 1599 that determined what Indian Thomasine rituals were condoned by the Roman Catholic Church and which ones were deemed pagan

Syrian Christianity - the home of Thomasine Christianity in the Mediterranean

Tatian - philosopher and theologian that promoted encratic asceticism

Tertia - friend of Mygdonia and Thomas convert in *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas*

Thomasine Traditions - Christian traditions that identify the apostle Thomas as the representative figure of their relationship with Jesus. This includes the **Mediterranean Thomas Christians** of antiquity that we know from text bearing the name Thomas and the **St. Thomas Christians in South India**.

Thomas of Cana - a Persian trader that migrated to Kerala in 372 CE

Vaisya - the caste charged with trade and commerce in India

vastu - doctrine of auspicious architecture and dwelling arrangement in India

Vazan - celibate convert in *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas*

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