Apr 20th, 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

Not So Doubtful: Traditions of the Apostle Thomas from the Beginning of the Common Era through 600 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

J. Y. Strain
Legacy of Thomas

In Western Christianity Today:
- Doubting Thomas from the Gospel of John

In antiquity and/or in Eastern Tradition:
- Recipient of Secret Knowledge
- Apostle that brought Christianity to India
Mediterranean Thomas

- The Gospel of Thomas – a sayings gospel
- The Book of Thomas the Contender – a revelation narrative
- The Acts of the Apostle Thomas – a narrative of the apostle’s travels to India
Thomas in India

- St. Thomas Christians in Kerala
- Presence in antiquity
- Still practicing
Small World
Methodology

For Mediterranean Thomasine Traditions:
- Hermeneutics of *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Book of Thomas the Contender*, and *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas*
- Close readings of its contemporary heresiology

For Indian Thomasine Traditions:
- Archaeological findings
- Discussion of India in writing from Syria
- Existing oral tradition
Summary of the Mediterranean Findings

- *The Gospel of Thomas* hypothesized to be a collection of key points of a sermon(s)
- Existed in multiple versions; surviving versions date later
- April DeConick hypothesizes an original “Kernel” gospel

- Emphasis of the Kernel *Gospel*: revealed knowledge and immediate transformation; general instruction
- Emphases of the Surviving *Gospel*: immediate transformation to a specific lifestyle emphasizing encratism and *gnosis*
Summary of Mediterranean Findings

- The Book of Thomas the Contender and The Acts of the Apostle Thomas follow in traditions from this later Gospel of Thomas
- Encratic
- Revelatory / gnostic
- The consistent theme between all texts (including early versions of the Gospel):

Revelation and Transformation
Thomas in India – The Arrival Debate

Where did the tradition begin?
When did it get there?
Who brought it?
Where?

North Indian Hypothesis
- Coins found in Pakistan with King Gundaphar's name
- King Gundaphar's presence in *The Acts of the Apostle Thomas*

South Indian Hypothesis
- Tablets proving Christian presence in Kerala in 372 CE
- Tomb venerated as Thomas's; constructed in 1st Century
- Family lineage traced to Thomas
When?

- For North India, debate over a community's existence at all, let alone when it got there
- For South India, debate not on Christianity's arrival but on the arrival of the Thomas tradition

South Indian Possibilities
- 1st Century with Thomas or a contemporary
- 4th Century with merchants
- 16th Century with Portuguese
Aspects of the South Indian Thomasine Tradition

- Syriac liturgy and loose ties to Syria
- Incorporated many traditions from surrounding religious traditions, including holidays, gods, and monastic traditions in meditation
- Caste system – became the merchant caste and respected as high caste members, even intermarrying with members of high caste Hindus
My Conclusions

- The Christian message that arrived in South India must have been more bare-bones/general
- Early Keralan Christians received a message of urgent transformation, without specifics
- Preexisting foundation of revelation from the divine in meditation

*Indian Thomasine Tradition in South India was founded upon a revelatory-transformative soteriology*