

## Saint Thomas, Missionary Apostle to India

The *Acts of Thomas* is an early third-century attestation of a missionary narrative in the Syriac tradition that attributes the conversion of India to Saint Thomas, the apostle known as Jesus's twin (John 20:24).<sup>1</sup> In this extended apocryphal narrative, Christ commissions Judas Thomas to travel to India to convert its people.<sup>2</sup> Thomas journeys there by way of the trade routes as a servant enslaved to merchants.

The *Acts of Thomas* has received much scholarly attention and is the subject of several full-length studies, notably those of A. F. J. Klijn, J. Bremmer, and H. J. W. Drijvers.<sup>3</sup> The text appears to have been written in Syriac, but was almost immediately translated into Greek, and then was translated into Syriac again.<sup>4</sup> Scholars examine this text from a variety of angles, ranging from the history of early Syrian asceticism to the text's influence in Manichaean circles. Scholars have described the text as Gnostic, Encratite, Manichaean, or anti-Manichaean. J. W. Childers notes that different recensions do reflect particular theological tendencies.<sup>5</sup> The earlier scholarly tendency, however, to characterize the *Acts* as "Gnostic" may derive from Western scholars' lack of acquaintance with the unique traits of early Syriac Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

Many stories about Saint Thomas from late antiquity have survived, but the *Acts of Thomas* is unique in its influence on subsequent sacred fictions. It presents the Christian missionary life as one of sacrifice, itinerancy, asceticism, and imitation of Christ. The *Acts of Thomas* enshrines the symbol of the missionary apostle in Syriac religious memory. In the late antique world the narrative spread an account of imaginary conversions of mythic places on the road to India. And the symbol of the missionary struck a chord in the cultures of the Christian East, within both the Roman Empire and the Sasanian milieu. The text's widespread

dissemination and translation attest to its popularity in late antiquity. While the authors of subsequent missionary stories studied in this book may not intentionally imitate the *Acts of Thomas* in their hagiographies, it is clear that the *Acts of Thomas* gave power to the symbol of the missionary saint.

#### PRÉCIS

The *Acts of Thomas* contains thirteen chapters that depict India's conversion to Christianity through the apostle Thomas. As it is longer than any other text included in this book, I summarize the narrative here. Readers familiar with the story may wish to pass over this section. The section divisions in parentheses correspond to Klijn's commentary and translation of the Syriac text.

The [First] Act of Judas Thomas, the Apostle: Jesus assigns each apostle an area of the world to convert. The lot of India falls to Thomas, his slave (1.1).<sup>7</sup> Jesus sells Thomas to the merchant Habban to be a carpenter for King Gundaphorus (1.2).<sup>8</sup> Thomas and Habban set out for India, and they reach Sandaruk (1.3).<sup>9</sup> Thomas attends a banquet of the king in honor of the princess's wedding, but he abstains from eating, anointing himself, and praying. A Hebrew flute girl notices him (1.4). A cupbearer slaps Thomas [now called "Judas"] for not celebrating. Thomas sings a song in Hebrew that describes the church as a bride of light, with the apostles as groomsmen (1.6–7). The Hebrew flute girl recognizes the words he sings, and the cupbearer is torn apart by a lion (1.8). The flute girl proclaims that Thomas is either God or his apostle (1.9). Thomas prays over the princess bride and the bridegroom, and the prayer contains a Christological proclamation (1.10). When the bride and bridegroom are about to consummate their marriage, Jesus appears to the bride in the form of Thomas (1.11). Jesus persuades the couple to abstain from the sickness, death, and torment that he associates with sex and childrearing, and they agree (1.12). This scandalizes the king and queen (1.13). The girl explains to her parents that she is wed to a heavenly bridegroom, Christ (1.14). The groom praises Christ, who has shown him his true self (1.15). The king is furious, and he chases the apostle out of his kingdom, but the apostle continues his journey in India (1.16).

The Second Act: Thomas and Habban the merchant reach India and King Gundaphorus. Thomas identifies himself as a carpenter, and he agrees to build a palace for the king (2.17–18). But Thomas instead gives the money for the palace to the poor (2.19). People report back to the king that Thomas is giving the money to the indigent, teaching them about Christianity, and practicing acts of ascetic piety: fasting, prayer, and

almsgiving (2.20). Thomas tells the king that he has built him a palace in heaven, and the king arrests Thomas and the merchant (2.21). The brother of the king, Gad, dies, his soul is taken to heaven, and he sees the palace that Thomas's acts of charity have built (2.22). Gad returns from heaven in order to tell his brother about the heavenly palace (2.23). The king realizes his mistake, frees Thomas and the merchant, and asks for Thomas's forgiveness (2.24). Judas prays a gift of thanksgiving (2.25). The entire community rejoices and prays together and prepares for baptism (2.26). Thomas pours oil over their heads, prays to the Holy Spirit, baptizes them, and then at dawn they share in the Eucharist (2.27). Thomas preaches to the newly baptized (2.28). Thomas shares a meal with his disciples, and they head off on the road together, according to Christ's instruction (2.29).

The Third Act: On the road, Thomas sees a dead boy (3.30). A snake appears and tells Thomas that he lusted after a girl whom the [dead] boy had loved. The snake watched the two youths have sex, and then killed the boy (3.31). The snake identifies himself as the son of Satan (3.32). Thomas commands the snake to suck the poison from the dead youth, and the snake obeys. The boy comes back to life, and the snake bursts (3.33). The youth praises Christ, and Thomas encourages him (3.34–36). The entire community converts to Christianity and praises Thomas as the apostle of the living God (3.37).

The Fourth Act: The colt, speaking as a man, instructs the apostle to sit upon him, so that he can carry the apostle the way his ancestor carried Christ. He identifies himself a descendant of Balaam's ass (4.39–40). The ass carries Thomas into the city (4.41).

The Fifth Act: Thomas exorcises a woman whom demons had raped (5.41–46). Thomas praises Jesus, he baptizes the woman, and then they share in the Eucharist (5.47–49).

The Sixth Act: A young man who fornicates with his girlfriend is unable to receive the Eucharist because he killed his girlfriend when she would not convert to Christianity with him (6.50). The young man repents and is purified by Thomas's prayer and ritual (6.51). Thomas and the crowd of people then go in search of the young woman, and they pray over her (6.52). Thomas raises her from the dead by invoking Jesus's name (6.53). The resurrected girl gives a description of the underworld, a smelly place, where the chaste are separated from fornicators (6.54). Thomas uses her warning as an admonition for all the newly baptized (6.55–58). All the people surrender themselves to the living God and commit themselves to care of the poor and widows (6.59–60). Thomas's prayer equates discipleship with "becoming a stranger" for the sake of Christ (6.61).

The Seventh Act: The general of India approaches Thomas that he might help his wife and daughter whom a violent man attacked (6.64). Thomas entrusts a deacon, Xanthippus, to care for the community, and the apostles continue on the road with the general.

The Eighth Act: The general and Thomas are aided by wild asses who bow down to them and are willingly yoked to help the apostle and the general (8.69–70). They find the general's wife and daughter, and Thomas orders the ass to instruct the demon to leave the wife and daughter of the general (8.73–74). Thomas drives the demon out of the women (8.75–77). All are amazed to hear the preaching of the wild ass and the apostle's healings (8.78–81).

The Ninth Act: Thomas and the general reach the home of Mygdonia, a kinsperson of the king, and Thomas comforts the servants of those who work for Mygdonia and her husband (9.82–84). Thomas presents an extended homily on holiness (9.85–86) and humility (9.86). Mygdonia falls at Thomas's feet and begs to become a Christian and transform her body into a holy temple of the Spirit (9.87). Thomas tells Mygdonia to rise, turn away from bodily adornments, turn away from earthly marriage, and worship Christ alone (9.88). Mygdonia pulls away from her husband Karish, resisting his company and refusing to eat with him (9.89–92). Mygdonia continues to receive instruction from Thomas (9.93–94). Her husband is angry that she spends so much time with Thomas, whom she calls a "physician of the soul" and whom he calls a "sorcerer" and a "stranger" (9.95). Karish's resentment builds as his wife refuses to eat and have sex with him (9.96). Mygdonia prays for support, and she refuses her husband's sexual advances (9.97–98). Her husband Karish weeps and seeks that the king, Mazdai, avenge the apostle (9.99–102). Mygdonia bemoans her situation to the apostle (9.103). The king has his men hunt after Thomas, they apprehend Thomas, and they put him in jail for sorcery and reviling the king (9.105–6). While in prison, Thomas prays and poetically recounts the Hymn of the Pearl (9.106–13). Mygdonia is tortured and inconsolable, and she is unmoved by her husband's pleas for her love. She confesses to her husband her commitment to Jesus and continence (9.114–17).

The Tenth Act: Mygdonia prepares for baptism and the Eucharist (10.119–20). Thomas anoints her and baptizes her, Karish makes her choose between him and Jesus, and she professes her fidelity to Christ (10.121–24). The king and Mazdai reproach Thomas again (10.125–30). Thomas preaches about the glory of baptism (10.131–32). Thomas shares in the Eucharist with the general and his daughters (10.133).

The Eleventh Act: The queen Tertia goes to comfort Mygdonia, and Mygdonia tells Tertia about the wonders of Christianity (11.136). Tertia is then equally elated about Christianity, and Mazdai is infuriated at the apostle. Both Mazdai and Karish go to the house of the general and physically assault Thomas (11.137).

The Twelfth Act: Vizan, the prince, speaks with Thomas sympathetically, and the king subjects the apostle to ordeals. God brings a flood upon the king (12.141). Judas and the community of new Christians pray together in prison (12.142–49).

The Thirteenth Act: Vizan, the prince, is baptized (13.150). Mygdonia and Tertia visit the apostle in prison, and the apostle prepares the group for baptism. They all share another Eucharist (13.157–58).

The Martyrdom of the Apostle Thomas: Thomas is imprisoned, and gives a special commissioning to Tertia and Mygdonia, and he is tried, stripped, and martyred. After Thomas's death, King Mazdai is ultimately converted because of sickness from which his son is healed. (159–70).

The colorful coming of Christianity to India brings violence, chaos, abrupt interventions, scandals, and social revolt. Thomas's apostolic legitimacy comes from his kinship with Christ, and he demonstrates this through miracles and godly insight. Thomas converts people from every social stratum through miracles, exorcisms, poetic discourse, and ritual.

#### THE ACTS OF THOMAS AS A NARRATIVE TYPOLOGY OF THE SYRIAC MISSIONARY STORY

Just as missionaries traveled throughout the Syriac-speaking world, so did stories about them. In the third century C.E., stories about the apostle Thomas that were circulating among Syriac speakers were compiled into a composite text, the *Acts of Thomas*.<sup>10</sup> The popularity of the *Acts of Thomas* among late antique audiences demonstrates that Syriac- and Greek-speaking Christians gravitated to the symbol of a reluctant missionary apostle. Circulation of the *Acts of Thomas* among Christian groups was broad, and subsequent Syriac hagiographers followed in its literary footsteps. As we will see, some of the main motifs in the *Acts of Thomas* work together to form a narrative typology that is found in other missionary stories.

#### *Genre: The Bible and Ancient Novels*

The *Acts of Thomas* belongs to the genre of apocryphal narrative. The New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles presents a picture of Jesus's disciples establishing new societies of believers in the regions around the Mediterranean. Before his ascension to heaven, Jesus instructs his followers to be his witnesses, going out

from Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), and as they move from place to place, he urges them to heal and speak with boldness (Acts 4:13). Some awestruck people accept Jesus's followers, but others ridicule them and accuse them of madness, saying they are "filled with new wine" (Acts 2:13). The book of Acts exhibits literary patterns and sets precedents that subsequent stories about the apostles will use to describe individual and communal conversions. We find these stories within the *Acts of Thomas*. The creation of a new Christian society is accompanied by chaos and miracles, turmoil and rebirth.

The integration of biblical typologies in the *Acts of Thomas* is obvious. Thomas, mirroring the activities of his twin, Christ, converts through healing. The saint's wonderworking ability shows his access to the divine. Thomas resurrects dead children, who come back to life and confess Christ.<sup>11</sup> The apostle uses sacraments to heal those whom demons torment.<sup>12</sup> We read, for example, a variant on the story of the resurrection narratives of Mary Magdalene and Jesus.<sup>13</sup> When the matron Mygdonia visits Thomas in prison, she does not recognize him: "[Mygdonia] was afraid and fell down. And he stood up [*qom*] before her and said, 'Don't be afraid Mygdonia! Do not desert Jesus Christ. Do not desert your Lord to whom you have entrusted your soul.'<sup>14</sup> Novelistic elements are used in a paradoxical way as the text promotes asceticism and romanticized chaste relationships between men and women: Mygdonia flees her husband's bed to visit the apostle.<sup>15</sup> Like the Acts of the Apostles, this text features a miraculous escape from prison,<sup>16</sup> and like some of the noncanonical narratives about Jesus, including the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and the *Acts of Pilate*, the *Acts of Thomas* features a tour of the underworld. H. J. W. Drijvers notes that parallels and shared motifs of the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles "can be better explained from the common background of tradition and milieu shared by the two Acts."<sup>17</sup> The Syriac version of the *Acts of Thomas* enumerates the names of the apostles along with their missionary assignments. This specificity is absent from the Greek text.

The narrative also expands on the Pauline image of Christ's kenosis.<sup>18</sup> The all-powerful Lord becomes a slave to redeem humanity, and he then sells his freeborn twin into slavery to further his mission. The holy man qua slave motif, moreover, can be an allusion to the biblical patriarch Joseph, whose brothers sold him into slavery.<sup>19</sup> Thomas distinguishes his mission: "I am imitating you my Lord Jesus Christ. It is not just that I believe, but that I endure many things! You made me worthy to be in the Lord's image."<sup>20</sup>

The *Acts of Thomas* features the leitmotifs of exotic travel, royal characters, and mistaken identity that we find in the late antique Greek novels and in other apocryphal Acts.<sup>21</sup> Greek novels also feature the motif of a hero sold to an Indian merchant. Xenophon of Ephesus, for instance, writes of the Greek heroine Anthea, who was sold as a slave to a rich Indian merchant.<sup>22</sup>

Like the stories of the Greek novels, the *Acts of Thomas* features adventures and themes of romance. It also shares motifs with the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the *Acts*

of *John*, the *Acts of Andrew*, and the *Acts of Philip*. Their similarities with the Greco-Roman novel have been demonstrated elsewhere: “There is a motley mixture of miracle stories, fantastic deeds of the apostle, conversions, nature miracles and stories of demons, which are akin to the novelistic narrative art of the ancient world.”<sup>23</sup> The Christianity that Thomas brings turns society upside down and undoes the laws of nature. The story reorders a pagan landscape into a Christian one with scenes of weddings overturned, Christian queens fleeing from their pagan husbands dead women returning from the underworld and donkeys revealing hidden knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

The compiler of the *Acts of Thomas*, however, uses the structure of the novel and the Acts of the Apostles to promote the theological ideals and practices of the emergent communities of the Christian East.<sup>25</sup> Christian mission brings chaos and upheaval to pagan society, but it transforms states of social disorder into well-arranged Christian kingdoms.

#### *Divine Kinship and Twin Discourse*

The *Acts of Thomas* blends discourse on twins and family with the Christian rhetoric of paradox to construct an apostolic history for the Orient. The *Acts* pairs images of twins and slaves, masters and apostles, to elevate its patron's lineage.

Twin discourse elevates Thomas's status by blurring distinctions between the actions of Christ and those of the apostle. Thomas heals and exorcises as Christ does,<sup>26</sup> and the characters mistake Thomas and Christ for each other.<sup>27</sup> The story includes themes with biblical precedents: Thomas is a carpenter like Christ, who preaches and shares meals with his disciples after he has healed them. Thomas, like Jesus, dies at the hands of a political ruler. Yet a closer look reveals the stark differences between Thomas's deeds and those of the canonical Jesus: Thomas occupies himself with kings, queens, and princesses, and the affairs of the royal bedroom.<sup>28</sup> Jesus works with fishermen, sinful women, lepers, and occupies himself with the affairs of Galilean peasants.<sup>29</sup> Thomas travels as a slave with merchants.<sup>30</sup> The twin language and Thomas's weaving of biblical verses into the text, however, naturalize these divergences between Thomas and Christ, giving the story a biblical gloss and “India” an apostolic past.

The twinning of Christ and Thomas corresponds to the construction of the text's dualistic symbolic universe. The story sets up contrasts between the corruptible and the incorruptible, kings and servants, the demonic and this earth versus the divine and heaven, men and women, conversion of the heart and healing of the body, and so on. Even earthly “goods” are poor imitations of their heavenly counterparts.<sup>31</sup> This hermeneutic emerges also in the narrative pattern of the hidden and the revealed eye of the body versus the eye of the heart the temporal world versus eternal life.<sup>32</sup> The text is promoting the divine insight that Thomas has. Thomas uncovers the dual dimensions of the world hidden to most. Satan, as prince of

the material world, beguiles human beings into a state of forgetfulness about their true origin; the earth is a neutral arena in which good and evil intermingle. The missionary wins the world for his God and the Christians, and he replaces demons with servants of Christ to unify fragmented persons and communities.

The *Acts of Thomas* creates two contrasting lines of descent in two nonhuman biblical characters: a talking donkey that descends from Balaam's ass and the serpent sprung from the snake of Genesis.<sup>33</sup> The snake calls himself a creeper and the son of a creeper,<sup>34</sup> and he portrays his participation in evil events in biblical history. The donkey, which carries Thomas on his back, claims to be an heir of noble asses memorialized in scripture.<sup>35</sup> Just as apostles divide into Judas Thomas's and Judas Iscariots, and incorporeal beings into angels and demons, so the text uses biblical animals to construct twinned lines of descent in the created world. The donkey/serpent motif shows inversions of power: the snake tempts and poisons; his authority comes from his kinship to Satan. The beast's prophetic speech reveals the nearness of the donkey to the divine, and his humble service to Thomas.

*Theology of Sacred Travel: Real and Spiritual Journeys to Christ*

The *Acts of Thomas*, like all missionary stories, focuses on journeys, both physical and spiritual. Thomas is a foreigner, *aksenāyā*, who enters the social fabric of the kingdoms of India from below, as a craftsman or carpenter.<sup>36</sup> The wandering apostle, homeless and uninterested in concerns of the world, directs people to their true heavenly home by assigning to them positions in the Christian earthly hierarchy that anticipate their lives in heaven.

Thomas is on a journey to India, but as he converts people, he leads them on an interior journey to Christ. The theological underpinnings of the story distinguish it from the Greek novels of late antiquity. Jesus sends Thomas away from Jerusalem to convert the East, and the apostle's sacred travels begin. The narrative also describes unseen journeys of the spirit to which Thomas calls his disciples, as he awakens their souls to recall their true selves. A newly converted prince of India explains to his father that he has discovered his divine origin: "He [Thomas] showed me how to find my own self."<sup>37</sup> The *Acts* portray Christianity as religion that heals the body and spirit and brings freedom. Faith in Thomas's God transforms new converts. The *Acts of Thomas* stands out from later texts, however, in its focus on the divine origins of the individual believer. The hymns of the *Acts of Thomas* contain theological metaphors describing the church as a bride of light. The *Acts of Thomas* also connects the wandering apostle motif with another bridal symbol in the Syriac language, the verb *mkar*. The root meaning of the word is "to barter," while its extended meaning is "to betrothe." The apostle, a slave to the merchant, thus facilitates the marriage between the bridegroom Christ and his betrothed, the church: a heavenly eschatological wedding feast arranged by the apostle, as the bartering or betrothing merchant.<sup>38</sup>

The theology of sacred wandering and returning to Christ is best exemplified in the hymn that Thomas sings while he is imprisoned: the “Hymn on the Pearl.”<sup>39</sup> Thomas chants about a king and queen who send their son on an expedition to find a hidden pearl, giving him a royal tunic. The prince sets out, but he loses his way in Egypt and forgets his royal heritage. His parents send him a letter to help him recall his mission and royal lineage. The youth then regains his robe, retrieves the pearl from the serpent, and comes home to rule his land with his brother: “The Hymn is a symbolic portrayal of the life of Adam, the man who of his own free will left his Father’s house, Paradise, with a part of his inheritance. . . . Then the whole process is put into reverse: he recovers his splendid robe, the image of God, and will rule with his brother, his heavenly second self, Jesus (cf. Thomas and Jesus as twins) in the (heavenly) kingdom.”<sup>40</sup>

This story inverts a version of the missionary story itself, warning of the dangers that befall a traveler who forgets the intent of his mission. The type/antitype patterning of the hymn’s images relates to themes from the dominant narrative. The values of the hymn compare to the ideals of the *Acts of Thomas*. Unlike Thomas, who maintains his course to Christ through prayer,<sup>41</sup> even in imprisonment, the prince of the hymn begins with purpose but loses his way. The hymn reunites a family broken apart; the *Acts of Thomas* breaks up earthly families and discourages marriage. The hymn celebrates royalty; the *Acts of Thomas* promotes simplicity and anonymity. The prince of the “Hymn on the Pearl” must hold fast to his material possessions,<sup>42</sup> whereas the *Acts of Thomas* promises freedom through poverty. Thomas, though a pauper and magician in the temporal world, emerges as a superior double of the royal son.<sup>43</sup> Both the prince and Thomas move from freeborn social statuses into slavery. Both complete missions in service to a lord. Both fall into a decadent society but Thomas resists its temptations.<sup>44</sup> He, unlike the prince, never forgets his royal lineage.

The interpolation of this hymn into the *Acts of Thomas* preserves a beautiful piece of literature and combines the image of the itinerant missionary apostle with that of an imprisoned bard, painting an icon of the missionary poet. In subsequent missionary texts, intellectual practices involving speech, debaters, letter writers, preachers, or hagiographers continue the tradition of speaking charismata of the missionary holy man, but the specific image of the poet apostle is unique to the *Acts of Thomas*.

The sanctification of itinerancy and journeys, as presented in the *Acts of Thomas*, has a long trajectory in the stories of the Syrians. The notion of holy itinerancy and homelessness in the *Acts of Thomas* might in fact reflect an early period in Syrian Christianity of wandering ascetics, as Daniel Caner has suggested.<sup>45</sup> By the fifth century, however, monastic detachment brings conflict with the church leaders in the cities.<sup>46</sup>

As we discuss in subsequent chapters of this book, the theological themes of detachment, homelessness, poverty, and itinerant healing in the *Acts of Thomas*

reemerge in Syriac texts of the fifth and sixth centuries as symbols of legitimacy for monks and Miaphysite bishops exiled from their sees.<sup>47</sup> Miaphysite bishops like Simeon of Beth Arsham and Jacob Baradaeus (described in chapters 5 and 6 of this book) lose the support of the imperial church. Their hagiographer John of Ephesus gravitates to the narrative typology of the itinerant missionary saint that is canonized in the *Acts of Thomas*. John of Ephesus will cast the bishops according to this ideal. Persecution drives Syriac monks from the safety of their monasteries. John will use the model of itinerancy, as glorified in the *Acts of Thomas*, to redefine their lack of stability as holy itinerancy, once consecrated in Syriac memory as “apostolicity.”

*Model Societies: Converting the King, Creating Christian Families*

The *Acts of Thomas* established a paradigm that future Syriac missionary stories adopted: Christianity arrives in the Syrian Orient through the conversion of the royal household. Thomas proclaims the message of Christianity to the kingdoms of India, and riots follow. Thomas challenges social orders that madden local rulers. Kings pursue the apostle throughout the narrative, and they even incarcerate him. The building of a new Christian society, as the legend portrays it, requires that Thomas disrupt the regnant power structures. His challenges are largely economic, disrupting the kingdom’s financial administration and threatening the familial structures that ensure the continuity of the household economy. In one instance, Thomas fails to fulfill his obligations of labor to the king. Rather than building a palace for the king as commissioned, Thomas gives the money to the poor to build a palace in heaven, and Gundaphorus imprisons him.<sup>48</sup>

In the *Acts of Thomas*, programs of asceticism and social reform sustain community welfare.<sup>49</sup> Christianity creates communities structured on asceticism and care of the poor. The missionary teaches Christian labor to the city. Thomas, whom King Gundaphorus hires to construct a palace, gives the money meant for the edifice to the poor instead. When the king asks about the progress of Thomas’s palace building, the royal messengers respond:

He is not doing anything [with respect to the construction], but rather he goes around in cities and towns giving to the poor and teaching them a new God. Also he heals the sick, and he drives out demons. . . . We thought that he was a sorcerer. It is thought from his asceticism and his religion that he is a magician or an apostle of the new God. He fasts and prays a great deal. He eats bread and salt and drinks water. He wears a linen garment and takes nothing from anyone. Anything that he has, he gives to others.<sup>50</sup>

Thomas’s other economic challenges entail the “corruption” of the pagan household. Thomas intervenes on the night of the princess bride’s marriage to stop the young couple from having intercourse.<sup>51</sup> King Gundaphorus runs Thomas out of

his city, because the apostle has thwarted the consummation of the marriage of his daughter and son-in-law: "When the king heard these things from the bridegroom and bride, he tore his garments asunder. He said to those around him, 'Go out immediately in the whole city and surround it. Bring the man to me, that sorcerer, and bring him up to my house. I asked him to pray for the fortune of my wicked daughter. The man who finds him and brings him to me will be given anything he wishes.'" <sup>52</sup> Elsewhere Thomas seduces wives away from their husbands' beds by wedding them to a new heavenly bridegroom, Christ. King Mazdai throws the apostle in jail because his kinsman, Karish, is sexually frustrated. <sup>53</sup> Karish's wife Mygdonia will no longer sleep with him on account of her conversion to Christianity. <sup>54</sup>

The *Acts of Thomas* situates the apostle's preaching within the setting of a royal court. <sup>55</sup> The story mentions three different kings with whom the apostle interacts. <sup>56</sup> In a cultural model that has both biblical and nonbiblical precedents, <sup>57</sup> Thomas plays the part of the holy man, detached from cares, who speaks with *parrhesia*, or frank speech, warning kings and their families about the fleeting nature of their power. <sup>58</sup> Despite Thomas's criticism of the transitory structures of the kingdom, his program takes root through the royal court, set over and against its institutions and accoutrements. Thomas contrasts his values with those of the king: "You are glorified with servants, possessions, garments, concubines and transient foods and abominations of every sort. I am glorified with poverty, asceticism, humility, fasting, prayer, great thanksgiving, fraternal fellowship, the spirit of holiness and brotherly asceticism." <sup>59</sup> The king is as a metaphor for temporal authority or empire in contrast to the heavenly ruler, Christ. Unity is imagined through the conversion of the king to Christianity.

The narrative refashions the roots of Christianity through Thomas to elevate the enslaved apostle poet above the kings Gundaphorus and Mazdai (whose name symbolizes the "Mazdaean" or the "Zoroastrian"). <sup>60</sup> The *Acts of Thomas* replaces the authority of the king and his gods with that of the apostle and the Christian God. The conversion of the king is necessary to legitimate the power of the apostle and to differentiate Thomas's authority from the prince's.

Thomas's rhetorical aggrandizement of poverty gains force as it contrasted to the earthly power and richness of his audience. <sup>61</sup> His program of simplicity and asceticism stands in contrast to the social complexity and decadence of the king and his family. The narrative classifies two opposing groups of social relationships: the king and his court, and the apostle and his Christian community. This stance of Thomas vis-à-vis the king endows Thomas's speech with the same authority as the monarch's.

As Thomas gathers his group around him, he and his followers resemble a new Christian kingdom, and the words of the missionary apostle are endowed with the authority of a king. Thomas converts the king through persuasion. No human

rivals exceed Thomas's eloquence. A talking donkey identifies Thomas's apostolate for India:

Twin of Christ and apostle of the most high God, son of the hidden life giving Word, bearer of the hidden mysteries of the son of God, son of free men who became a slave, who bought his freedom in obedience to many, who went from having much to poverty, through whom the Lord stole many away, that there might be a cause for life for this region of India, he who came not in his own desire toward the people of India, who turned many through his appearance and through his divine words, get up and ride upon me and have a rest until you enter the city.<sup>62</sup>

This asinine insight contrasts with the unbaptized people who "lived in a desolate region and are led like animals who cannot speak."<sup>63</sup> The text subverts the hierarchy of rulers of the land who deny Christ by contrasting their blindness to the insight of beasts of burden who recognize Christ's lordship.

#### *Model Apostle: Asceticism, Healing*

The story cloaks the apostle in the ascetic virtues of celibacy, poverty, and social welfare, values that are particularly, but not exclusively, characteristic of Syriac-speaking Christianity.<sup>64</sup> In the *Acts of Thomas*, an itinerant carpenter attracts men, women, princes, slaves, and even donkeys to his movement; he forges a new hierarchy to resolve the chaos that his initial message creates. The *Acts of Thomas* crafts a "Christian India" as the story's hero resolves social revolts by converting kingdoms to his new God. The conversion of Gundaphorus and his brother helps create a unified Christian community, from king down to child. There is no conflict. The king and his brother are unified in their obedience to the Christian God. Thomas's authority is realized through God's attestation of the treasures in heaven.<sup>65</sup>

The *Acts of Thomas* establishes models that later traditions identify and use as literary symbols of apostolicity. Kings,<sup>66</sup> apostles,<sup>67</sup> merchants, and their slaves are linked together.<sup>68</sup> The apostle is a stranger,<sup>69</sup> a healer,<sup>70</sup> who announces<sup>71</sup> and imitates Jesus and speaks about the freedom that Christianity brings.<sup>72</sup> The apostle converts all levels of society through his instruction,<sup>73</sup> teaching them how Christianity redeems<sup>74</sup> people to stand up<sup>75</sup> and glorify<sup>76</sup> the God who prepares heavenly dwelling places for those who wed their souls to Christ.

In the *Acts*, Thomas prays, with his disciples, to Jesus, using healing rhetoric: "You became for us a medicine of life [*sam haye*] through your life-giving body and by the sprinkling of your blood."<sup>77</sup> The *Acts of Thomas* depicts Thomas as an itinerant healer, creating a literary type for the missionary saint in Syriac literature.<sup>78</sup> Whereas other traditions present Christianity as a "perfect philosophy" and craft descent through its teachers, the Syrians portray themselves as the children of healers; the Syriac version of the *Acts* contains more healing rhetoric than the

Greek translation.<sup>79</sup> Teaching and divine insight are never disembodied; conversion of the heart begins with a strengthened body.<sup>80</sup>

Healing miracles precede conversion in the *Acts of Thomas*, and this literary pattern is a standard feature of missionary hagiography.<sup>81</sup> The saint's charisma is not his ability to debate or persuade with homiletic discourse.<sup>82</sup> Rather, Thomas forges new communities of unified bodies of Christians,<sup>83</sup> and he uses miracles of exorcisms or resurrections to build Christian kingdoms in India, teaching his followers that Christ is the divine healer.<sup>84</sup>

The *Acts of Thomas* idealizes early Syrian views of the body, sex, wealth, and manual labor. Sex corrupts,<sup>85</sup> and it belongs to the underworld.<sup>86</sup> Espousal to Christ as the heavenly bridegroom heals both men and women from the decay and mortality that the text associates with marriage. The story links sex with murder and deceit.<sup>87</sup> The missionary thus frees the couple from the ills attached to family roles and sexuality. Thomas cures couples and seals their bodies for Christ,<sup>88</sup> as he preaches about continence.<sup>89</sup> Thomas then cures cities of physical and social malaise.

#### *Liturgical Order*

Thomas's conversion of the people he meets brings social upheaval. Yet out of this disruption comes the creation of new churches, whose members pray for revelation of hidden divine mysteries. Together they sing poetic songs to recall their true selves, and they share sacred ascetic meals to anticipate heavenly banquets. Thomas does not let persecution or imprisonment depress him. Instead, he calls on God for divine assistance, and the prisons and other locations of hardship become stages for liturgical drama.

The story emphasizes the role of liturgical practices in sealing Christian societies, and this theme will recur in subsequent Syriac missionary stories. Spoken and sung prayers to the new God set Christian practices in stone. Some scenes describe rituals from the later Syriac versions of the text, and these feature more developed liturgies and creedal statements from the third century, suggesting that these versions are post-Constantinian interpolations. The authors of the *Acts of Thomas* legitimate their liturgical practices and beliefs by attributing their origins to Thomas.<sup>90</sup>

The liturgical formulas exhibit unique features of Syriac Christian idioms, such as the invocation of the Holy Spirit as Mother:

- Come, holy name of Christ.
- Come, life-giving power on high.
- Come, fulfillment of mercies.
- Come, exulted gift.
- Come, participation of the blessing.
- Come, revealer of the hidden mysteries.

Come, mother of the seven dwellers, for in the eighth house is your rest.  
 Come, messenger of reconciliation.  
 Have communion with the hearts of these young people.  
 Come, Holy Spirit. Purify their entire hearts.  
 I will baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>91</sup>

Baptism creates a new Christian community centered on their missionary apostle, who links them to Christ. Thomas defines baptism as the birth of not just a new person, but an entire people. He began to speak about baptism and said: "Baptism is remission from sins. This is the birth of new people. This is the renewal of minds. This is the mingling of body and soul. This is the resurrection of the new man and childhood. This is participation in the remission of sins. Praise to you, power hidden in baptism, sharing with us. Praise to you, power made visible in baptism. Praise to you, joys renewed in baptism, approaching with love."<sup>92</sup>

In the story, Christian liturgical practices replace pagan feasts. The pre-Christian societies celebrate with opulent feasts in which the guests anoint themselves with fragrant oils; the new Christian society transforms these banquets into ascetic Eucharists. While the apostle is a guest at the banquet of the king, he does not use oil to lather up, but rather seals himself to shut off his senses from bodily temptations: "Judas gave thanks to God, and in the middle of his head he sealed himself, and he moistened his nostrils, and set oil on his ears, and he seals his heart. Then he placed a crown of myrtle on his head."<sup>93</sup> Thomas seals these societies of Christian neophytes through anointing, or *rušmā*. Along with the anointing, Thomas teaches them the Eucharist.<sup>94</sup>

In this section we have analyzed how the symbols in the *Acts of Thomas* work together to create a narrative about the missionary life and the creation of Christian societies. Christianity is presented as liberation and freedom, and the biblical ideals are set into narrative form. The mobility of Thomas's simple practices frees people from the entanglements of their household and court religions. The text distances Thomas from the social prestige of the royal family. Thomas passes on the lineage of Christianity not through animal sacrifice or kinship ties, but rather through rituals, such as the Eucharist and baptism,<sup>95</sup> that the faithful can perform in prison, at home, or on the road.<sup>96</sup> Thomas moves from the heart of the city of the king (building palaces and participating in weddings, king's courts, and prison) to the limits of civilization (with trips to the underground and talking donkeys) where he encounters Satan governing the periphery. The *Acts* offers a map or paradigm for future missionary stories: the itinerant holy man brings his portable practices to convert rulers and sanctifies the wilderness for the worship of his Christianity, uprooting, when necessary, the remnants of the religious "other," whether "pagan" or Christian "heretic." We turn now to examine the specific landscape of the *Acts of Thomas*.

## MAPPING THE TRAVELS OF SAINT THOMAS

The canon of early Christian literature contains various stories about Saint Thomas; of these, however, only the *Acts of Thomas* focuses on his mission.<sup>97</sup> Scholars cannot pinpoint a specific social situation that explains the circulation of these stories.<sup>98</sup> We will show, however, that the composite of stories in the *Acts of Thomas* advances the interests of early Syrian Christians by portraying a Christian landscape grafted onto the trade routes between Edessa and India.

*Exoticized India*

In the *Acts of Thomas*, the apostolic succession begins with the merchant Haban, to whom Jesus sells Thomas.<sup>99</sup> The *Acts of Thomas* traces the spread of the gospel through commercial activities and trade routes. An idealized form of Christian life that promotes homelessness and mobility is realized on the road between Jerusalem and India. Christianity spread to the Syrian East by means of the trade routes to India, and the *Acts of Thomas* is a literary celebration of that tradition.<sup>100</sup>

The *Acts of Thomas* portrays a Christian journey to the exotic, and the text elevates the role of the merchant culture in spreading Christianity to the East. The Indian setting places Thomas's actions in regions at the crossroads of trade routes for spices and other commodities. In Edessa and other places along these routes stories about Thomas circulate, and devotion to his cult grows.<sup>101</sup>

The *Acts of Thomas* is one of many texts from late antiquity to construct India as an idealized region of the exotic. India represents a place of learning and teaching,<sup>102</sup> a place to perfect the apostolic craft. As Grant Parker has shown, texts like the *Acts of Thomas* portray India as a "place of special knowledge, its religious specialists themselves the objects of pilgrimage."<sup>103</sup> Parker also notes that Thomas traveled to India via routes that were part of a vast network for the exchange of commodities.

Exactly where in India did Thomas travel? The Christians of southern India today believe that he came to their province. But early evidence links Thomas to Parthia, a region that corresponds roughly to present-day northeastern Iran. There are many Persian loanwords in the *Acts of Thomas*, as well as allusions to the Parthian kingdom and caravan routes in Syria and Mesopotamia.<sup>104</sup> The church historian Eusebius explains how Jesus divvied up the regions of the world: "When the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were scattered over the world, Thomas, so the tradition has it, obtained as his portion Parthia."<sup>105</sup> Eusebius further explains that Origen knows the *Acts of John, Peter, Paul, Andrew, and Thomas*,<sup>106</sup> and Origen connects a mission of Thomas with Parthia.

The author of the *Acts of Thomas* embellished the text with historical details, notably about the Indian king Gundaphorus, who is known from other ancient historical sources. Gundaphorus, whose name means "May he find glory," was an

Indo-Parthian king who ruled 20–46 C.E. in Drangiana, Arachosia (southeastern Afghanistan, northern Pakistan), and Punjab. He is known from the Takht-I Bahi inscription and coin issues in silver and copper in his name.<sup>107</sup> The Parthian details in the story may be based on the embassies between Rome and North India that passed through third-century Edessa.

### *Trade Route Culture*

The trade routes to India played a vital role in the encounters between East and West, and the *Acts of Thomas* develops the rich memory of these encounters to promote an idealized view of the expansion of Christianity. The text draws from the example of the working, wandering apostle as modeled in Paul. It couples that image with the history of Rome's trade with the East, creating powerful symbolic associations. The trade routes are a place for conversion and new encounters and are traversed not only by merchants, who have economic interests, but also by detached wanderers, with spiritual motivations.

Roman trade with the East arose in the first centuries C.E. in response to a demand for luxury goods, such as silk and spices.<sup>108</sup> In his book, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, Gary K. Young explains that in the classical period of Roman trade (ending with the fall of Palmyra in 272 C.E.) goods such as silk, cotton, pearls, gemstones, nard, pepper, and cinnamon were exchanged.<sup>109</sup> The Romans obtained incense, for example, from southern Arabia for both its religious and medicinal properties,<sup>110</sup> and silk and spices from India for the production of clothing and for culinary uses. Young draws much of his evidence from the *Periplus Erythraei*, a “workmanlike, practical manual for the merchant of the Red Sea trade,”<sup>111</sup> which attests to “a rich and complex trade in goods from India, Arabia, and Africa arriving at the Red Sea ports, and a significant quantity of goods as well as gold and silver bullion being exported from the Roman Empire in exchange.”<sup>112</sup> Thus the trade routes on which Thomas traveled to India were part of a robust network that brought the Eastern Roman Empire into contact with cultures beyond its borders.

Young also notes that in late antiquity Greek, Syrian, and Jewish merchants used trade routes in Syria and northern Mesopotamia.<sup>113</sup> The city of Palmyra, in central Syria, became an important stopping place for caravans and a meeting point for merchants as well as a center for long-distance trade with India and the Persian Gulf.<sup>114</sup> In northern Mesopotamia, we have evidence of the wealth of cities like Batnae/Serug, in a Syriac-speaking area near the Euphrates, that was renowned for its annual festival. The late antique historian Ammianus Marcellinus describes the vibrant trade fair there:

Batnae is a town in Anthemusia founded by the ancient Macedonians, separated by a short distance from the Euphrates, which is filled with rich merchants when, during the annual festival held near the beginning of September, a great crowd of mixed fortune comes together for the fair, to buy and sell the things which the Indians and

Chinese send, and many other things which are accustomed to be bought there by land and sea.<sup>115</sup>

Two hundred years, the sixth-century Syriac hymnist Jacob of Serug wrote a homily on the heavenly palace that Thomas, the slave of the merchant Haban, built.<sup>116</sup> With this detail connecting Thomas to a merchant, Jacob draws on his audience's familiarity with the trade route culture. In Jacob's homily, as in the *Acts of Thomas*, Thomas is presented as a reluctant apostle to India.

The presence of merchants is also well documented in the cities of Nisibis and Seleucia-Ctesiphon, both centers for Syriac Christianity.<sup>117</sup> These cities were also centers of long-distance trade. Nisibis, a border city between the Roman and Sasanian empires, is particularly important as a meeting point between East and West, and merchants and the trade route culture contributed to its civic identity.

People in Syriac-speaking regions could readily identify with merchant figures and the trade networks in which they operated. The merchants and traders who passed through and settled in these cities connected the Roman world to the East and bring Christianity to the Orient.

#### *Edessa's Cult of Thomas*

The narrative of the *Acts of Thomas* takes Thomas from Jerusalem, the city of Jesus's death and resurrection, to India, the place of Thomas's martyrdom. Between these sacred locations are places like Edessa that honor Thomas's memory through cult.

The symbol of the apostle who travels with merchants may be rooted in the cultural and commercial exchange of Edessa with North India. I have suggested that this symbol points to an audience or authors familiar with or invested in the trade route culture. Located at the junction of roads leading to India and China, Edessa was a crucial stop. Drijvers notes that numerous merchants would have passed through the city, which explains the cogency of the merchant-apostle symbol for the Edessa's inhabitants. According to Drijvers, Edessa was "an important station on the ancient silk-road and many travellers and merchants passed by Edessa on their way to or from the Far East and often sojourned there for some days."<sup>118</sup> This late antique city embodied the rich diversity created by trade routes and merchants. Embassies from India taught Edessans about the religious practices of the Indians. One of Edessa's most famous philosophers, the syncretistic thinker and ethnographer Bardaisan (154–222), wrote a book about India and its traditions, and attributed his knowledge of India to his acquaintance with an embassy to the Roman emperor Elagabalus (r. 218–22).<sup>119</sup> The placement of Thomas in India correlates with the cultural exchange between Edessa and India/Parthia in the third century.

As noted above, Greek-speaking Christians or bilingual Greek-Syriac Christians translated the *Acts of Thomas* almost immediately.<sup>120</sup> Could these translations have carried out in Edessa? Edessa was a bilingual city. Although we cannot prove

where the text was originally compiled, it seems plausible that some editing of the *Acts* and promotion of the story took place in Edessa.

The *Acts of Thomas* claims the apostle Thomas for the Christian Orient and creates a sacred memory that reserves him for locations east of Antioch.<sup>121</sup> The *Acts of Thomas* secures Thomas for the eastern areas of the trade routes to India, and South Indian Thomas Christians in Madras claimed to have Thomas's body in their cathedral.<sup>122</sup> Yet his martyrdom narrative (which also circulated independently from the rest of the *Acts*) claims that Thomas's relics went westward.<sup>123</sup>

According to Edessan traditions, Thomas's precious bones came to their city. Thomas's relics were enshrined there and became a pilgrimage destination. The Syriac deacon, poet, and theologian Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) moved to Edessa from Nisibis in 363. He mentions that Christians come to Edessa to venerate Thomas's relics.<sup>124</sup> In the late fourth century, the Spanish pilgrim Egeria describes her visit to Thomas's shrine. She hears "the writings of holy Thomas himself,"<sup>125</sup> and we can presume that these texts are some version of the *Acts of Thomas*.

The reference in the *Acts of Thomas* to the dislocation of his bones from India, together with the fourth-century testimony of Egeria, suggests an alignment of relic and narrative traditions that advances Edessa's claims to antiquity and apostolicity.<sup>126</sup> The trade routes connecting Edessa to India thus also provide a route for the exchange of Thomas's traditions between India and Edessa.<sup>127</sup>

The eastward gaze toward India serves the interests of a community considering its location between Rome and Parthia. Through their attribution of the conversion of India to Thomas, the authors of the *Acts* gain an apostle whose prestige reaches beyond Osrhoene. Yet, just as the prince in the "Hymn on the Pearl" ultimately returns to his family, so Thomas's bones, Edessa's pearls of great price, come to rest in a place west of India. This demonstrates the complex formation of Syriac religious traditions: relics are added to an earlier story tradition to invent an apostolic past to authenticate late antique civic piety in Edessa.

As we have seen, the *Acts of Thomas* creates themes for future Syriac missionary stories, and an essential narrative typology for subsequent Syriac hagiographers. While these writers may not copy the themes of the idealized missionary, they propose particular associations of the attributes of the missionary saint. In the *Acts of Thomas*, liturgical and ascetic practices create Christian societies in India. Poverty, celibacy or marital continence, and faith in Christ bring sweetness, rest, and eternal life and transform bodies into temples of God: "Blessed are the bodies made worthy to become purified temples in which Christ might dwell."<sup>128</sup> Thomas replaces sacrifices to the gods with prayers of thanksgiving, feasting with ascetic Eucharists, and families with communities of disciplined people united in his teaching. The *Acts* clothes ideals of material detachment in the garb of a wandering apostle and creates a narrative icon of early Syriac Christianity.

Although the text of the *Acts of Thomas*, and parts it, circulated in Greek-, Coptic-, and Latin-speaking circles, it was primarily Syriac-speaking Christians who preserved Thomas's memory. The *Acts of Thomas* became a Christian novel for the Syriac-speaking world. Thomas made a lasting impact on the presentation of apostolic lineage as the missionary apostle to the Syriac-speaking world. To this day, the Christians of South India identify themselves as "Thomas Christians." Although it may be impossible to connect the *Acts of Thomas* with a specific location, church, or community, the story projects an image of Saint Thomas that associates the apostle with India, and constructs a biblical past through the man who was called the "twin" of Jesus.

The *Acts of Thomas* crafts a representation of Christianity that ties it to the settlements and people on the trade routes east. And with the symbol of the itinerant missionary, the *Acts* lays the groundwork for how future generations will remember their past and their apostle and his mission to the people of the East.