

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOOK, 'THE ACTS OF THOMAS'**

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### **Introduction**

The Acts of Thomas is a hagiographical and legendary account of the Apostle Thomas's missionary activities and miracles. It is believed to have been written in the 3rd century although dating can be challenging for ancient texts. It is attributed to an early Christian tradition that associates it with the apostle. It is considered apocryphal; it is not included in the New Testament and is not considered authoritative by mainstream Christian denominations. Nevertheless, it has had an impact on Christian thought and history. It reflects the expansion of Christianity beyond the Roman Empire and into regions like India. The text is divided into several episodes often presented in a narrative form, each showcasing different aspects of Thomas's ministry.

### **Important Points and Significance**

The book has very interesting ideas that glorify the Christian faith. Its significance lies not much in history but in its narrative style and faith aspects.

Literary Genre: Critics often point out that the Acts of Thomas fall into the category of hagiography, which includes texts that focus on the lives and deeds of saints. Hagiographical literature often blends historical facts with legendary and miraculous elements to convey spiritual truths. This genre allows for creative storytelling and embellishment.

Cultural and Historical Context: The text offers glimpses into the cultural and historical context of the regions where Thomas is said to have preached, providing valuable information about the religious landscape of the time.

Missionary Zeal: The text portrays Thomas as a missionary who travelled to distant lands to spread the Christian message. This missionary zeal is highly significant for St. Thomas Christians, as it aligns with their missionary efforts and the expansion of Christianity in India.

Conversion of King of Gundaphorus: One of the most famous episodes in the text is the conversion of King Gundaphorus to Christianity. Thomas's miraculous acts and teachings led to the conversion of the king and his subjects.

Miracles: Throughout the text, Thomas is depicted as a miracle worker, healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons and performing other extraordinary deeds. One of the most famous episodes in the text involves Thomas miraculously providing a palace for King Gundaphorus by converting stones into money, highlighting the power of faith and divine intervention.

Asceticism: The Acts of Thomas emphasizes asceticism and celibacy as virtuous Christian practices, and Thomas is portrayed as an ascetic. As depicted in the text, Thomas's ascetic lifestyle and celibacy influence the ascetic traditions within the St. Thomas Christian communities. Monasticism and celibacy hold a significant place in their religious practices.

Death and Ascension of St. Thomas: The text narrates Thomas's eventual martyrdom in Mylapore, India, where a spear is said to have killed him. Following his death, Thomas's soul is depicted as ascending to heaven.

Theological Themes: It explores various theological themes, including the nature of faith, the importance of prayer, and the power of divine intervention and the spiritual life. St. Thomas Christians use these reflections as a theological foundation for their own beliefs and practices.

Conversion of women: St. Thomas converts several women to Christianity, including Mygdonia, the king's sister, and Tertia, the queen's sister, which leads to tensions within the royal court.

### **Significance of the Book in the Indian Church**

According to tradition, St. Thomas established Christian communities in various parts of Kerala, and this establishment is described in The Acts of Thomas. The text is seen as a historical document that validates their presence in the region. St. Thomas Christians consider themselves the direct descendants of the Apostle Thomas, who is said to have brought Christianity to India. The book provides a historical and spiritual link to their apostolic heritage, reinforcing their belief that their faith was founded by an apostle of Jesus

Apostolic Authority: St. Thomas Christians view the apostle Thomas as their spiritual father and a key figure in the establishment of Christianity in India. The Acts of Thomas bolster this apostolic authority, emphasizing the legitimacy of their Christian heritage.

Ethical and Moral Teachings: The text contains teachings and ethical principles attributed to Thomas. St. Thomas Christians look to these teachings as a guide for their own moral and ethical conduct, seeking to emulate the apostle's virtuous life.

Influence on Liturgy: The liturgical practices of St. Thomas Christians, particularly the East Syriac liturgy, are influenced by early Christian traditions, some of which are reflected in The Acts of Thomas. Their liturgy preserves ancient Christian rituals and prayers. Elements of this liturgy can be traced back to early Christian traditions described in the Acts of Thomas.

Cultural Integration: It describes Thomas's encounters with India's local culture and traditions. St. Thomas Christians find in these accounts a resonance with their historical interactions with Indian customs and beliefs as they integrated Christianity with the local culture. The text's portrayal of St. Thomas's encounters with Indian culture and traditions resonates with the historical and cultural integration of Christianity in Kerala. St. Thomas Christians have absorbed elements of Indian culture into their religious practices while maintaining their Christian faith. St. Thomas Christians consider themselves a distinct Christian community with a rich cultural identity. And harmonized their faith with Indian customs, resulting in a unique blend of Christianity and local culture.

Interfaith Dialogue: As St. Thomas Christians engage in interfaith dialogue with other religious communities in India, the text provides a historical narrative that fosters discussions about Christianity's presence in the subcontinent. In a religiously diverse region like Kerala, the historical narrative of St. Thomas Christians and their apostolic heritage as described in the "Acts of Thomas" facilitate interfaith dialogue and coexistence with other religious communities.

Pilgrimage and Tourism: The book has led to the establishment of pilgrimage sites in India, such as St. Thomas Mount in Chennai and various churches in Kerala. These sites attract both tourists and pilgrims, contributing to the local economy and cultural heritage.

### **Modern Critical Study on the Book**

The book has undergone critical study and the results are the following points.

Lack of Contemporary Evidence: One of the primary challenges in assessing the historicity of "The Acts of Thomas" is the absence of contemporary or external historical evidence that can independently corroborate the events described in the text. No non-Christian sources from the time of St. Thomas mention his missionary activities in India or the specific events narrated in the text.

Oral Tradition: Supporters of the historicity of "The Acts of Thomas" argue that the text may contain elements of oral tradition passed down through the early Christian communities. They contend that even if the events were not recorded in contemporary documents, they could still have a basis in actual historical events.

Later Composition: There is consensus among scholars that "The Acts of Thomas" was composed several centuries after the events it describes. This temporal gap raises questions about the accuracy of the details, as memories and traditions may have evolved.

Internal Inconsistencies: Critics also point to internal inconsistencies within the text. Some episodes and details appear contradictory or fantastical, further raising doubts about the text's historicity.

Historical Clues: On the other hand, proponents of the historicity of "The Acts of Thomas" argue that certain elements of the text, such as references to geographical locations and cultural practices, could contain historical clues that align with the context of ancient India.

## **Conclusion**

While "The Acts of Thomas" plays a significant role in the traditions of St. Thomas Christians and offers valuable insights into early Christian thought and practice, its historicity remains a subject of debate and scepticism among scholars. The text should be approached with a critical perspective, acknowledging that it may contain a mixture of historical facts, legendary accounts, and theological teachings.

## **Bibliography**

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