History and Fiction in the Acts of Thomas: The State of the Question

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ABSTRACT: The *Acts* of Thomas has not yet received as much attention as the *Gospel* associated with the same individual, and this is understandable. Current students of this early Christian work, however, are in danger of missing out on the discussions and differing perspectives long offered by scholars of the Indian church and Indian history on this work. The current study suggests that, while the *Acts of Thomas* is almost certainly a work of novelistic fiction, this should not lead us to ignore the instances of confirmable historical information embedded therein, as in many other works of historical fiction. The *Acts of Thomas* merits renewed detailed study by historians interested in early Christianity both in Syria and in India.

Whereas the *Gospel* of Thomas has been the subject of increasing scholarly attention and interest over the course of the 20th (and now 21st) centuries, the rest of the literature associated with the name of Judas Thomas has received rather less and somewhat sporadic attention from scholars. This is not to say that (particularly among those interested in Indian Christianity) there has not been a continuous and longstanding history of scholarship on the work that will be the focus of this article, namely the *Acts of Thomas*. Nevertheless, there is a need for the attention that scholars pay to this work to continue, and indeed to increase; in particular for the following reasons:

1) Scholarship has tended to revolve around (and periodically swing back and forth between) the polar dichotomies of historicity and ahistoricity, with little attempt to define a middle ground (as has been done in the case of the Gospels). The tendency has been either to *presuppose* its lack of historical value rather than to argue the case, or to argue for its historical accuracy in its broad outline using speculative arguments unlikely to carry weight with the mainstream of historians and exegetes working on this text.
2) Our current academic climate, in which scholarship on Indian history and religion is represented in a growing number of universities, and which emphasizes interdisciplinarity, offers the potential for new insights through collaborative efforts between scholars of India and of early Christianity.
3) Even if the *Acts of Thomas* proves to be a completely fictional account without the slightest basis in history, there is still a need (as some recent studies have emphasized) to place the Gospel of Thomas within the context 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, and why this figure who was so important to them was at the same time associated with India.

Scholarship on this subject has swung on more than one occasion between the extreme poles of the narrative being considered essentially historical on the one hand, and a mere romance or novel on the other. Scholars associated with the Indian Church, however, have had a greater tendency to argue for the essential historicity of the story, in spite of the fact that the *Acts* differs from local church traditions passed on orally by South India's Marthoma community. With a few important exceptions, most recent Western scholarship has tended to *presuppose* the legendary character of the story, rather than to argue the case in detail. This has meant that, for the most part, readers of the most recent publications on the *Acts of Thomas* will not be introduced to the detailed arguments presented in the scholarship of the early 20th century. This is unfortunate, since a fair determination of the issue will need to engage the detailed argumentation of that generation of scholars, in particular A. E. Medlycott, J. N. Farquhar, and A. Mingana, not to mention Stephen Neill, Mathias Mundadan, and others writing somewhat more recently on the history of Indian Christianity. The main evidence presented in these books with respect to the historicity of the *Acts of Thomas* can be grouped under two key headings. First, names and geography, in particular, the mention of king Gondophares[1] and the discovery of coins providing evidence of his existence. This discovery (which had an important impact on scholarship in the 19th century) is still mentioned in discussions of the Acts, although often with a very different assessment of the implications with respect to historicity. Second, there is the alleged presence of Indian or Hindu customs. We shall consider both of these major categories in what follows.

Knowledge of names and geography

Before considering the presence of Gondophares' name in the text, let us begin with the broader subject of names in general in the story. Although Medlycott separates these subjects, they are best treated together, for reasons that will soon become clear. Medlycott acknowledges that the names in the story are in general not Indian and not authentic. His explanation of this fact is that names are at least as unintelligible to outside visitors as the language spoken in a region, and for that reason, one should not be surprised that the author was unable to reproduce the actual names of individuals and instead used other names for dramatic purposes.[2] Medlycott's explanation is certainly plausible, since as he notes, Act 7 introduces the general and his family without names, and it is only in the middle of Act 8 that a name is given to this character, suggesting this detail may be a late addition to the story.[3] He thus rejects (for example) the suggestion that the name Mazdai in the *Acts* derives from Vasudeva, although his attempt to derive it from Mahadeva is equally unconvincing. The latter name, for one thing, is attested in the time of Marco Polo, and thus has little weight as evidence for names in the first century

[1] Parthian Vindapharna. Other forms (such as Gudnaphar) are also sometimes used.

[2] Medlycott (p.283) notes that the names in the story are not Indian and are therefore to be dismissed as added for dramatic purposes. This does not affect historicity, he claims, since names are often unpronounceable to foreigners and therefore unlikely to be preserved accurately in narratives of foreign travel. Medlycott also states that, in a realistic depiction of Indian customs, women's names would not be used at all – the individuals in question would be referred to as "wife of X", "daughter of Y", or in similar fashions (p.283). I am grateful to Prof. Chad Bauman for pointing out to me that, in the Epics (often thought to have been written around this time) Sita is not simply called "Rama's wife", and so Medlycott's point, while generally true, did not always apply.

[3] Medlycott, p.284.

C.E. Nor does his explanation of the transformation of "Maha" to "Mas" convince.[4] A more likely source for this name is the actual name Mazdai itself, Mazdai having been not only a famous ruler of Cilicia and Syria, but one mentioned in Arrian's account of Alexander's "descent" into India, likely reading for someone composing a work set in India.[5] But at any rate, for the most part Medlycott himself is skeptical (and rightly so) of the attempts to provide authentic Indian origins for most of the names in the text.

This broader topic was introduced first, prior to discussing the name Gondophares which appears both in the text and in numismatic evidence, because it sets the stage for a crucially important question: if the names in the *Acts of Thomas* are generally accepted to *not* represent authentic Indian names, then why is there at least one glaringly great exception in the case of Gondophares?[6] The answer, it is sometimes suggested, is that the name of Gondophares was well known beyond Persia and India, as indicated most clearly by the fact that he was identified in later legend as one of the "three kings" who came from the East, his name having become corrupted in later centuries to Caspar. Authors who make much of this point also tend to highlight some uncertainty regarding the dates of Gondophares' reign, suggesting that they might not in fact correspond to the time when Thomas could have engaged in Christian mission activity in India. Given the general inauthenticity of the names in the *Acts*, it is not surprising that scholars should suggest that the one authentic one gets it right not because of actual historical knowledge deriving from Thomas, but more likely by drawing on a pool of general knowledge about India available in Syria, the most probable place of composition. This is an important point, since other features of the *Acts* may be explained along similar lines, as shall soon become apparent.

However, be that as it may, a very different view of these matters is taken by historians of India, as opposed to those approaching the *Acts of Thomas* from the perspective of research primarily focused on early Christian texts. For example, John Keay expresses some doubts about the identity of the *Thomas* mentioned in the Acts, but with respect to king Gondophares he writes that the confirmation in the *Acts of Thomas* of the reign and time of this king "deserves…to be greeted as something of a milestone in what is otherwise a trackless wilderness of dynastic uncertainty."[7] With a single exception, scholarship on Indian and Parthian history seems to unanimously date Gondophares' reign to the period from 21 C.E. until at least 46 C.E., and thus the *Acts of Thomas* seems to use an appropriate name for this time period.[8]

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[4] Although in the earlier development of the Indo-European (and more strictly the Indo-Aryan) language family, interchange of these two consonants did indeed take place, this phenomenon has no direct relevance to a consideration of how an *Indian* name in the first century may have been transformed by speakers of Syriac or Greek in that same period.

[5] Arrian, Anabasis, III.8.6. See also Farquhar p.56.

[6] Although I am here referring to the Parthian king, as is usually done in discussions of the *Acts of Thomas*, it is to be noted that some have suggested identifications for the Gondophares of the *Acts* with *South* Indian kings, such as Kandappa or Kutnappar Raja (Mundadan, p.26). Interestingly, the South Indian oral tradition tells the same stories as the *Acts of Thomas*, but gives different names to the kings (Mundadan, p.31).

[7] John Keay, *India: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2000) p.109.

[8] Klijn (2003, p.21) refers to a much-disputed minority viewpoint that Gondaphares reigned c. 30-15 B.C.E., without discussion or citation of evidence. This seems to belie the tendency of early Christian scholars to prefer conclusions that allow works such as these to be dismissed out of hand. The harder task of sifting through a work and painstakingly assessing historicity cannot so easily be avoided. Apparently the only scholar of Indian history to argue for this earlier date is J. Van Lohuizen de Leeuw in his 1949 book *The*

Furthermore, the *Acts* mention not only this king, but his brother, who is called *Gad* in both the Greek and Syriac texts. This name, as has often been pointed out, could correspond to the name Gudana found on coins in conjunction with king Gondaphares. While Gondaphares *may possibly* have become the stereotypically known king of the East in some traditions (although he is certainly not known from any historical text), the same cannot be said of his brother, who is not at all known outside of the numismatic evidence and the *Acts of Thomas*.

Lourens van den Bosch, however, has recently proposed that what has thus far been interpreted as a name (i.e. Gudana) ought to be taken instead as an adjective. If he is correct, then just as Kushana designates a royal line deriving from Kusha, rather than being an individual's proper name, so also Gudana would indicate a royal line derived from Guda. Yet while this possibility cannot be definitively excluded, it fails to convince for several reasons:

- First, while there is clear evidence for the use of Kushana to denote a line of rulers, such evidence is absent in the case of the Parthian rulers of whom Gondaphares is one.
- Conversely, the records which use Kushana as a designation of the ruler do not mention individual rulers by name.[9]
- The majority of scholars of Indian history understand Gudana as a proper name (although admittedly it is possible that they do so under the influence of knowledge of the *Acts of Thomas*).
- If one were to press this line of argumentation too far, then the very name Gondaphares might also be taken adjectivally, since it is a variant pronunciation of the Persian name Vindapharna meaning "The Winner of Glory".[10]

Given that scholars of Indian history accept the accuracy of the names and approximate dates attributed to these individuals the *Acts of Thomas*, it would seem ill-advised for scholars of early Christianity to express an inordinate amount of skepticism.

Once one accepts this conclusion, one becomes aware that the information from the *Acts of Thomas* and other early Christian authors is complementary and mutually confirming with regard to at least one other point, in a way that seems once again to support some measure of historical knowledge on the author's part. The *Acts of Thomas* present the apostle as traveling to India, and within the *Acts* the kings we have been discussing are presented as *Indian* kings. Yet a number of early Christian authors refer to Thomas as having gone to *Parthia*. This Parthia tradition says nothing about Thomas visiting India, while the India tradition never mentions Parthia. Yet this information, rather than being contradictory as has sometimes been suggested, is mutually confirmatory, since these rulers of northern India were *Parthian* kings.[11] When two sources provide information that is complementary and apparently independent, this is often taken to be historically significant.

Scythian Period (Leiden, 1949). As Mundadan notes, the Parthian entry into the Punjab is usually dated to the 1st century BCE/CE, and Gondaphares is not the first of the Parthian rulers (Mundadan, p.12 n.1).

[9] D. C. Sirkar, in *The History and Culture of the Indian People: The Age of Imperial Unity* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1968) p.131.

[10] George Menachery, "The St. Thomas Christians of Kerala India" http://thinkers.net/writer/nazraney.html

[11] As rightly observed by J. N. Farquhar, *The Apostle Thomas in India According to the Acts of Thomas* (Kerala, 1972) pp.1,34-35.

With respect to the itinerary of the journey of Thomas in the *Acts*, textual confusion complicates historical discussion somewhat. Where the Syriac text of chapter 3 refers to *Sandaruk* as the first major disembarkment on the journey, the Greek has *Andrapolis*, an Egyptian city, and the characterization of the latter as a 'royal city' is particularly problematic. The overland route presupposed by the Syriac manuscript, on the other hand, is historically plausible, and would account quite naturally for both Thomas' connection with Edessa and his arrival in North India. This very plausibility, however, raises issues for the historian, since one possible explanation is that the author of the *Acts*, writing in Eastern Syria, simply attributed to Thomas a journey to India via a route such as the author's contemporaries were prone to take.

Before moving on from a consideration of names, dates and geography in the *Acts of Thomas*, it is worth pointing out several additional details that are, at the very least, historically intriguing. These relate to the as yet unmentioned tradition that Thomas visited not only Parthian-ruled North India, but also South India as well. Thomas' arrival in South India is traditionally dated, by the Mar Thomite oral tradition preserved in Kerala, to the year 52 C.E. As Farquhar has noted, the fall of the Parthian dynasty of which Gondaphares was a part is also to be dated to around this time, and could provide an explanation for Thomas' move south. Also intriguing is that Jewish refugees from the Jewish war settled on the Malabar coast in the late first century C.E.[12] Either of these could account for the arrival of Aramaic or Syriac-speaking Christianity in this region in the first century, although the latter without any direct involvement of Thomas being necessary. Also worth noting is that this Jewish community's existence, like that of the Christians in the region, can only be confirmed as of several centuries later. Both synagogue and church have preserved ancient copper plates inscribed with details of land they were given, and in both cases the communities in question sought to date their links with that region earlier still.[13]

To summarize the results of our study thus far, we appear to have sufficient reason to conclude that the author of the Acts of Thomas had accurate information about the names of kings reigning in the time in which Thomas could have visited India. These details are unlikely to be the result simply of the fame attributed to one of these individuals. The inclusion of accurate details at certain key points, however, must be coupled with the more general fact that the majority of names mentioned in the text have nothing whatsoever to do with India. These divergent types of information in the Acts may perhaps suggest that we are dealing with a fictional story that took its starting point in actual events that were still accurately remembered or were mentioned in texts existing in the author's time. Before determining whether that is in fact the best explanation of the information found in the *Acts of Thomas*, however, we must consider our second major category of evidence.

Knowledge of customs and viewpoints

We now turn to the topic of Indian and/or Hindu customs or viewpoints that are said to be found in the *Acts*. The following have frequently been mentioned in this regard:

- The Brahmin custom of bathing before meals

[12] http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/indians.html
[13] http://www.the-south-asian.com/March2001/Jews_%20of_India_Cochin_Jews1.htm

- The custom of being carried in a litter
- Negative characterization of individuals of dark skin color

The observation is indeed correct that Brahmins observe the custom of bathing or washing prior to meals, and a character in the *Acts of Thomas* is explicitly mentioned as bathing before partaking of meals (ch.89). However, in order for this to be a convincing piece of evidence for connecting the *Acts* with genuine, accurate knowledge of India, we need to ascertain (1) whether or not this Indian custom was already known in Syria or in the Greco-Roman world more generally, and (2) whether the same custom was also found elsewhere. As for the former question, it is impossible to give a definitive answer. None of the existing works that describe Indian customs mentions this practice. However, one of the most likely sources of knowledge about India in this time, particularly in Syria, no longer exists in its entirety, namely the treatise of Bardesanes on this subject, which is quoted in part by other authors. It is thus *possible* that this custom had been described by Bardesanes, or indeed that it was mentioned in one of the other fragmentary sources about India by Greco-Roman authors.

This point becomes largely irrelevant, however, when we note that there is at least some evidence for the same practice in the Greco-Roman world. The *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* states:

> It was usual to bathe about two o'clock and dine at three, hours which seem to have been observed, at least by the higher classes, long after the Augustan age. (Mart. iv. 8. 6, xi. 53. 3; Cic. *ad Fam.* ix. 26 ; Plin. *Ep.* iii).[14]

To Martial, Cicero and Pliny, the sources cited in the aforementioned article, we may add Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* (23), which mentions that Alexander bathed before meals. The same work (75) also makes a point of noting someone whose custom was to bathe before bed, probably implying that the latter was not the usual custom.[15]

The custom of being carried in a litter turns out to be a similar case. Although Medlycott claims the carrying of the wife of Vizan in a litter reflects Indian practice, Bremmer observes that it could equally reflect Roman practices.[16] This mode of travel is quite international, and given that it is mentioned in Isaiah 66:20, one can scarcely make much of a case for a specifically Indian background for this detail in the *Acts of Thomas*. The origins of the litter may well have been in the East, but they had spread far beyond there long before the first century C.E.

The reference to black individuals as negative characters might at first glance seem to reflect Indian views of skin color, views that are attested in ancient sources and that persist even to this day. However, any discussion of this topic must account for the

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[14] p.308 [available online at http://www.ancientlibrary.com/smith-dgra/0315.html]

[15] In 76 it mentions the order of 'bathing, sacrificing, eating' but in this case the individual is ill and so one cannot generalize. Also note that the Essenes, according to Hippolytus, are said to have bathed before having breakfast (http://jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=478&letter=E). The Pharisees and rabbis washed their hands before meals, which was presumably a symbolic bathing where the complete action was impractical. Also worth mentioning is that Homer describes women bathing and then eating.

[16] Bremmer, "The Acts of Thomas and Women", *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* p.83. See Juvenal, Satire VI; also Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* (esp. 25, 28). More information on Roman litters available at http://www.vroma.org/~araia/litter.html.

presence of a similarly negative characterization of black skin in *Acts of Peter* 22, which does not share our present work's Indian setting.[17] This motif, then, has no direct connection to the Indian setting of the story, much less to its purported historical roots. Here, as in the previous cases, the features in question are *compatible with* an Indian setting, but in no way *require* it.

The same may be said of the detail mentioned by Gunther Bornkamm, who claims that the story about the eagle in chapters 91-92 reproduces the Indian myth about the stealing of the food of immortality by the heavenly eagle Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu.[18] However, the purported parallels are slim, and in fact consist only of the fact that in both stories an eagle steals something. This hardly demonstrates knowledge of Indian tradition on the part of the author of the Acts of Thomas.[19]

Beyond these examples that are more or less frequently mentioned in treatments of the *Acts of Thomas*, one must also consider the opposite phenomenon: the *omission* from the *Acts* of details that one would have expected in a work genuinely reflecting knowledge and experience of India. Of these, the most important is presumably the failure to mention the custom of abstinence from sexual intercourse, the so-called "renouncer tradition", of Indian religion (including not only what we refer to under the umbrella term "Hinduism", but also Buddhism and Jainism). Is it really feasible that Thomas (of anyone else for that matter) promulgated the view of sexual abstinence found in the *Acts of Thomas* in India, without receiving as a reply some mention of the renouncer traditions' teachings on this matter? The failure of the author of the *Acts* to mention this detail is all the more noteworthy when one considers that it was relatively well known among Greco-Roman authors of the time.[20] The characters behave in a manner more typical of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* than anything genuinely reflecting an Indian context. Indeed, it has been suggested that the *Acts of Thomas* may in fact be directly dependent on the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.[21] But at any rate, its audience and background with respect to this feature are more likely Encratite Christians in Syria and/or the Roman world, rather than anything or anyone genuinely to do with India.[22]

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[17] See also Acts of Paul and Thecla 10.

[18] *New Testament Apocrypha Vol.2*, p.431. In spite of this detail being considered by him as reflecting knowledge of Hindu tradition, Bornkamm states that the Acts of Thomas "has no claim to historicity" (p.427).

[19] It is closer to what Sandmel famously called 'parallelomania'. Prof. Bauman has drawn to my attention that there is a myth related to the foundation of Mexico City, about an Eagle flying away with a snake in its claws. This is clearly a closer parallel, and yet any direct connection is impossible.

[20] Most significantly by Bardesan (see Porphyry, *De Abstinentia* Book IV 17; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* III.194; but there are others as well.

[21] Jan N. Bremmer, "The *Acts of Thomas*: Place, Date and Women" in Bremmer (ed..), *Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, p.78.

[22] The failure to mention the worship of idols may also be mentioned in this context. Discussions of idol worship were at least as inevitable in an Indian context as in a Roman one, and the lack of focus on this suggests that the audience is a Christian one that the author is concerned to persuade or encourage to remain celibate, rather than a non-Christian audience whether in India or Syria. For local gods as an issue for Syrian Christianity see the excerpt from Eusebius' *Church History* preserved in Syriac in Cureton's *Ancient Syriac Documents* p.14. On the other hand, the proliferation and significance of images in Hinduism increase drastically in the 3rd-5th centuries (with the emergence of Tantric and Puranic texts), and around the first century Buddhism seems to have been aniconic. I am indebted to Prof. Chad Bauman for this last point.

Conclusions

The appropriate conclusion appears to be that our author was writing what we today would call "historical fiction." Christine Thomas has suggested that all novels of this period were "historical fictions" to at least some extent.[23] For this reason, it is appropriate to ask whether the historical core of this story is the mere existence of the main character, Judas Thomas the disciple of Jesus, or whether included in that historical kernel is also an actual visit of Thomas to India, even if he did few or none of the specific things mentioned in the Acts.

Let us then ask about the *plausibility* of a visit by Thomas to India. The short answer is that there is nothing implausible about it. Contact between India and the Eastern Mediterranean was open along trade routes by land and by sea, and the presence of a word derived from Tamil in the Hebrew Bible shows just how ancient such contacts were.[24] Contacts between Syria and India we have already mentioned, and there was not necessarily anything preventing Thomas from traveling to India should he have so desired (or been forced to do so). Beyond questions of plausibility, we must consider as well the evidence that Christianity took root in India at a very early stage. Whether this was indeed the apostolic age cannot be confirmed, but certainly by the time the Acts of Thomas were written, it is probable that there was an existing church in India to lend verisimilitude to the story.

When considering this issue, we must ask what best explains both the presence and the relative absence of Thomas at various points in other early Christian literature. On the one hand, Thomas' name is connected with Syria and in particular Edessa, and with a stream of literature that certainly flows along the border with Gnosticism, if not directly into it. Thomas is also singled out for attention in the Gospel of John. Yet in Paul's letters and the canonical *Acts of the Apostles*, Thomas is for all intents and purposes ignored. One could obviously propose that Thomas simply disappeared altogether, perhaps even having fallen away from faith after the crucifixion. Such an explanation, however, fails to do justice to the fact that embarrassing behavior on the part of other key disciples (Simon Peter and Judas Iscariot) apparently could not simply be ignored, and found its way into the very core of the earliest Gospel traditions. We thus need to posit an ongoing association of Thomas with Christianity, presumably in Syria. Yet the association must be at the same time loose and indirect enough to account for the following considerations:

- Paul, who caused a fair bit of controversy in Antioch in Roman Syria, which was apparently his base of operation for a time, nevertheless makes no mention of contact or interaction with Thomas. Is it likely that Thomas would have been present, even if only as one of many leaders of the church in Eastern Syria, and yet would not have become involved in the church's first great debate?

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[23] Thomas, Christine M., *The Acts of Peter, Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

[24] http://bibletools.org//index.cfm/fuseaction/Def.show/RTD/Easton/ID/2875; http://bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Def.show/RTD/ISBE/ID/6755. The Hebrew tuk is apparently borrowed from the Tamil tokei. See also Farquhar pp.19-20.

- We may also ask why the church of Edessa, which claimed an indirect link to Thomas,[25] would have placed his activity primarily in Parthia and India, were it centered somewhere closer to them.

The easiest explanation is that Thomas was in contact with this church, but his location and primary activity was elsewhere. One could certainly speculate about other possible locations, but it is difficult to see on what basis one could come up with a scenario more plausible than the essentially unanimous testimony of early Christian sources.

We have raised the possibility of Thomas having ongoing connections with the church in Edessa while elsewhere. It is here that we may mention what is perhaps the most intriguing piece of the puzzle, and one that might account for some genuine historical knowledge having reached the third century author of the *Acts of Thomas*. The Syriac *Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles* mentions alongside letters from well-known canonical authors one or more that were sent by Thomas from India. This is all the more striking when one considers that when it mentions accounts in Acts of the lives of the Apostles, this source mentions only the Acts attributed to Luke.[26] It seems that the author of the Syriac *Doctrines* wrote sometime prior to the third century (when the *Acts of Thomas* was written), and knew of a letter attributed to Thomas. Could such a letter have been preserved by the Syrian church, and provided some information that found its way into the *Acts of Thomas*? This is certainly possible, and although Farquhar's highly speculative reconstruction is rather dubious in most of its details, that such a letter could have existed and could have perished together with the many other Christian documents lost when Edessa was flooded in the year 201 C.E., remains a real possibility.[27] Of course, the letter need not have been authentic any more than the many other epistles attributed to apostles. And it remains all but inexplicable that this letter, if it did exist, failed to be copied and achieve a wider circulation.[28]

At any rate, one can hardly blame most serious scholars for having been inclined towards skepticism. Among those who have argued that there is indeed material of historical value in the *Acts of Thomas*, many have had ideological reasons for doing so. In these works, one typically also meets unsubstantiated claims[29] and wild speculation. One also meets sweeping claims, such as that either the Indian material is entirely unreliable while the Syriac sources are of great historical importance,[30] or that the Indian oral tradition preserved in Kerala is at times more original than the *Acts of Thomas*.[31] It is far simpler to dismiss this work, whose form is essentially that of an ancient novel, as pure fiction. But the truth is that most ancient novels took some historical event or

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[25] Through the Apostle Addai (Thaddeus), one of the 72. Cf. Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents*, for the story.

[26] Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents* p.32. See also Farquhar pp.28-32,49..

[27] Farquhar p.32; Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* ch.1 (http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~humm/Rs/rak/publics/new/BAUER01.htm); http://www.srr.axbridge.org.uk/flood.html

[28] Unless, of course, this author assumed that the canonical Epistle of Jude stemmed from Judas Thomas.

[29] I failed to find in the *Keralolpatti* of a reference to Thoman, presumably because there is more than one recension of this tradition (cf. Mundadan, p.30). Farquhar provides some of the best examples of just how far speculation has taken some who have previously written on this subject, when he hypothesizes that Habban the merchant was present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and thus a Christian prior to meeting Thomas!

[30] A. Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in India* (BJRL 10/2 (1926) p.78.

[31] Farquhar, pp.57-60.

reminiscence as their starting point. Even today, in reading fictional novels set in the past, one will find many instances where the author has accurately represented places and events through careful research. Why should it be considered unlikely that ancient novels, simply by their closer proximity in time and space to the events in question, should at times preserve such details?

In short, there is sufficient evidence supporting Thomas having spent time in Parthia/India, so as to make it unnecessary (and significantly less plausible) to develop a speculative alternative scenario. In conclusion, therefore, I would argue that behind the fictional *Acts of Thomas* there most likely lies a genuine historical kernel, namely the activity of Judas the Twin in India.[32] Beyond that, the only way to determine whether any particular detail has historical value is to engage in painstakingly careful analysis of each and every person, place, and event, building on a broad foundational knowledge of both Indian and Syrian history. Although in the end it will almost certainly remain a largely fictional novel, embedded within the *Acts of Thomas* are certainly nuggets of historical gold waiting to be brought to light. But unlike in the India of many classical narrators, there are no giant ants that will dig them out for us. This reference, however, should remind us that historiography and fiction were not as far apart in the ancient world as they are today. One might, in concluding, make a comparison with the Gospel of John, the dialogues of which are generally agreed to primarily reflect the aims and context of the author, but within which are to be found accurate geographical details and snippets of earlier tradition. And so, to provide an answer with regard to the state of the question concerning history and fiction in the *Acts of Thomas*, there is at least as much and as little of each as in other early Christian literature that has been the focus of far more sustained scholarly attention. It is my hope that this article will have piqued the interest of at least a few of its readers to turn some of their attention to this fascinating work.[33]

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[32] See the same conclusion reached by Mundadan, p.60.

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