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

Janna Strain  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

Kevin Sullivan, Faculty Advisor  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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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 1<sup>st</sup> 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**

- 1<sup>st</sup> Century with Thomas or a contemporary
- 4<sup>th</sup> Century with merchants
- 16<sup>th</sup> 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*