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ARTICLE

Thomas the Twin: Constructing an Apostolic Personality

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Abstract

In the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, Thomas is mentioned only in the four lists of the Apostles (Mk 3:18; Mt 10:3; Lk 6:15; Ac 1:13). Appearing about midway through these lists, he seems to have been regarded as relatively unimportant among the Twelve. By contrast, in John's Gospel, Thomas is presented as a central character, featuring prominently in four major scenes. In three of those scenes Thomas is given the additional name Didymus (Twin), a name exclusive to him in John's Gospel and later tradition, especially in connection with Syrian Edessa. By the 4th century, Edessa had become famous for its special veneration of the Apostle Thomas, with sources featuring Thomas as the missionary link between Jesus and the early Christianisation of lands from Syria to India. The Edessan School of Thomas developed an encratic school of devotion to Thomas as the mystical twin of Jesus and prototypical Christian healer, and the Syrian city housed an established shrine for his remains. Scholars rightly contest the historical value of these sources, but analysis of their provenance, content and reception allows us to outline a picture whose lines converge in a coherent and plausible tradition of devotion that, in just a few centuries, reached as far east as India and as far west as Spain, Gaul, and Britain.

Keywords: Abgar; Apostle; Edessa; Egeria; Ephrem; India; School of Thomas; Syria; Thomas; twin

This article outlines the historical and theological construction in the Bible and Christian tradition of the apostolic personality known as Thomas the Twin. In sacred memory, he is popularly remembered as Thomas the doubter, a designation rooted in his stubborn refusal, recounted in the fourth Gospel, to believe the testimony of his apostolic confreres that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. This characterisation not only focuses too narrowly on this sceptical aspect of his personality, thereby betraying his developing role and character in the unfolding plot of John's Gospel, but it also overlooks two distinct yet connected traditions, subsequent to the New Testament, according to which Thomas – especially in his roles as mystical and intimate twin of Jesus, prototypical Christian healer, and posthumous miracle worker – is celebrated as the originating agent for the Christianisation of kingdoms and empires spanning from Roman Syria to as far east as Parthia and India.

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The study begins with the Thomas of the canonical Gospels, dwelling on his role and development in John, the way his questions precipitate vital shifts and pronouncements in the narrative, and the notable status he is accorded near the end where, in contrast to the synoptics, he is ranked second alongside Simon Peter. From here, the analysis moves to the Thomas of Syrian Edessa, a personality perhaps not unknown to the original Johannine community, but who was popularised especially in the early apocryphal works and encratic ethics associated with the School of Thomas. In this world, Thomas is better known as Judas-Thomas, with his intimate twin relation to Jesus serving to merge their identities such that his actions, both during life and after death, embody divine, kingdom-establishing salvific signs. This soon became the Thomas known and venerated in the Roman Empire, prompting pilgrims to visit the shrine of his much-prized relics in Edessa. Finally we turn to the Thomas of India, again linked to the Syrian Thomas, who was acknowledged to have been martyred in north-western India, but going beyond his exploits to found churches along the southern Indian coastline whose devoted heirs to this day lay claim to apostolic origin. After considering critical questions about the historical plausibility of these alleged 'Indian' sojourns, we conclude by affirming the curious unity of the various constructions and attestations, such that Thomas eventually – and uniquely among the Twelve – may be said to symbolise the fulfilment of a truly universal evangelical imperative.

1. The Thomas of the canonical Gospels

In the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, Thomas is mentioned only in the four lists of the Apostles (Mk 3:18; Mt 10:3; Lk 6:15; Ac 1:13). The name Thomas (Θωμᾶς) represents a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew epithet תאם (t'm) or Aramaic תאומא (t'ōma'), meaning double or twin. Appearing about midway through these lists, he seems to have been regarded as relatively unimportant among the Twelve.

By contrast, in John's Gospel, Thomas is presented as a central character, featuring prominently in four major scenes. In three of those scenes, Thomas is given the additional name Didymus, a name exclusive to him in John's Gospel and later tradition. Didymus is simply the Greek version of the Hebrew name Thomas, carrying the same meaning, 'the twin'. This of course evokes the question: to whom is Thomas the twin brother? But let us first consider his characterisation and personal development in the four Johannine scenes.

In his first appearance in John's Gospel, in the preamble to the ultimate seventh sign, Thomas, here named 'Thomas called Didymus', triggers a decisive move in the narrative, urging the disciples to accompany Jesus to Bethany and to the certain fate awaiting him there. 'Let us also go, that we may die with him' (Jn 11:16). The scenario suggests a certain morbid but realistic pessimism on Thomas's part, although John Chrysostom explains Thomas's statement here as an expression of fear, 'for he was weaker than the rest, and more lacking in faith'.[1] Thomas's role here, in what amounts

[1]Iohannes Chrysostomus, *In Iohannem homiliae* 62, trans. T.A. Goggin, Saint John Chrysostom, in *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist Homilies* 48–88 (Washington DC: Fathers of the Church 41, 1959), p. 168.

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to a significant passion prediction in the fourth Gospel, anticipates his growing importance in the unfolding of the narrative sequence culminating in Jesus' passion and glorification.

In the second scene, in which Thomas is named without his additional epithet, Thomas's comment, this in the form of a question directed to Jesus, again triggers a decisive moment, in which Jesus declares, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (Jn 14:6). The fact that Thomas here speaks on behalf of the eleven seems significant: 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Comparative questions directed by disciples to Jesus in the first person plural are very rare in John but always precipitate a weighty response from Jesus (cf. 3:2; 6:68). That Thomas functions representatively here, a function in the synoptics often exercised by Peter, speaks to the importance accorded to him by the Johannine community.

The third scene, often referred to as the 'Thomas episode' (Jn 20:24–29), brings out the extremes in Thomas's character: he is both the doubter and the pre-eminent confessor of Jesus' divinity. While many commentators praise doubt as a necessary element of Christian faith, Thomas's strong refusal to believe (οὐ μὴ πιστεύσω), without positive empirical proof, that the Lord the other Apostles were speaking of was the same person who had been crucified, occasions a firm rebuke from Jesus and an equally strong command to believe, or, more literally, to 'become a believer'. But the fact that the risen Lord holds out these physical proofs of his identity nonetheless, in accommodation of Thomas's determined demand, indicates the lengths to which the Lord will go to secure the fidelity of this Apostle, and any other would-be follower who is tempted to imitate such determined scepticism.

It is here in this pericope too, and precisely in connection with these dynamics of doubt and faith, that the fullest nominal description of Thomas is provided: 'Thomas, one of the Twelve, the one called Didymus' (20:24). As one who is simultaneously 'one of the Twelve' and 'not with the other disciples' when the risen Jesus appeared, Thomas stands on the borderline between the pre-Easter and post-Easter modes of encountering Jesus. Herein lies his double identity as twin: he is 'twin' with the ten Apostles who encounter the risen Jesus directly, and he is 'twin' with the readers of the post-Easter Church who must encounter him by means of the apostolic testimony.[2] His astonishing confession of the risen Jesus as 'My Lord and my God' (20:28) is most striking. As the confession that has made this Apostle 'famous in theology, liturgy, and representative art and writing',[3] it is also intensely personal, summing up the proper response to Jesus that stands as the intended goal of the entire Gospel (20:31). Yet while Jesus seems fully to accept this bold acknowledgement of his divinity, it prompts him to pronounce the second of only two macarisms in the fourth Gospel (20:29; cf. 13:17), in which not Thomas's kind of seeing faith, but precisely non-seeing faith is blessed.

In the final scene of Thomas's appearance, 'Thomas called Didymus' is listed second, alongside Simon Peter, in a group of seven disciples fishing by the Sea of Tiberias (21:2). The location functions as the setting for Jesus' final resurrection epiphany. Thomas's

[2]See S. M. Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst: Essays on the Resurrection of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville 2013), pp. 50–53.

[3]T. Popp, 'Thomas: Question Marks and Exclamation Marks', in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. S. Hunt et al. (Grand Rapids, 2013), p. 528.

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prominence in the list of disciples stands in noticeable contrast to his ranking in the synoptic lists. Is this a sign of some special devotion to Thomas already operative in the late 1st-century Asia Minor? One intriguing proposal that purports to account for the prominence of Thomas in the fourth Gospel comes from April D. DeConick, who argues that the Johannine Thomas, especially in the 'Thomas episode' of John 20:24–29, functions as part of an anti-gnostic theological polemic against popularisations of Thomas in the gnostic soteriologies prominent in early Christianity. While most scholars locate the Johannine community around Ephesus, DeConick suggests a provenance further east, proposing a Thomasine association in Syrian circles already in the 1st century.[4]

How may we summarise the persona and role of Thomas in the fourth Gospel? As far as his character goes, we have this appraisal:

> Altogether it may be said that he is portrayed as a deeply devoted, but somewhat dull, disciple whose lack of understanding provides Jesus an opportunity to disclose the truth more fully; but when he understands, he responds with stubborn loyalty.[5]

Yet does this do full justice to Thomas's prominence in the narrative, and to his rhetorical and *theological* role as twin? Johannine scholars account for the 'tag' Didymus in a number of ways. On the one hand, 'it may reflect a not untypical Johannine attention to historical detail'.[6] On the other hand, it may have been intended to identify Thomas for the 'Thomas community' whose tradition came to be reflected in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas and the Gospel of Thomas.[7] It is to that tradition, in which we meet with Judas-Thomas, the twin of Christ, that we now turn.

2. The Thomas of Syrian Edessa

It is hard to exaggerate, yet easy to overlook, the importance of Edessa in the early development of Christianity. Known today as Sanliurfa and situated some fifty kilometres from the Syrian border in south-central Türkiye, in ancient times Edessa lay on the busy caravan route between Antioch to the west and Nisibis to the east and functioned as a central point of exchange between the Greco-Roman and Persian-Asian cultures. Originating in close connection with Judaism and sharing a common liturgical and hermeneutical discourse, a vigorous Christian presence was well-established by around the year 200.[8] By the 4th century, Edessa had become well-known for its

[4]See A. D. DeConick, 'Blessed Are Those Who Have Not Seen' (John 20:29): Johannine Dramatization of an Early Christian Discourse', in *Nag Hammadi Library After Fifty Years*, ed. J. D. Turner and A. McGuire (Leiden, 1997), pp. 381–98.

[5]E. P. Blair, 'Thomas', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, ed. G.A. Buttrick et al. (Nashville, 1962), p. 631–2, at p. 632.

[6]M. M. Beirne, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals* (London, 2003), p. 206 fn37.

[7]G. J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Philadelphia, 1995), pp. 110–14.

[8]See S. Ashbrook Harvey, 'Syria and Mesopotamia', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity* vol. 1: *Origins to Constantine*, ed. M. M. Mitchell and F. M. Young (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 351–65, at pp. 354–56; H. J. W. Drijvers, 'East of Antioch: Forces and Structures in the Development of Early Syriac Theology', in idem., *East of Antioch: Studies in Early Syriac* Christianity (London, 1994), pp. 1–27; S. P. Brock, 'Jewish Traditions in Syriac Sources', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 30/2 (1979), pp. 212–32. Early theological developments were

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special veneration of the Apostle Thomas, and as the site of his tomb. Numerous sources in which Thomas features as the missionary link between Jesus and the early Christianisation of Syria and lands as far east as India originate in or around Edessa. They include, among others, the famous apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Acts of Thomas*. Many scholars dispute the historical value of these sources, but analysis of their provenance, content, and reception allows us to construct a picture whose lines converge in a coherent and plausible tradition of devotion.

2.1 The Abgar 'correspondence'

In the first book of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius recounts a story linking the Apostle Thomas to the original Christianisation of Edessa. The story seems quite independent of the apocryphal tradition relayed in the *Gospel of Thomas* and *Acts of Thomas* locating Thomas's primary missionary activity in 'India'. Eusebius's source tells how a certain king Abgar of Edessa, during Jesus' own lifetime, wrote to Jesus begging for healing from some terrible disease he was suffering.[9] Jesus promised in a return letter that he would in due course send one of his disciples to cure the king. The account reproduced by Eusebius explains:

> Not long afterward his promise was fulfilled. For after his resurrection from the dead and his ascent into heaven, Thomas, one of the twelve apostles, under divine impulse sent Thaddeus, who was also numbered among the seventy disciples of Christ, to Edessa, as a preacher and evangelist of the teaching of Christ.[10]

Eusebius then goes on to provide evidence of this correspondence, including the letter of Jesus and a record of the resulting mission, that the historian claims that he himself had discovered in 'the archives of Edessa', and which he had translated from the Syriac into Greek. It is on the basis of this epistolary exchange between Jesus and King Abgar and the subsequent mission by Thaddeus, sent by the apostle Thomas, that Eusebius

shaped by Marcion (85–160), Tatian (120–180), author of the *Diatessaron*, and Bardaisan (154–222). This latter was closely connected with the court of King Abgar VIII of Osroene. Attributed to Bardaisan (or his pupil Philip) is the Syriac philosophical dialogue *Book of the Laws of the Countries*. Bardaisan's theology was later opposed by Ephrem. See S. P. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature* (Kerala, 2009), pp. 8–9; also L. van Rompay, 'The East (3): Syria and Mesopotamia', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. S. Ashbrook Harvey and D. G. Hunter (Oxford, 2008), pp. 365–88, at pp. 370–71: 'It is only around 300 that Syriac Christianity fully emerges on the historical scene'.

[9]This is meant to refer to King Abgar V Ukkama of Osroene (9–46 A.D.). The Abgarid dynasty prevailed in Edessa from around 133 B.C. to 250 A.D. In the early 5th century, Syriac version of the story, preserved in the *Doctrine of Addai*, the tale ends with the ordination of the king's son Palut by Bishop Serapion of Antioch. This indicates a later date during the reign of King Abgar VIII (177–212). See further T. S. Wardle, 'Abgarids of Edessa', in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, ed. S. P. Brock et al. (Piscataway, 2011), pp. 5–7; S. P. Brock, *Eusebius and Syriac Christianity*, in: *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. H. W. Attridge and G. Hata (Detroit, 1992), pp. 212–234; A. Luther, *Die ersten Könige von Osrhoene*, 'Klio' 81/2 (1999), pp. 437–454.

[10]Eusebius Caesariensis, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1, 13, trans. A. C. McGiffert, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series* [=NPNF], ed. P. Schaff, H. Wace, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, 1890), p. 100.

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explains the peculiar and longstanding devotion of the Edessenes to Christ from the earliest times.[11]

While the story bears the features of an anti-Manichaean historical fiction,[12] it seems that it was taken quite literally by many in the Syrian church and, indeed, by Eusebius himself. In the 4th century, copies of the alleged correspondence were available in Edessa for archival research. Despite the fact that Ephrem (d. 373), Syriac Christianity's premier theologian of the 4th century, omitted any reference to the correspondence, possibly indicating his non-endorsement of its veracity or utility, in 384 Egeria reported that while in Edessa she was personally presented with an extract from the correspondence as a gift from Bishop Eulogius, noting how it appeared 'fuller' than an existing version she already had in her own library.[13] It is possible the version presented to Egeria was the expanded one eventually preserved in the Syriac *Doctrine of Addai*, which is usually dated to the early 5th century.[14]

2.2 *The Syrian 'School of Thomas'*

A second major tradition emerging from Edessa was the so-called School of Thomas. As in the Abgar correspondence, the Apostle Thomas, or Judas-Thomas as he is more commonly known in this school, features as the missionary link between Jesus the Saviour and lands as far east known contemporarily as 'India'. The School of Thomas tradition is attested by three main apocryphal texts from the early 3rd century: the *Acts of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Book of Thomas the Contender*. All three texts originated in Syriac, though it is possible Greek versions arose simultaneously or immediately afterwards. In all three, crucial importance is accorded to Thomas's being 'the twin', with his twin brother being identified as Jesus himself. To what extent the texts believe this symbolic filiality to have a literal and physiological basis is not clear. In the *Book of Thomas the Contender*, for example, the Saviour acknowledges only that Thomas 'is said' to be his twin brother, and 'is called' such. In the *Acts of Thomas*, on the other hand, there are multiple instances of the kind of confusion of identity that sometimes occurs with physically identical twins, with both Jesus and Judas-Thomas being mistakenly taken for the other in turn. In any case, this 'twin' motif functions as a central doctrinal and soteriological element in all the texts. Between Thomas and the Lord stands a certain spiritual identity and mystical reciprocity, as if, in the theology of the Thomas School, 'to know oneself was to know one's divine double and thence to know god; to follow the living Jesus was to know and integrate one's self'.[15]

The application of the name 'Judas' to Thomas the Twin in sources from the School of Thomas raises questions about its origin and development. In Matthew 13:55, Judas (*Ioudas*) is named along with James, Joseph and Simon as Jesus' brothers (*hoi adelphoi*

[11] See Eusebius Caesariensis, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2, 1, NPNF 1, p. 104.

[12] 'The Addai story has clear anti-Manichaean tendencies, and as a historical fiction functioned in a situation in which Manicaheism was a real threat'. Drijvers, *East of Antioch*, p. 18.

[13] *Itinerarium Egeriae* 19, trans. A. McGowan and P. F. Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria: A New Translation of the Itinerarium Egeriae with Introduction and Commentary* (Collegeville, 2018), pp. 140–141. Her own copy was presumably that of Rufinus's Latin translation of Eusebius' account. See below for further discussion on Egeria's visit to the shrine of Thomas.

[14] Also known as *The Teaching of Addai*, ed. and trans. G. Howard (Chicago 1981).

[15] Ed. B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: Ancient Wisdom for the New Age* (New York, 1987), p. 359.

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autou), while Mark 6:3 presents a slightly different list comprising James, Joses, Judas (*Iouda*), and Simon. The association of the two names Judas and Thomas in designation of the same Apostle is reflected in Syriac manuscripts of John 14:22. Where most manuscripts read 'Judas, not Iscariot', the Curetonian manuscript (syr^{c}) reads 'Judas Thomas'.[16]

2.2.1 *The Acts of Thomas*

The *Acts of Thomas* is generally believed to have been originally written in Syriac, though Klijn notes that, given the bilingual environment, both the Greek and Syriac versions could have arisen simultaneously.[17] It was composed sometime in the early 3rd century, probably in Edessa, and incorporates originally independent materials that go back to even earlier periods. Klijn further argues that this work should not be classified among the better-known Gnostic writings, but that it represents a prominent strand in the early tradition of Syriac Christianity.

As mentioned above, throughout the *Acts of Thomas*, in both Syriac and Greek versions, the Apostle is by and large known as 'Judas' or 'Judas Thomas' or even 'Judas, who is also Thomas'. In chapters 31 and 39, echoing the Gospel of John, Thomas is called 'the twin of the Messiah/Christ', which Klijn believes represents an original appellation. In chapter 11, the Lord appears in the likeness of Judas-Thomas, and is understandably mistaken for him. But the Lord clarifies, 'I am not Judas, but I am the brother of Judas'.[18] As Klijn summarises, 'It appears that we are dealing with a tradition according to which the word "Thomas" is supposed to mean "twin", that, secondly, the name of this twin is Judas and, finally, that this Judas is the twin of Christ'.[19]

Given the mystical interest in twins within many ancient near eastern cultures, not to mention the imaginative and creative style so characteristic of Syriac biblical exegesis, this theological development of Thomas as the twin brother of Jesus is not surprising. Popular myths often associated twins with the healing arts; in the *Acts of Thomas*, the Apostle is presented as a healer par excellence. It is not implausible to speculate that the exploitation of the 'Thomas the Twin' motif from the Fourth Gospel in the Syriac Judas-Thomas tradition, and especially the development of the symbolic idea that Thomas was the twin brother of Jesus and his appointed healer, was supported by precisely this kind of widespread mysticism of twins in that cultural universe.[20]

[16]Ed. K. Aland, *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd edn (New York, 1975), p. 391.

[17]A. F. J. Klijn, *Introduction*, in: idem., *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, Novum Testamentum 108 (Leiden, 2003), p. 3. See also the comment of Drijvers: 'almost all writings that originate in that area and date back to the first three centuries A.D. are handed down in a Syriac and a Greek version, and it is often very difficult to establish which is the original.... Whoever was literate in that particular time and area usually knew both languages, and it may even be supposed that most texts were written down in two versions from the very outset'. Drijvers, *East of Antioch*, p. 3.

[18]Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, p. 51; cf. chpts. 31 and 39.

[19]Klijn, *Introduction*, in: *The Acts of Thomas*, 7. See further J. J. Gunther, *The Meaning and Origin of the Name Judas Thomas*, 'Le Muséon' 93 (1980), pp. 113–48. On the interpretation of Thomas as the twin brother of Jesus, see J. Hartenstein, *Charakterisierung im Dialog: Maria Magdalena, Petrus, Thomas und die Mutter Jesu im Johannesevangelium* (Fribourg, 2007), pp. 230–68, 295–307.

[20]See L. D. Hankoff, 'Why the Healing Gods are Twins', *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 50 (1977), pp. 307–319.

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It is on a similar basis that Drijvers concludes that the Thomas we meet in the *Acts of Thomas* is 'not a historical but a theological person'. He asks:

> Whence stems this particular interest in an apostle Judas Thomas, who is unknown in traditions current outside Syria? I believe that Judas the twin brother of the Lord is the most perfect representative of the state of salvation, which implies an identification with the Saviour, God's Word and Spirit dwelling in a human being. Who is more like the Lord than his own twin brother?'[21]

In which case, from a historical point of view, it was probably not the Apostle Thomas who brought the gospel to eastern Syria. Rather, 'the particular interpretation of the Gospel that prevailed in that area focussed on the twin brother of the Lord, who as a human person identical with the heavenly brother represents salvation par excellence'.[22]

Alongside and within the 'twin' motif in the *Acts of Thomas* stands a number of significant theological features that typify the Syriac Thomas tradition both in the apocryphal sources and elsewhere. A central thematic feature in the *Acts of Thomas* concerns the problem of moral corruption and the contrasting ideal of sexual continence, even for the married. According to the preaching of Thomas, marital intercourse is 'a deed of shame' (chpts. 14, 54, 55, 84). It was for this message especially that Thomas met with opposition and eventual martyrdom.[23]

Between this theme of sexual abstinence and the 'twin' motif, it is possible to propose a linguistic and theological connection. The Syriac word for virginity or singleness is *ihidaya*. It represents the ideal form of life not only in the School of Thomas tradition, but in early Syriac Christianity in general. But *ihidaya* is also the word used to translate the Greek 'only-begotten' (*monogenes*), the special designation of Jesus as God's only son in the New Testament. According to Murray, the doctrine of *ihidaya* or *ihidayutha* involves not only leaving family and marriage for a sexually continent mode of life, but a single-mindededness, a pre-occupation with holiness, and even a kind of mystical identification with Christ as the only-begotten Son of God (*b^{e}ra ihidaya*), 'whom the consecrated ascetics "put on" in a special way'.[24] In the School of Thomas, Judas-Thomas – Jesus' own twin brother – can be seen both to preach and embody this moral and mystical identification with Christ the divine *ihidaya*.

The *Acts of Thomas* reveals additional personal details about Thomas himself, at least as portrayed and imagined in the world of the text. He is a carpenter and stonemason (3), trades that fit his identity as Jesus' 'twin'. His appointment to bring the gospel to 'India' falls to him by lot. Initially he rejects this appointment, based on his Hebrew ethnicity and ignorance of the Indian people. Jesus gets around this obstacle by selling

[21]Drijvers, *East of Antioch*, pp. 15–16. Similarly, according to Puech, 'Thomas serait, en conséquence, conçu comme le "frère mystique" du Christ, un "frère" qui e nest le reflet, l'image, la réplique parfait'. H.-C. Puech, *En quête de la Gnose II, Sur l'évangile selon Thomas* (Paris, 1978), p. 214.

[22]Drijvers, *East of Antioch*, p. 16.

[23]On the roots of extremes in sexual asceticism in early Syriac Christianity, see R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London, 2006), pp. 11–13. Drijvers (*East of Antioch*, p. 10) makes an important qualification: 'This encratism is not inspired by pure and simple hate of the body, but is a means of salvation, of restoring Man's original state'.

[24]Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, p. 14.

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Thomas for twenty pieces of silver [cf. Gen 27:38] as a carpenter-slave to one Habban, a servant of King Gundaphar. More will be said about this king below, but numismatic evidence attests to the reign of a king by this name in the Indo-Parthian region (from eastern Iran across Afghanistan to the Punjab) during the 1st century A.D. In this way Thomas the carpenter begins his apostolic ministry – as a slave in the court of King Gundaphar. Possessing just one garment, he appears as a poor stranger among those with whom he lives. Though he is apparently handsome or 'beautiful', like the Lord, his ministry consists primarily in self-denial and warfare against the devil and demonic agents, and controversially preaching conversion to Christ through ascetic purity, sexual abstinence (even for the married), prayer, and reception of baptism and the eucharist.

The apostle is soon entrusted with funds from the royal treasury to build an opulent palace. But overwhelmed by the poverty and plight of the people around him, Thomas instead spends the king's money on the poor, thereby building an invisible palace in heaven. The king is at first outraged by this betrayal of trust, sentencing Thomas to execution. But in a miraculous twist of events, the king is converted to Christ and, setting Thomas free, receives anointing, baptism, and communion.

From here the narrative turns to Judas-Thomas's journeys beyond the Gundapharan kingdom, eventually having him arrive 'in the realm of India' where his itinerant mission occupies him until his death. In the final chapters, in the court of a King Mazdai, Thomas again lands in trouble for his controversial ascetic message and its effect on the king's wife, Tertia, who withdraws from the marriage bed out of devotion to her new-found and true spouse, Jesus. Having tested the patience of King Mazdai too long, Thomas is at last violently killed with spears and his body buried 'in the sepulchre in which the ancient kings were buried'. Tradition places this tomb in Mylapore (near modern Chennai), but on the exact location the *Acts* remains reticent.[25] And finally, an account is given of a posthumous miracle healing experienced by King Mazdai's son. For a long time, Mazdai had opposed the preaching of Thomas. But in anguish over his son's illness, the king thought to himself, 'I will go and open the grave of Judas [Thomas] and take one of his bones and tie it to my son, and he will be healed'. But when the king opens the tomb, he finds the body of Thomas gone, secretly transferred by one of his followers to the West. So, instead, taking some dirt from the tomb, he applies it to his son; the son is healed, and the king converted. This extension of Thomas's miraculous powers after death by means of his relics, as well as the tradition that has his body relocated to Syria, also features in the later hymns and poems attributed to Ephrem (d. 373), which depict the devil lamenting over Thomas's enduring, and indeed, increased, power following the transferral of his body to Edessa.[26]

So ends the *Acts of Thomas*. Laden with doctrinal implication, these details, especially those involving spiritual warfare and sexual continence, 'vividly anticipate classic forms of Syrian asceticism that come to characterise the region when ascetic and monastic movements develop in the late fourth and fifth centuries'.[27] At the same time, they prompt questions about the relative usefulness of the account for a historical and geographical reconstruction of Thomas's extra-biblical activities. Is it possible

[25] See R. E. Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 96–7

[26] See the discussion on Ephrem below.

[27] Ashbrook Harvey, *Syria and Mesopotamia*, pp. 357–358.

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to offer any historical assessment? Several personal names and locations invite closer scrutiny. Especially important for the School of Thomas is the stress on 'India' as the ultimate field of Thomas's activities. More will be said on this in the relevant section below. Even if our analysis finds the *Acts of Thomas* lacking in reliable information of a historical and geographical nature, we must agree with McGrath that 'there is still a need... to place [it] within the content of the broader Thomas tradition, so as to answer questions about the location and extent of the group that produced these works, their theology, and questions such as why Thomas in particular became the apostle associated with this tradition ...'.[28]

2.2.2 *The Gospel of Thomas and the Book of Thomas the Contender*

The *Gospel of Thomas* was first referred to by Hippolytus (d. 235) (*Haer.* 5.2), and soon after by Origen (*Hom.* 1 *in Lc.*). In the 4th century, it was referred to by Eusebius (*HE* 3.25.6) and Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catech.* 5.36), who ascribed it to the disciples of Mani. Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Latin, and Greek versions represent a Syriac original (extant), though there is lack of consensus on date of composition, with variations from before 200 to much later.[29] Even so, it is quite possible that many of the Jesus-sayings collected in this apocryphal work represent a more primitive form of such sayings than those found in the canonical Gospels.

In contrast to the *Acts of Thomas*, which is written in the third person, the opening sentence of the *Gospel of Thomas* presents Judas-Thomas the Twin as its author: 'These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down'. Throughout the work Thomas is depicted as having an especially intimate relation to Jesus. Among the disciples he is Jesus' closest confidant, privy to secret messages and surpassing the knowledge possessed by Simon Peter and Matthew.

Of similarly early date, the *Book of Thomas the Contender* was composed in Syriac during the first half of the 3rd century.[30] Purportedly written down by a one 'Matthias', it comprises 'the secret words that the Saviour spoke to Judas Thomas'. The Saviour acknowledges that Thomas is known ('it has been said', 'you are called') as 'my twin and true companion', 'my brother', and so urges him on this basis to rise to self-knowledge and understanding. Thomas is variously named 'Judas Thomas', 'Judas, the one called Thomas', and finally 'Thomas the Contender'.

2.3. *The Tomb of Thomas in Edessa*

The early growth of Christianity in Edessa was marked largely by diverse and often competing movements. Traditions associated with figures like Marcion, Tatian, Bardaisan, and Mani did not easily offer a common confession for a more unified Edessan Christian identity to emerge.[31] With the development of the Thomas tradition, however, a unifying rallying point came to the fore which by the 5th century had

[28]J. F. McGrath, 'History and Fiction in the Acts of Thomas: The State of the Question', *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 17/4 (2008), pp. 297–311 at p. 297.

[29]See H. Koester and T. O. Lambdin, *Introduction to The Gospel of Thomas,* in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. J. M. Robinson (New York, 1977), pp. 117–30.

[30]J. D. Turner, *Introduction to The Book of Thomas the Contender* in: *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. Robinson, p. 188

[31]Drijvers (*East of Antioch*, pp. 7–10) contends for the paramount influence of Tatian's radical ascetic theology in the early formation of the School of Thomas tradition. However see M. R. Crawford, 'The

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eclipsed all others. Edessan claims to apostolic pre-eminence came to rest above all on the tomb of the saint in its central church. The *Acts of the Second Council of Ephesus* (449), originally written in Greek but surviving only in Syriac, confirm this basis for the Edessan church's claim. 'From the very beginning, our city by the grace of God excelled in faith [...] because it was esteemed worthy that in it were placed the bones of the apostle Thomas, he who first proclaimed our Saviour to be the Lord and God'.[32]

Several other important testimonies to the shrine of Thomas's remains in Edessa support the account that in the late 4th century, the Apostle's body was transferred to Edessa from its original place of burial. Two are worthy of close reading, those of Ephrem and Egeria. From early times, Ephrem (d. 373) gained renown for his theological acuity, and today is venerated as the great Syriac Doctor of the Church. Although Ephrem was a native of Nisibis, he relocated to Edessa following the surrender of Nisibis to the Persians in 363. Perhaps surprisingly, Ephrem does not mention the Abgar correspondence, so dear to Edessene Christianity in its claims to have originated in direct contact with Jesus. On the other hand, numerous hymns traditionally attributed to Ephrem eloquently praise the ministry of Thomas the Twin in India and, centuries later by means of his physical remains, also in Edessa. The references are too many to cite in full here. Early in the 20th century, A.E. Medlycott methodically assembled those bearing witness to Thomas, but more recent studies by Sebastian Brock have raised questions about the genuineness of Ephrem's authorship of many of the collection.[33] The relevant extracts presented here should be read with that qualification in mind. On Thomas's alleged mission to India, for example, we read:

> The One-Begotten his Apostles he chose, among them Thomas,
> whom he sent to baptise peoples perverse, in darkness steeped.
> A dark night then India's land enveloped,
> Like the sun's ray Thomas did dart forth;
> There he dawned, and her illumined.[34]

Or again, with subtle reference to the darker skin colour of the people of India

> Blessed art thou, Thomas the Twin, in thy deeds!
> Twin is thy spiritual power; nor one they power, nor one thy name:
> But many and signal are they; renowned is thy name among the Apostles.[35]

'Problemata' of Tatian: Recovering the Fragments of a Second-Century Christian Intellectual', *The Journal of Theological Studies NS*, 67/2 (2016), pp. 542–575.

[32]In R. Doran, *Stewards of the Poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth-Century Edessa*, Cistercian Studies Series 208 (Kalamazoo, 2006), p. 146.

[33]A. E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas: An Inquiry, with a Critical Analysis of the Acta Thomae* (London, 1905), pp. 21–32; S. Brock, *A Brief Guide to the Main Editions and Translations of the Works of St. Ephrem*, 'The Harp' 3/1–2 (1990) pp. 7–29.

[34]Ephraem Syri, *Hymni dispersi* 7,1, ed. T. J. Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones*, vol. 4, Mechliniae 1902, col. 706, trans. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, p. 29.

[35]Ephraem Syri, *Hymni dispersi* 5,11, ed. Lamy 4, 700, trans. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, p. 26.

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> Blessed art thou whom the Great King hath sent,
> that India to his One-Begotten thou shouldest espouse;
> above snow and linen white,
> thou the dark bride didst make fair.[36]

And concerning the transferral of Thomas's body from India to Edessa by an unnamed merchant, and its continuing miraculous power, we read:

> [Thus] howled the devil: into what land shall I fly from the just?
> I stirred up Death the Apostles to slay, that by their death I might escape their blows.
> But harder still am I now stricken: the Apostle I slew in India has overtaken me in Edessa;
> Here and there he is all himself. There I went, and there was he:
> here and there to my grief I find him.[37]

Another testimony to the presence of Thomas's tomb in Edessa comes from the diary of the Spanish nun, Egeria. Unlike Ephrem, Egeria is silent on the so-called Indian connection: that is, where Thomas had died and how his remains came to be in Edessa. According to her journal, after a lengthy stay in Jerusalem, Egeria decided to return home via Syria. Scholars place her journey there during April of 385, when Eulogius was bishop of Edessa.[38] Unable to visit Nisibis due to its Persian occupation, she elected instead to visit Edessa to see the holy monks of the region but especially 'for the sake of prayer at the martyrium of holy Thomas the Apostle, where his entire body is laid'.[39] The exact location of the Apostle's martyrium is not obvious from Egeria's report, and some scholars express uncertainty whether 'to the church and to the martyrium' indicates one or two locations. According to the Syriac *Chronicle of Edessa* (6th c.), the first place of interment of Thomas's remains in Edessa lay just outside the city in an unidentified location, until, on August 22 in 394, the relics were transferred to the church dedicated to him under the episcopate of Cyrus (d. 396), Eulogius' successor.[40] This would suggest that the impressive church visited by Egeria, 'huge and very beautiful and of new construction', was distinct from the shrine of Thomas, at this stage still located outside the city. Thus, having viewed the new cathedral church, Egeria proceeded directly to the tomb, where prayers and customary rituals were made. She reports that 'we also read there something from holy Thomas himself', perhaps meaning something from the *Gospel of Thomas* that, unlike the *Acts of Thomas*, purports to

[36]Ephraem Syri, *Hymni dispersi* 5,14, ed. Lamy 4, 702, trans. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, p. 26.
[37]Ephraem Syri, *Carmina nisibena* 42, ed. G. Bickell, *S. Ephraemi Syri Carmina Nisibena: Ephrem's Nisibene Hymns* (Leipzig, 1866), trans. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*, p. 22.
[38]McGowan and Bradshaw, *Introduction* in *The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, pp. 22–7.
[39]*Itinerarium Egeriae* 17, trans. McGowan and Bradshaw, p. 133.
[40]See B. H. Cowper, *Selections from the Syriac. No. 1: The Chronicle of Edessa*, 'Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record NS' 5/9 (1864), pp. 28–45 at p. 33. The *Chronicle of Edessa*, an original Syriac work, comprises short stories related to the history of Edessa. See further L. van Rompay, 'Chronicle of Edessa', in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac* Heritage, ed. S. P. Brock et al. (Piscataway, 2011), pp. 97–8.

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have been authored by the Apostle himself.[41] Having been shown through the church and the grand palaces of king Abgar by bishop Eulogius, Egeria was given a copy of one of the letters from the Abgar correspondence with Jesus, in which the role of Thomas in the original evangelization of the kingdom is narrated. Interestingly, Egeria makes no mention of the Apostle's customary Syriac appellation 'Judas-Thomas'. Nor, as already indicated, does she refer to any tradition linking Thomas to India. Could it be that between the time of Ephrem and Egeria the Thomas-India tradition in Edessa was beginning to dissipate? Does this confirm that the reading she heard about Thomas was from the *Gospel of Thomas* (which omits any mention of India) and not the *Acts*? It has been suggested that the 4th-century Manichaean appropriation of the *Acts of Thomas* and the Thomas-India connection led to its increasing suppression in Edessa.[42] The Edessan church claimed possession of the apostle's body, and that is what mattered. In any case, after three days, Egeria left Edessa for Carrhae.

3. The Thomas of India

As we have seen, the 3rd-century *Acts of Thomas*, which is of Edessan provenance, legendarily locates the missionary activities of Judas-Thomas the Twin largely 'in the realm of India'. Likewise the hymns attributed to Ephrem make much of Thomas's Indian connection. But in both cases the whereabouts of this 'India' is ambiguous. Does it in fact mean the sub-continent? The kingdom of Gundophar, a prominent figure in the story, has been situated somewhere within modern Pakistan. Coinage places Gundaphar's reign somewhere between 30 B.C. to 46 A.D.[43] The invocation of this long-unknown but now firmly attested dynastic ruler has certainly lent aspects of the tradition connecting Thomas to India greater credence. Other names in the *Acts of Thomas* both broaden and problematise the geopolitical picture. In chapter 82, Judas-Thomas engages a royal figure by the name of Mygdonia. According to Klijn, 'The name is known from that part of Mesopotamia in which Nisibis is situated'.[44] In the final chapters, Thomas is under house arrest in the court of a King Mazdai. On the provenance of this name, McGrath contends that Mazdai was 'not only a famous ruler of Cilicia and Syria, but one mentioned in Arrian's account of Alexander's "descent" into India…'.[45] Alexander's campaigns certainly brought him as far as the Indus River. Such associations have been used to strengthen claims of a real north-Indian provenance for the ministry of the Apostle Thomas.

Other patristic sources, apparently quite independent of the sources of the School of Thomas, also refer to Thomas's apostolic ministry in India. Near the end of the 4th century, we have Gregory Nazianzen asking:

[41]Alternatively, the Latin genitive construction – *aliquanta ipsius sancti Thomae* – may instead indicate something 'about' Thomas, rather than something (purportedly) authored by him. See S. F. Johnson, *Literary Territories: Geographical Thinking in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2016), p. 86.

[42]Johnson, *Literary Territories*, p. 98.

[43]Klijn proposes 30 to 15 B.C., while most scholars date his reign to the period between 21 and 46 A.D. See McGrath, *History and Fiction*, p. 299.

[44]Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, p. 161 (modern south-eastern Turkey).

[45]On the provenance of this name, McGrath writes: Mazdai was 'not only a famous ruler of Cilicia and Syria, but one mentioned in Arrian's account of Alexander's "descent" into India…'. McGrath, *History and Fiction*, p. 299.

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> What? Were not the Apostles strangers amidst so many nations and countries over which they spread themselves? ... Peter indeed may have belonged to Judea, but what had Paul in common with the Gentiles, Luke with Achaia, Andrew with Epirus, John with Ephesus, Thomas with India, Mark with Italy?[46]

About the same time in the West, we find Ambrose describing the primitive spread of the gospel, with 'the Apostles being sent without delay according to the saying of our Lord Jesus.... Even those kingdoms that were shut out by rugged mountains became accessible to them, like India to Thomas, Persia to Matthew...'.[47] Another eloquent testimony comes from the famous hagiography of Gregory of Tours (d. 594). Written in the 580s, the *Glory of the Martyrs* dwells upon the miracles effected by saints' relics. While Gregory rarely tells of his sources, in one section he relates a personal story he had heard from a certain Theodorus who had supposedly travelled to India. Theodorus told Gregory that at the place where Thomas was martyred there now stands a monastery and a large, ornate church in which an oil lamp burns continuously (and miraculously) by the Apostle's former tomb. 'Much later', however, 'his blessed body was transferred to the city that the Syrians call Edessa, and there buried'. Accordingly, every July in Edessa there is a thirty-day festival in the Apostle's honour, during which many visitors gather for toll-free trade, and enjoy miraculous provisions of water and an absence of flies.[48] By the middle ages, the Thomas-India connection was universally accepted in the West, precipitating official pilgrimages to Thomas's supposed original place of burial from personages as famous as Bishop Sigehelm of Sherborne, commissioned with alms and sent in 883 by King Alfred of England, and Marco Polo (d. 1324) on his return journey from China.[49]

Another set of data testifying to Thomas's missionary presence in India originates within the early Christian communities of southern India, the same communities encountered by Cosmas Indicopleustas during his voyage around 550 along the Keralan and Sri Lankan coastlines and with links to the Persian Church of the East. The very early establishment of Christianity in southern India seems quite plausible given the flourishing maritime trade between the Roman Empire and India, and the existence of Jewish diaspora settlements along the south Indian coastline from as early as the 4th century BC. According to Frykenberg, the relevant data connecting Thomas to this early Christian presence consists of 'carefully preserved oral sagas, literary texts, genealogies, epigraphic and numismatic data on stone tablets and copper plates and coins of copper, silver, and gold...'.[50] Among the earliest texts among these is the *Thomas Parvam* or Song of Thomas, which describes how 'the way of the Son of God' came to southern India from Arabia when Thomas arrived. While this text locates Thomas's missionary activity not in the northern Punjabi region (as we find in the School of Thomas tradition), but in the southern and western coastal area, the two

[46]Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio* 33, 11, NPNF 7, 332.

[47]Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *In Psalmum XIV Enarratio*, PL 14, 1143AB.

[48]Gregorius Turonensis, *Miraculorum libri I de gloria beatorum martyrum* 31–32, trans. R. Van Dam, Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Martyrs*, Translated Texts for Historians 4 (Liverpool, 1988), pp. 51–2.

[49]W. Baum and D. W. Winckler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London and New York, 2003), p. 94; C. R. Green, *King Alfred and India: An Anglo-Saxon Embassy to southern India in the late ninth century AD*, 2019. https://www.caitlingreen.org/2019/04/king-alfred-and-india.html#fn7 [accessed 8 June 2023].

[50]Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, p. 99.

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quite independent groups of sources converge in their references to the heavenly palace Thomas built by his charitable works, and to his violent death by spearing. The *Thomas Parvam* dates the Apostle's death to 73 A.D.[51]

Yet another set of sources, on the other hand, relegate Thomas's missionary activity to Parthia, and instead identify Bartholomew as the first-generation Christian responsible for the evangelisation of India. In recounting the division of the world into discrete apostolic missionary zones, Eusebius refers to a tradition that connects Thomas not with India, but with Parthia: 'As the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were scattered over the whole inhabited world, Thomas, tradition maintains, obtained Parthia for his share …'.[52] Then further on in book 5, another account is related by Eusebius in discussing the career of Pantaenus, the renowned teacher of Clement and Origen in Alexandria. He relates the story, circulated by teachers of the school in Alexandria, that Pantaenus had at some stage, perhaps before or around the time of his pedagogical association with Clement, been appointed to carry out a mission to India.

> They say that he displayed such zeal for the divine Word, that he was appointed as a herald of the gospel of Christ to the nations in the east, and was sent as far as India. For indeed there were still many evangelists of the Word who sought earnestly to use their inspired zeal, after the examples of the apostles, for the increase and building up of the divine Word. Pantaenus was one of these, and is said to have gone to India. It is reported that among persons there who knew of Christ, he found the Gospel according to Matthew, which had anticipated his own arrival. For Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them, and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language, which they had preserved till that time.[53]

This story finds partial collaboration, with additional detail, in the writings of Jerome. According to Jerome, Pantaneus's missionary journey to India had actually been conducted in response to a request from the Indians themselves, who had sent a deputation to Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria, probably sometime around 180, or perhaps 190. As Jerome has it, 'Pantaenus, a philosopher of the Stoic school, was on account of his great reputation for learning sent by Demetrius bishop of Alexandria to India, to preach Christ to the Brahmans and philosophers there'.[54] Even more specifically, in his historical compendium of great intellectuals Jerome says that Pantaenus 'was sent to India by the bishop Demetrius at the request of the Indians themselves'.[55] This then would seem to make plausible the theory that the mission of Pantaenus to India, following upon a deputation from India around 180–190 A.D. soliciting support from the church in Alexandria, was subsequent to an earlier missionary journey, one possibly undertaken by Bartholomew.

[51]Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, p. 100.
[52]Eusebius Caesariensis, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3, 1, NPNF 1, 132.
[53]Eusebius Caesariensis, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5, 10, 1, NPNF 1, 224–5.
[54]Hieronymus, *Ep*. 70, 4, NPNF 6, 150.
[55]Hieronymus, *De viris illustribus* 36, NPNF 3, 370.

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But now we must return to the problematic question about the meaning of 'India'. 'It is well known', writes Johnson in a chapter devoted to the question, 'that late antique and medieval writers often meant very different things from one another when invoking the land they called "India"'.[56] More typically, India – when investigated – often meant either the southern end of the Arab Peninsula (modern Yemen), or else ancient Axum (Ethiopia). Sometimes the placename was additionally qualified: 4th- and 5th-century sources speak of 'further India', 'inner India', 'nearer India', and 'innermost India'.[57] When commenting on the reported journeys of Bartholomew and Pantaenus to India, Johnson argues that the more likely destination was in fact Arabia.[58] The accounts in Eusebius and Jerome, therefore, do not displace the tradition attesting to Thomas's missionary journey to India. But then again, the ambiguity surrounding late antique invocation of 'India' as a real or imagined land east or south of Mesopotamia, not to mention the discrepancies in the sources between a north Indian, Parthian, or south Indian field of activity, forces us to suspend any decisive conclusions about Thomas's alleged mission there.

4. Conclusion

While the Thomas of the synoptic gospels features simply as one of the Twelve, we have seen the ways his personality expanded from the fourth gospel, where he is remembered especially for his refusal to believe in the resurrection of Jesus without tactile proof, to the early traditions of Syrian Edessa and India, where he is celebrated as the ascetic miracle worker and first evangelist in influential kingdoms reaching to the boundaries of the known world. His role as 'the twin', only subtly and ambiguously developed in John's gospel, comes to feature, in the apocryphal writings of the School of Thomas, as a central theological motif. There he is above all the mystical twin brother of Jesus, the consecrated, virginal *ihidaya*, whose Christian preaching contentiously calls for singular devotion to Christ and his eternal kingdom, to the point of forsaking all forms of love that belong to the world that is passing away. According to this same tradition, it was precisely for this message and its effects that Thomas eventually met a martyr's death, not in his Hebrew homeland, but far to the east in 'India'. Already in the 3rd century, there are patristic testimonies attesting to this far-flung apostolic sojourn, while in the 4th century, the return of his body to Edessa prompted pilgrims from as far west as Spain to visit his tomb, and in short time became the celebrated basis for the Edessan church's claim to apostolic eminence. Whether the 'India' referred to in the earliest texts means the subcontinent we know today, or rather somewhere further west, such as the Arab Peninsula or even Ethiopia, remains a matter of some doubt. Still, it must be granted that the contemporary conditions that enabled maritime trade and overland travel between the Mediterranean and lands as far east as China lend some slim plausibility to early affirmations that Thomas the Apostle did in fact reach both southern and western India. Indeed, the first recorded communities of Christians in southern India, with links to the Syriac-speaking Church of the East in Persia, who were already encountered by outsiders from the 3rd century and who

[56] Johnson, *Literary Territories*, p. 133.
[57] Johnson, *Literary Territories*, pp. 133–4
[58] Johnson, *Literary Territories*, p. 134.

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have evolved through a 1800 year-old continuous living tradition, deferred to Thomas as their founder, while his original burial shrine near Chennai (Madras) was renowned in the west, so much so that King Alfred of England, a noted devotee of St Thomas, appointed representatives to travel to India and give alms at the site, in this way signalling the universal reach of the Christian gospel. And so, although the historical kernel of the Apostle's story remain inextricably interlocked with legend, by the end of the first millennium, in all their diverse aspects, the life, ministry and martyrdom of Thomas the Twin had come to symbolise the rich fulfilment of the primitive dominical mandate to bear witness to Christ 'in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1: 8).

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