

Covenant Keepers

Lesson 17

**Brief Introduction to Syro Malabar History:
Level 2**

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.



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 and there is no dearth of writers and scholars who are experts on the subject.

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.

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 / Holy Qurbana.

The Voyage to North-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

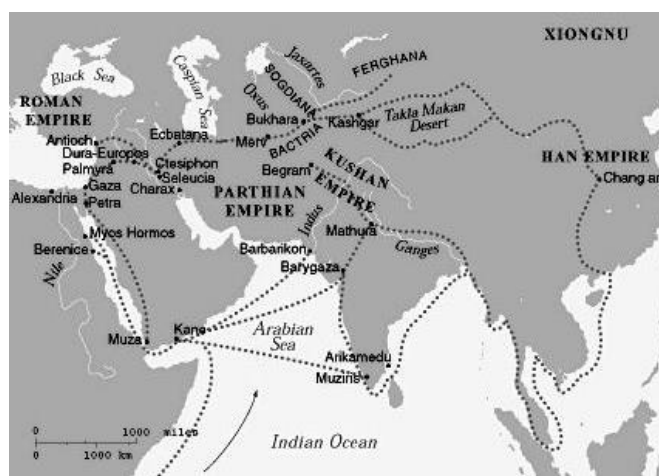
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Alexandria, the second city of the Roman Empire, the cosmopolitan city which received people of all races, colours and languages. 2/5th of the population of Alexandria were Jews. Alexandria was the greatest port in the world then, second city of Roman Empire.

It is said that perhaps Ptolemy got his surprising knowledge about India from the Indians residing at Alexandria. 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.

The usual route from Alexandria to India was the one from Alexandria down the Nile by Memphis and from there through the Red Sea to Okelis, Aden or Kana and thence to Bharuch (Barygaza). Therefore, the first port where Thomas disembarked in India was Bharuch or Barygaza. Bharuch was the most important sea port of India at that time all the ships to India landed at this port.



The Christianity of Bharuch which had great affection for the Apostle Thomas bears witness to the mission of St. Thomas. The Christians of Vasai who still hold on to some of the St. Thomas traditions may also be seen as remnants of the converts of St. Thomas in his first voyage. The same may be said also about the ancient Christian communities of Thana, Sopara etc.

From Bharuch the Apostle followed the route through Ujjain to Taxila-Pataliputra highway. Following this highway the route of the Apostle finally reached Taxila, the kingdom of Gondophares.

The Christian community of St. Thomas tradition that existed at Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh and Christian symbols discovered at Ujjain prove the visit of the Apostle in these places. It seems that there were Christians at Taxila in the first century AD.

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Return to Jerusalem

From Taxila St. Thomas seems to have returned to Jerusalem through the overland route, the famous silk route. There are various traditions regarding the journey of St. Thomas to Jerusalem to take part in the funeral of Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

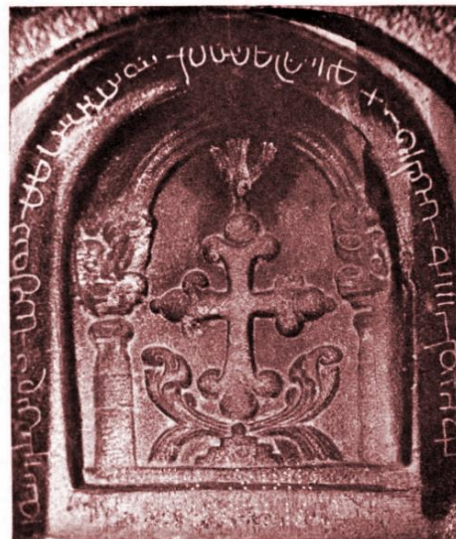


St. Thomas describes to the other apostles about his mission to the king of India. It seems to be logical to say that St. Thomas was in North West India and from there he went to Jerusalem following the well travelled silk route.

The tradition of St. Thomas in various parts of the Persian Empire may be a result of this voyage from India to Jerusalem and his mission. We know that on those days the journey through silk route was not a non-stop journey from one end to the other. The traveller had to stop at regular intervals and spend a few days or perhaps weeks and even months before he resumed the voyage in different caravan groups.

The Voyage to South India

On a second voyage to India St. Thomas reached Muziris in 52 AD, as the traditions recount. On his way to India, he also might have stayed in Socotra and preached the Gospel there establishing a Christian community. Socotra is a small island in the Indian Ocean and is today part of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. It was a calling port for the voyagers coming to the western coasts of India. It had also a considerable Indian colony. The considerable Christian presence in this island from early centuries of Christian era gives an added reason to this theory.



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

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Tradition among the Christians of St Thomas of the Malabar Coast about the apostle Thomas claims that he came to them via Socorta. The first notice of the Christians of St Thomas in Socorta is given by Cosmos Indicopolisteus who wrote in 535 A.D. 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 (Seven Churches, or Ezharapallikal) Kodungallur, Kollam, Niranam, Nilackal (Chayal), Kokkamangalam, Kottakkavu (Paravur), Palayoor and Thiruvamcode Arappally (a "half church").



All these Churches where St. Thomas is said to have established communities are now strong Christian centers. 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.

As for the St. Thomas Christians to keep its ecclesial unity it had to have relations with the Church in other centres. Hence, on appeal from the St. Thomas Christians, the Catholicose of the East sent to Kerala in AD 345 Bishop Uraha Mar Yausef and four priest and the relation continued until the Portuguese arrival.

The Rambanpattu which summarizes the traditions of Malabar regarding the mission of St. Thomas narrates that before crossing over to the Coromandel Coast the Apostle had already strengthened the communities by ordaining Bishops and Priests for them.

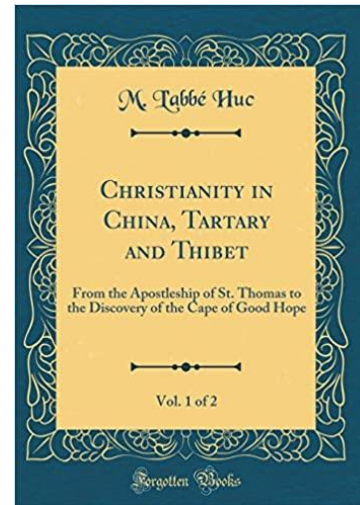


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Mission Voyage to China

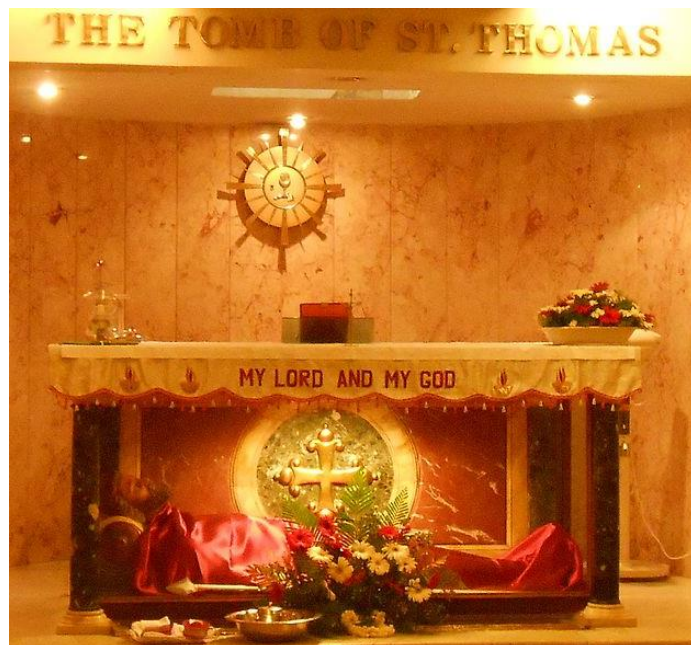
It is said that from the Coromandel Coast St. Thomas made a journey to China where he stayed for a few years and preached the Gospel. China had held commercial contacts with the Eastern coast of India for a long time and this trade was at a brisk pace in the first century AD.



Martyrdom of St. Thomas in Mylapore (Tamil Nadu)

Malabar traditions say that St. Thomas went to China from Mylapore after the year 56 AD. He returned to Mylapore (in Madras) from China about 67 AD. St. Thomas embraced his martyrdom in 72 AD while he was in Mylapore.

Some of the envious Brahmins killed the Apostle with a lance and he was buried by his disciples in the church of Mylapore. The name St. Thomas and his fascinating and inspiring story of the missionary journeys evoke sentiments of pride and devotion in the minds of the faithful who belong to the Churches of St. Thomas Tradition.



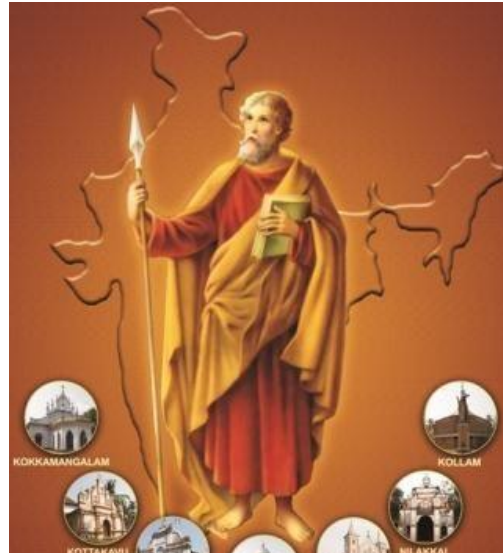
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The Origin of St. Thomas Christian Denominations

The Saint Thomas Christian denominations are traditional Christian denominations from Kerala, India, who trace their origins to the evangelistic activity of St. Thomas the Apostle in the 1st century.

They are also known as "Nasranis" (The followers of Jesus of Nazareth) as well. The Syriac term "Nasrani" is still used by St. Thomas Christians in Kerala. For the first 15 centuries, they had their own leaders to whom they were obedient and who were well respected by both the people and the rulers of the country.



In AD 190, Pantaenus from Alexandria visited these Christians. He found that they were using the Gospel of Matthew in the Hebrew language. Around AD 522, an Egyptian monk, Cosmas Indicopleustes, visited the Malabar Coast. He mentions Christians in a country called Male, where pepper grows, in his book Christian Topography. This shows that until the 6th century these Christians had been in close contact with Alexandria. They were spiritually assisted by the Bishops from Persia from 4th century onwards.



Sketches from Cosmas Notes : Also notes that, the place "has a church of Persian Christians who have settled there, and a Presbyter who is appointed from Persia, and a Deacon and a complete ecclesiastical ritual."

Until the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries the Chaldean Bishops governed the Catholic Church in India and it could be identified with the Church of St. Thomas Christians.

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Saint Thomas Christians were greatly affected by the arrival of the Portuguese in India in 1498. The Portuguese attempted to bring the community under the auspices of Latin Rite Catholicism, resulting in permanent rifts in the community.

Portuguese missionaries began to accuse the St. Thomas Christians that they are under heresy and schism especially after the erection of the diocese of Goa in 1533. After the death of Mar Abraham, the last Chaldean bishop, there were organized attempts to Latinize the St. Thomas Christians.

The Synod of Diamper in 1599

Immediately after the death of the local Bishop, Mar Abraham, in 1599, Archbishop of Goa Aleixo de Menezes (1595–1617) convoked a Synod of Diamper and imposed Latinization and Western ecclesiastical traditions on the local Church of India. The Portuguese extended their evangelization programme over India, and therefore brought the Indian Church under Catholic jurisdiction.



Menezes controlled the synod completely. He presided over it, framed its decrees and executed them. The synod lasted for eight days. Almost all of the decrees were framed not in the synod after due discussion but 15 days or earlier prior to the meeting. Many of the decrees were framed after the Synod as the archbishop desired. The synodal decrees were passed by threats and terror methods, and autocratically as desired by the archbishop.

The Assyrian Patriarch of Babylon was condemned as a heretic and contact with him declared highly perilous inviting spiritual dangers. Additionally, The Malabar church was required to follow the norms declared by the Council of Trent. The church had to be divided into parishes with the parish priest directly appointed by the Portuguese

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church authorities. All Syriac books had to be handed over for burning so that no memory of those rites remained.

The Catholic Church appointed Fr. Francis Roz, Bishop of Angamaly in 1599. In August, 1600 Latin rule was imposed on the Nasranis. The church appointed Roz as the first Latin Bishop of the St. Thomas Christians in 1601. The church erected the Diocese of Cranganore in 1609. They suppressed the Archdiocese of Angamaly.

The Metropolitan of Goa cancelled the All India Jurisdiction and limited the pastoral jurisdiction of Nasranis to Malabar in 1610. Priestly formation of Malpanate system was suspended and a Dominican Seminary was started at Kaduthuruthy in 1624.

