

ST. THOMAS IN THE PATRISTIC TRADITION - ACCORDING TO THE WRITINGS OF LATIN FATHERS

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Introduction

Our Lord Jesus Christ sent his disciples, by giving them “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Lk. 28: 18), to the four corners of the world as heralds of Good News of salvation “to give great joy to the entire world” (Lk. 2: 10). The Holy Spirit strengthened the disciples to preach the Good News and to witness him “in Jerusalem and all Judaea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts. 1: 8). The Apostles went out to different parts of the world and proclaimed the good news of salvation, as well as their own Christ experience with which they were filled. The origin of the Indian Churches is the result of the apostolate of St. Thomas, who preached the Gospel in Kerala and other parts of India and laid the foundation for the Christian Church there.¹ It is an ancient belief shared by Christians and non-Christians alike that St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ, came to India and founded Christian communities. According to the tradition, on his arrival from West Asia, St. Thomas descended at a place called *Malyankara* near Kodungalloor in Kerala and it was there that he first proclaimed the Gospel. On account of this, the Church founded by him is known as the *Malankara* Church.²

1.1. St. Thomas the Apostle of India

According to the living and invariable tradition, the Apostle Thomas is known as the Apostle of India. More than once, he passed through North India and South India during the time of his apostolic ministry. According to the *Malankara* tradition, the Apostle Thomas reached Crangannore in the year 52 and founded seven Churches across the whole land, before he left Kerala in the year 69 and went to Mylapore, where he met with great opposition from the people

¹ Louis Moolaveetil, *Beauty of the House: Spiritual Heritage of the Malankara Church* (Trivandrum: Malankara Seminary Publications, 1984), 9-10.

² Chediath, *The Malankara Catholic Church*, 13.

of the land and suffered martyrdom in 72.³ These words of tradition claim that in India, Thomas preached the Gospel founded seven Churches and moved towards Mylapore.⁴

There are proofs about the presence of Jews and Jewish colonies in Kerala in the first century AD. Thomas the Apostle was attracted to these colonies and it was among these Jews that he preached the Gospel and established the nucleus of Christian communities.⁵ When the Apostles were given different nations for Evangelization, St. Thomas was given India. Regarding the specified places of Apostles for Evangelization, William Cureton writes, “to Simon Rome, and to John fell Ephesus; to Thomas India, and Addaeus the country of the Assyrians.”⁶ First of all, the undeniable and authentic evidence of his apostolic activity in India is the living tradition of the Thomas Christians in South India. There are three important sources on the Indian apostolate of Thomas. They are the living tradition of the St. Thomas Christians, the NT Apocryphal writing of *the Acts of Thomas*, and the Mylapore Tomb.⁷

Besides this evidence, there are other shreds of evidence too. St. Thomas was described as an Apostle to the Indians by various Church Fathers. Paul Pallath says;

The Fathers of the Church like Origen, St. Ephrem, St. Gregory Nazianzen, Cyrillonia, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. John Chrysostom, St. Jerome, St. Gaudentius of Brescia, St. Paulinus of Nola, Jacob of Sarug, St. Bede the Venerable, St. Gregory of Tours, Gregory the Great and St. Isidore of Seville refer directly or indirectly to the apostolate, martyrdom or burial of St. Thomas in India.⁸

It proves that the great Fathers of the Church and a good number of writers were witnessing the Indian apostolate of St. Thomas. In all three; Latin, Greek and Syrian, traditions Thomas has a prominent place. Here we are describing what the Latin Church Fathers wrote on St. Thomas and his apostolic journeys in India.

³ C. B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian History* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1961), 3-4.

⁴ K. A. Antony, “Validity of St. Thomas Tradition,” in *St. Thomas Christians and Nambudiris Jews and Sangam Literature: A Historical Appraisal*, 224-225.

⁵ Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. I. 19.

⁶ William Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents: Relative to the Earliest Establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the Neighbouring Countries, from the Year after our Lord's Ascension to the Beginning of the Fourth Century* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1864), 112.

⁷ Kollaparambil, *The Sources of the Syro-Malabar Law*, 42-45.

⁸ Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 6-7.

1.2. Latin Fathers Writings

1.2.1. St. Jerome (c. 347 – 420):

St. Jerome the translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible, made references to St. Thomas's apostolic work in India in his writings. In his book *Epistola and Marcellam*, it is seen that “He dwelt in all places: with Thomas in India, with Peter at Rome, ... with each apostolic man in each and all countries.”⁹ In his commentary on the Book of Isaiah, he mentioned that Thomas preached the Gospel to the Parthians, which included regions in India. Jerome mentions Calamina in India as the place of Apostle Thomas' death.¹⁰

1.2.2. Ambrose (340-397)

Ambrose was a prominent Latin Church Father and a respected theologian in the Western Christian world. He was born in 340 A.D. He was a Bishop of Milan (374) and was a doctor of the church. Ambrose also identifies St. Thomas with India. The Apostles were being sent out by Lord Jesus Christ “Going therefore, teach the all nations...” (Mat 28:19). Even those kingdoms which were shut out by rocky mountains became accessible to them, as India to Thomas, Persia to Mathew. Even those kingdoms which were shut out by rugged mountains became accessible to them, as India to Thomas, Persia to Mathew.... (PL 14: 1143). Ambrose then narrates the journey of a certain Theban to India. There he mentions the famous city of Muziris (present-day Kodungalloor) in the southern part of India¹¹

1.2.3. St. Gregory of Tours (538-594)

St. Gregory was the bishop of Tours and is known as the ‘Father of French History.’ He wrote on the martyrdom and burial of the Apostle as “Thomas the Apostle, according to the narrative

⁹ J. Puliurumpil, *Jurisdiction of the Syro-Malabar Church A Historical Perspective*, OIRISI Publications, Vadavathoor, 2018, 50-51.

¹⁰ J. Puliurumpil, *Jurisdiction of the Syro-Malabar Church A Historical Perspective*, OIRISI Publications, Vadavathoor, 2018, 50-51.

¹¹ J. Kollaparambil, ed. By Kokkaravalayil SJ, Sunny, *The Sources of the Syro-Malabar Law*, 65.

of his martyrdom is stated to have suffered in India. His holy remains (corpus), after a long interval of time, were removed to the city of Edessa in Syria and there buried. In that part of India where they first rested, stands a monastery and a church of striking dimensions, elaborately adorned and designed. This Theodore, who had been to the place, narrated to us” (PL 71:733, Theodore was a pilgrim).¹²

1.2.4. St. Gregory the Great (540-604)

Pope Gregory the Great, a notable figure in the Latin Church, wrote about St. Thomas. In his "Homilies on the Gospels," he reflects on the story of Thomas's doubt and subsequent profession of faith after encountering the resurrected Christ. He emphasizes the significance of Thomas's confession, "My Lord and my God," as a statement of Christian faith. St Gregory also speaks of the relationship between Saint Thomas and India twice; one is that Thomas will present India before the judgement seat of Christ, and the other is that in a vision the Lord told Thomas, do not fear to go to India.¹³

1.2.5. Isidore of Seville (530-636)

Isidore was the Archbishop of Seville and was considered the 'last scholar of the ancient world.' He gives a list of the places evangelized by Thomas. According to him: Thomas preached to the Parthians, the Medes, the Persians, the Hyrcanians and the Bactrians, and to the Indians of the Oriental regions and, sealing his preaching by his passion, he died transfixed with a lance at Calamina, a city in India, and there he was buried with honour.¹⁴

Conclusion

There is enough and more shreds of evidence to support the fact of St. Thomas' coming to India. He preached and died in India. St. Thomas the Apostle's life, his initial doubt and subsequent confession of faith, and his missionary work in India have all left a lasting impact on the patristic tradition. His life and activities have been a source of inspiration and theological reflection for early Christian writers and theologians. While these Church Fathers acknowledged St. Thomas's missionary activities in India, their writings are not extensive accounts but rather brief references.

¹² J. Kollaparambil, ed. By Kokkaravalayil SJ, Sunny, The Sources of the Syro-Malabar Law, 67.

¹³ J. Kollaparambil, ed. By Kokkaravalayil SJ, Sunny, The Sources of the Syro-Malabar Law, 67.

¹⁴ J. Kollaparambil, ed. By Kokkaravalayil SJ, Sunny, The Sources of the Syro-Malabar Law, 67.

It's important to note that while Latin Church Fathers did acknowledge St. Thomas and his role as an apostle, their primary focus in their writings was on theological and doctrinal matters rather than detailed accounts of his missionary journeys. The more detailed accounts of St. Thomas's activities in India are found in later texts like the 'Acts of Thomas' and other traditions that developed over the centuries.

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