

Torch Bearers

Lesson 16

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO SYRO MALABAR CHURCH HISTORY - LEVEL 1

Historical Origin and Development of Syro Malabar Christianity



The Origin of St. Thomas Christians and Their Denominations

St. Thomas the Apostle and his missionary journeys

St. Thomas the Apostle also called Didymus was one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus according to the New Testament. Traditionally, St. Thomas is believed to have travelled outside the Roman Empire to preach the Gospel, reached Muziris, (modern day North Paravur and Kodungalloor in the state of Kerala, India) in AD 52 and converted several people, founding what today are known as Saint Thomas Christians or Mar Thoma Nazranis.



After his martyrdom at Mylapore in AD 72 the reputed relics of Saint Thomas the Apostle were enshrined as far as Mesopotamia, and later moved to various places. In 1258, some of the relics were brought to Ortona, in Abruzzo, Italy, where they have been held in the Church of Saint Thomas the Apostle.

The mission of St. Thomas in India is considered as an accepted fact. An ocean of literature is already written about the Indian mission of Thomas.

Initial Ministry of St. Thomas the Apostle

After the Pentecost the Apostles began their missionary expedition and traditionally it is believed that St. Thomas preached his Christ Experience to the Persians and made many followers for Jesus. Historically speaking early Christian in India had close identity with Christians in Syria and Persia. There is tradition that believes that St. Thomas and St.

Bartholomew came to India from the region of Persia.

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The Liturgy of Mar Addai and Mar Mari has its faith origin from St. Thomas. Mar Addai was the disciple of St. Thomas the Apostle and Mar Mari was the disciple of Mar Addai. The Liturgy of Addai and Mari (or the Holy Qurbana of Mar Addai and Mar Mari) is the Divine Liturgy belonging to the East Syriac Rite and was historically used in the Church of the East of the Sasanian (Persian) Empire.

It is currently in regular use, even if in different versions, in the Assyrian Church of the East of Iraq (including its archdiocese the Chaldean Syrian Church of India), the Ancient Church of the East of Iraq, the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church of India, and the Chaldean Catholic Church of Iraq.

The Voyage to India - Indian Mission

St. Thomas made his first mission journey to India which could not have been from Jerusalem. Jerusalem was not a port and no routes started to India from Jerusalem. From Jerusalem Thomas first travelled to Alexandria. He had reasons to go to Alexandria, the second city of the Roman Empire, the cosmopolitan city which received people of all races, colours and languages. Two fifth of the population of Alexandria were Jews. Alexandria was the greatest port in the world then, the second city of the Roman Empire.

It is the large presence of Jews in Alexandria that attracted Thomas and he came across people from India and he decided to go India in one of the ships sailing to India.

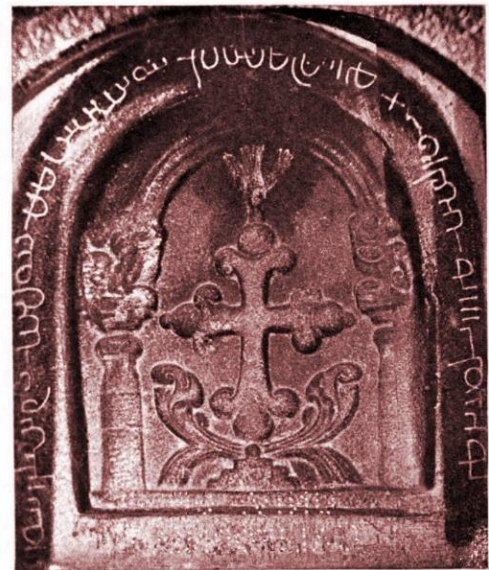


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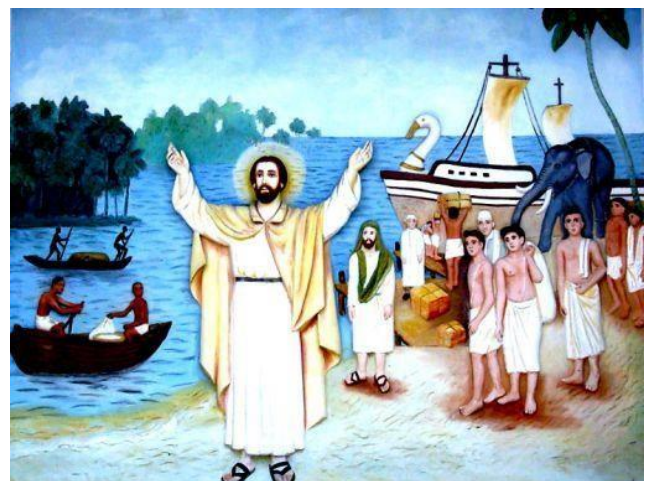
On a voyage to India St. Thomas reached Muziris in 52 AD, as the traditions recount.

Tradition among the Christians of St Thomas of the Malabar Coast about the apostle Thomas claims that he came to them via Socorta. Francis Xavier a thousand years later spoke of the nominal presence of Christians in Socorta. According to him they claim to be Christians of St Thomas.

The Apostle established Christian communities in seven places in Kerala (Eight Churches, or Ezharapallikal) Kodungallur, Kollam, Niranam, Nilackal (Chayal), Kokkamangalam, Kottakkavu (Paravur), Palayoor and Thiruvamcode Arappally (a church sponsored by the King of Tamil Nadu).



PERSIAN CROSS IN CHAPEL ON ST THOMAS'S MOUNT.
Seventh or Eighth Century.



All these Churches where St. Thomas is said to have established communities are now strong Christian centres and all of them offer tangible evidence for the mission of the Apostle. As we learn from the traditions in Malabar, after establishing seven communities in Malabar, the apostle went over to the Coromandel Coast. Before parting he had appointed presbyters and deacons and they in their turn appointed their successors.