

The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas and Christian Origins in India

Although considerable progress has been made in the last decades in the study of the Christian apocrypha, which can have consequences for church history and for theology, sufficient attention does not seem to be paid to these studies by all those who write the history of Christianity. For example, in a history of Christianity in India, Robert Eric Frykenberg devotes four pages to give an extensive summary of the *Acts of Thomas* on the assumption that the tradition about India's evangelization by the Apostle Thomas is based on this apocryphal work. He writes that this is an «extremely strong belief, whatever the historicity of this tradition may be».¹ The author, emeritus professor of history and South Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin, USA, concludes:

Exactly how much of this romantic tale, with its epic, its fabulous or questionable elements, can be trusted or considered to rest upon some small residue of actual events or fitted into contexts of verifiable historicity is highly doubtful.²

Frykenberg cites several earlier authors who wrote the history of Christianity in India but no recent study on the apocrypha in general or on the *Acts of Thomas* in particular. Not surprisingly he abides by the conclusion reached earlier by others like Leslie Brown, «historically doubtful».³ Brown was followed by Stephen Neill, who wrote: «The story of the coming of Christianity to India cannot start in any place other than the ... *Acts of Thomas*».⁴ He stated, «The Christian church has existed in India for at least 1,500 years» but he dismissed the patristic evidence for an earlier origin by alleging that «the source on which these later writers depended was almost certainly the *Acts of Thomas*».⁵ Consequently Neill did not care to cite and examine the patristic texts. He concluded:

¹ R.E. FRYKENBERG, *Christianity in India From Beginnings to the Present*, Oxford, 2008, 3.

² R.E. FRYKENBERG, *Christianity*, 97.

³ L. BROWN, *The Indian Christians of Saint Thomas*, Cambridge, 1956, reprint 1982.

⁴ S. NEILL, *A History of Christianity in India*, vol. I, *The Beginnings to AD 1707*, Cambridge, 1984, 26.

⁵ S. NEILL, *A History*, xi and 431, n. 23.

Millions of Christians in South India are certain that the founder of their church was none other than the apostle Thomas himself. The historian cannot prove to them that they are mistaken in their belief. He may feel it right to warn them that historical research cannot pronounce on the matter with a confidence equal to that which they entertain by faith.⁶

But in reaching this conclusion the historian himself was unconsciously making a triple act of 'faith': first, that the *Acts of Thomas* did not contain or could not be shown to contain historical elements; second, that the Indian tradition about the Apostle Thomas was based on this apocryphal work; third, that the church fathers also relied on it. These beliefs or presuppositions are shared also by some others who have written church history. For example, Karl Baus wrote as follows:

The Thomaschristians of south-west India of course regard the Apostle Thomas as their first missionary; but the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, on which they must base their claim, is, however, not a source free from objection.⁷

This 'must' of the historian is gratuitous. Pope Benedict XVI in his Wednesday catechesis on the Apostles in 2006 spoke of the post-NT tradition about the Apostle Thomas. The scholarly pope stated:

An ancient tradition claims that Thomas first evangelized Syria and Persia (mentioned by Origen, according to Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3, 1), then went on to Western India (cf. *Acts of Thomas* 1-2 and 17ff.), from where also he finally reached Southern India.⁸

The *tradition* reported by Origen is prior to the *Acts of Thomas* and the pope rightly mentioned it *before* referring to this apocryphal work. Moreover, it may be noted that Persia and Western India refer in fact to one and the same geographical region called in modern historiography Indo-Parthia (today, Pakistan and Afghanistan). In Origen we meet with a patristic witness who is independent of and possibly prior to the *Acts of Thomas* about the evangelization of India in apostolic times.

This leads us to the question about the historical value of this apocryphal work. Many recent writings on Christian origins in India treat it as mere fiction

⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷ K. BAUS, *Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Hubert Jedin, vol. 1, *Von der Urgemeinde zur frühchristlichen Großkirche*, Freiburg, 1962, 418.

⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Christ and His Church: Seeing the Face of Jesus in the Church of the Apostles*, London, 2007, 93. For the Italian original see Benedetto XVI, *Gli Apostoli*, Vatican, 2008, «Tommaso», 141-147, at 147; «Tommaso», *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28 September 2006, 4 (original version).

and consequently they either deny or doubt the evangelization of India by the Apostle Thomas.⁹ But such a procedure does not keep pace with the current research on the apocrypha in general and the *Acts of Thomas* in particular. Departing from the earlier prejudice against the apocrypha as fictitious or false, the new critical approach advocates a revaluation of this literature.

The term *apokryphos*, used at first to indicate writings that were received in certain churches till the II and III centuries but later recommended for private reading, that is, reading in secret but not like the public reading of the Bible (the Jews had already this custom), became later on in the Great Church synonymous with 'false'. [...]

The historical value of the apocrypha, however, is considerable and sometimes irreplaceable when we want to know the moral and religious currents of early Christianity or large portions of it. Indeed the apocrypha sometimes complete or correct what was received from other sources, at other times even supply for their silence. This historical value was regarded as secondary by most Fathers but it shows that the primary interest of the apocrypha was to gather and transmit the revelation contained in the Scripture.¹⁰

If «the primary interest of the apocrypha was to gather and transmit the revelation contained in the Scripture» and if «the historical value of the apocrypha is considerable and sometimes irreplaceable», they have to be taken seriously and may no more be neglected by theologians and historians of Christianity. Nor may they be dealt with in summary fashion as has been done mostly till now. In an introductory but wide-ranging study of the nature and value of the apocrypha Simon Claude Mimouni underscores their importance for the history of early Christianity.

Certain apocryphal writings are very ancient and consequently reflect the traditions contemporary to the writings that have become the New Testament. These apocryphal writings thus constitute for the historian a privileged route of access – still very little exploited – to a good number of Christian traditions, of which some are very ancient and go back even to the period of the first Christian communities.¹¹

About a decade previously Wily Rordof had written: «Christian apocryphal literature remains to this day an insufficiently explored territory, which, once it has

⁹ For a survey of these recent publications see G. NEDUNGATT, *Quest for the Historical Thomas, Apostle of India*, Bangalore, 2008, 3-30. «The answer of the vast majority in the West (43 out of 51, i.e., 84%) to the question whether India was evangelized by the Apostle Thomas, is No, while only 8, i.e. 16% say Yes» (27). This work shows that the Indian tradition about the Apostle Thomas does not originate from the *Acts of Thomas*.

¹⁰ M.G. MARA, «Apocriphi», in *Nuovo Dizionario patristico e di antichità cristiane*, I, Milan, 2006, 294-403, see at 395, 402 (abbrev. NDPAC).

¹¹ S.C. MIMOUNI «Le concept d'apocryphité dans le christianisme ancien et médiéval. Réflexions en guise d'introduction», in Id. (ed.), *Apocryphité: Histoire d'un concept transversal aux religions du livre*, Turnhout, 2002, 1-30, at 20 (with select bibliography).

been fully investigated, could compel us to alter the traditional map of Christian origins». ¹² Since then much attention has indeed been paid to the study of the apocrypha by specialists, who have concluded that these writings are of importance particularly for theology and early church history. In view of this any summary and dismissive approach to the New Testament apocrypha, as illustrated above (Frykenberg, Neil and Baus), can no more be regarded as satisfactory.

A New Approach to the Apocrypha

It may be useful to start with a brief overview of what is meant by the term apocrypha. In general, 'apocryphal' has a rather negative meaning, «of doubtful authenticity, invented, mythical» (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*). The Greek adjective *apokryphos* means «hidden, concealed, secret» and the verb *apokruptō* means «hide from, keep hidden from». The earliest apocryphal literature is pagan or Gnostic and contained secret doctrine or was accessible only to a select few, being withheld or hidden from the people at large. The Jews, too, wrote apocryphal works about persons of the Hebrew Bible; so did the Christians from the second century onwards. With reference to the Old Testament certain books called deuterocanonical in the Catholic-Orthodox tradition are called apocrypha in the Protestant Bible. There are also Christian apocryphal works (Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Letters, Apocalypses) not forming part of the New Testament but written on the model of the NT writings and attributed to different New Testament authors or persons. These writings are commonly called the apocrypha of the New Testament or Christian apocryphal literature. ¹³

Recently, however, several scholars have criticized the term 'apocrypha' as not altogether satisfactory. ¹⁴ Éric Junod calls the NT apocrypha «an erroneous designation and an artificial collection». ¹⁵ It has been stated «that the grounds for the appellation 'Apocrypha of the New Testament', which has wrongly become classic, should be called in question, in spite of the fact that it has been universally adopted by modern translations». ¹⁶ An alternate term 'pseudepigrapha' was

¹² W. RORDORF, «Terra incognita. Recent Research on Christian Apocryphal Literature, Especially on Some Acts of the Apostles» in *Studia Patristica* 25 (1993) 142-158, at 143; reprint, W. RORDORF, *Lex orandi lex credendi: Gesammelte Aufsätze zum 60. Geburtstag*, Freiburg, 1993, 432-448, at 433.

¹³ On the apocrypha of the New Testament see R.McL. WILSON, «Apocryphen des Neuen Testaments» in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Bd. 3, 1978, Berlin, 316-362; select bibliography 357-362. See also F. BOVON et al., *Les Actes apocryphes des apôtres: Christianisme et monde païen*, Geneva, 1981.

¹⁴ W. RORDORF, «Terra incognita».

¹⁵ É. JUNOD, «Apocryphes du Nouveau Testament. Une appellation erronée et une collection artificielle» in *Apocrypha* 3 (1992) 17-46.

¹⁶ W. RORDORF, «Terra incognita», 434.

proposed by some scholars (A. Di Berardino, F. Gori, J.-D. Kaestli, E. Norelli), but some others would prefer a less loaded and more neutral term. Till such a more satisfactory substitute is found, we may as well continue to use the current term 'apocrypha'. This is what is done by the *Association pour l'Étude de la Littérature Apocryphe Chrétienne*, an international scholarly association, which was founded in Switzerland in 1981. In 1990 this association started a new journal entitled *Apocrypha*, an annual publication devoted to the systematic study of the apocryphal writings. The incomplete state of the study of the apocrypha had been acknowledged several decades earlier by a well known authority in this field:

The methods of type- and form-history, which have so much proved their value in the investigation of the Gospels, can and must be applied to the pseudapostolic literature also. Only with their help can these documents be correctly opened up as sources for the history of Christianity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Here lie tasks which must be set about in the future.¹⁷

As long as we have to wait for such a methodological study of the apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* which can serve as «sources for the history of Christianity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries», it is surely bad method to dismiss the apocryphal works *a priori* as mere fiction under the presumption that they contain nothing valuable for historiography. A similar prejudice, let us recall, had at first characterised also the study of the Gospels in the quest for the historical Jesus. Indeed, the apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles*, too, need to be studied taking into account their peculiar literary genre. According to the specialists there is still much groundwork to be done in this area before the apocrypha can be put to use in historiography, as was noted already some decades ago.

There is as yet no scholarly study following the method of the history of forms on each of the narratives and each of the literary units: a work that is indispensable for the coordination of the material both from the literary point of view and the standpoint of religious history and the history of the Church.¹⁸

Borrowing a well-known term from another field we may say that the study or science of the apocrypha (apocryphology?) is an underdeveloped sector. At present the systematic study of the individual narratives and literary units is still underway and is a fast developing specialised sector. The above men-

¹⁷ W. SCHNEEMELCHER, «The Origin of the Pseudapostolic Literature» in E. HENNECKE - W. SCHNEEMELCHER (eds.), *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R.McL. Wilson, 2 vols., Philadelphia, 1963-1964; see II, 31-34, at 34. Abbreviated: NTA.

¹⁸ L. MORALDI (ed.), *Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento*, 2 vols., Turin, 1971, II, 942. For a more recent and complete collection of the NT apocrypha, see Id. (ed.), *Tutti gli Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento*, 3 vols., Casale Monferrato, 1999 (see in particular, II: *Atti degli Apostoli*).

tioned journal *Apocrypha* carried the following prefatory policy statement in its first five numbers (1990-1994).

Apocryphal writings have long been considered inferior literary products, which are judged by their relationship to canonical or normative writings. They have not yet really found their place as subjects of scientific study. Despite periodic interest from specialists of several disciplines they have remained, for the scholarly world as a whole, marginal, little known and unexploited by historians.

The historians shared the general prejudice against the apocryphal literature as unhistorical or unreliable. In this state of things it should not be surprising if some rewriting of the history of early Christianity, at least in part, is needed in the light of a re-reading of the total evidence.

According to one attempt at classifying the apocryphal literature they may be divided into four groups. The first expresses in written form the nucleus of the oral tradition obtaining in various places of ancient Christianity. The second group develops some scriptural datum regarding Jesus, his family, or the Apostles with free and even fantastic creations. A third group manipulates the canonical texts of Scripture in an attempt to legitimise heresy. And a fourth group contains later apocryphal writings reflecting apologetic or dogmatic concerns of the time and/or place.¹⁹

Among the apocryphal Gospels there were not only heterodox works rejected by the Fathers and condemned by the Church (like the *Gospel of Thomas* or the *Gospel of the Ebionites*) but also works like the *Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, which were in use among orthodox Judaeo-Christian communities and have been referred to by several Fathers without moving any reproach. Indeed, the term 'apocrypha' would be applicable to «the Apostles' Creed» (consisting of twelve 'articles' or propositions of faith) as well as to the «Canons of the Apostles», both of which are presented as formulated or codified by the twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ. The former is in use in the Latin Church not only for private prayer but also in the liturgy during the Mass («especially during lent and paschal time», *Missale Romanum*, 2002); the latter are held to be still in force by many Eastern Churches. Neither the one nor the other, we know, originated historically from the Apostles, to whom they are attributed. And in this sense both are apocryphal, though not so called in practice. This shows that the mere tag or label 'apocrypha' may mean little or nothing and what is so qualified can be of varying value, historical, theological or canonical.

¹⁹ M.G. MARA, «Apocriphi», 401-402. For a different classification and recent collection of the more important Christian apocrypha in French translation: F. BOVON - P. GEOLTRAIN (eds.), *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, vol. I, Paris, 1997; volume II, P. GEOLTRAIN - J.-D. KAESTLI (eds.), Paris, 2005. Abbreviation: ÉAC.

Certain writers like Rosa Söder found models of the apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* in the ancient Greek novels.²⁰ But this theory of the Greek models has not been found fully satisfactory and the question of models or precedents is still under study. This is what emerged from the proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ancient Novel (Groningen, July 2000).²¹ The historiography of antiquity and of the early Church did not disdain occasional fiction or free creation.²² This applies to the Bible, too. For example, the OT book of Jonah is a historical novel about an eighth century B.C. «prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, from Gath-hepher» (2Kings 14:25), who is otherwise unknown. But he was made the hero of a short story or extensive parable by an unknown writer four centuries later in a book of prophecy, which has found its place in the canonical Scripture. The relationship between history and fiction or novel in olden times was not between *either or* as it is in our modern way of thinking.

As an example of a modern historical novel one may consider *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1953) by Nikos Kazantzaki, which claims to probe «that part of Christ's nature which was profoundly human». Taking for granted the Jesus of history, the author tries to psychoanalyse the man Jesus, revealing probably in the process more of himself, the dark depths of his own complex psyche, than the human nature of the historical Jesus. Similarly, in the third century, the Thomas of history was used – or abused – by the author of the *Acts of Thomas* with a favourite agenda of his own, namely, to propagate encratism as a doctrine taught and practised by the Apostles even to the farthest ends of the earth, even India. But in this process does the *Acts of Thomas* furnish us any 'historical data' about the Thomas of history?

In the New Testament, the Gospels as well as the Acts of the Apostles combine history and theology in a unique harmony. So do in their own way also the apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* in general and the *Acts of Thomas* in particular. They are neither pure history nor mere fiction. «In order to compose these works the authors could base their accounts on some solid traditions», notes François Bovon.²³ And Angelo Di Berardino explains:

²⁰ R. SÖDER, *Die Apokryphen, Apostelgeschichten und die romanhafte Literatur der Antike*, Stuttgart, 1932 (reprint 1969).

²¹ S. PANAYOTAKIS – M. ZIMMERMAN – W. KEULEN (eds.), *The Ancient Novel and Beyond*, Leiden – Boston, 2003. Indeed, I. RAMELLI, *I romanzi antichi e il Cristianesimo: contesto e contatti*, Madrid, 2001, even reversed the original question and asked if Christianity influenced the novels of certain Greek writers (Chariton, Xenophon of Ephesus, Iamblichus, Achilles Tatius, Longus, Heliodorus, Lucian, Petronius, and Apuleius).

²² F. PASCHOUD, «Réflexions sur le problème de la fiction en historiographie», in B. POUDERON – Y.-M. DUVAL (eds.), *L'Historiographie de l'Église des premiers siècles*, Paris, 2001, 23-35. I.H. MARSHALL, *Luke. Historian and Theologian*, Downers Grove (IL), 1998.

²³ F. BOVON, «La vie des Apôtres: traditions bibliques et narrations apocryphes» in *Les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres*, Geneva, 1981, 154-155.

The apocryphal Acts are more or less novels with a religious background: they describe the lives of itinerant apostles and exalt their virtues. They take us into a religious world of legend and folklore. The historicity of these works can be understood as having degrees. The works may certainly narrate well-grounded, even if embellished, traditions about the apostle who is their protagonist. (Note: For example, the Acts of Peter on the presence of Peter in Rome and his death there; the Acts of John on John's activity in Asia).²⁴

«The Acts of Peter fall between novel and history», or is a «historical novel», concludes a recent study,²⁵ which is but one of many devoted in the recent years to the problem of determining the literary genre as well as the historical element in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles.

Since the relationship between novel and history [in antiquity] is more of a continuum than two sharply defined groups, works offering an account of the past could contain elements of both. 'Novelistic' features should not disqualify a work from being a historical account. To distinguish rigorously between these two categories of literature is false.²⁶

The apocryphal Acts follow no preset classical models but are mostly *sui generis*. What is said below of the literary genre of the Acts of John, for example, would apply to most other apocryphal Acts of the Apostles as well:

Il n'est à proprement parler ni un roman chrétien (même si ses liens avec la littérature romanesque sont patents), ni une biographie religieuse, ni un bâtard des Actes canonique, ni un descendant direct des πράξεις des héros antiques, ni un récit de voyages, ni un ouvrage historique. Sur le plan littéraire, il est un texte original comme le sont aussi les Actes canoniques.²⁷

Neither pure fiction nor mere history, the Apocryphal Acts combine both elements, often to instruct, inspire and entertain. Most studies devoted to determining what is historical in these Acts, however, neglect to consider a further element, namely, the factual evidence of cult at the tomb of the respective Apostle. Cult has often equal or greater value in hagiography than have mere texts in determining historicity. To quote a master of hagiography:

The tradition regarding the saints generally divides into two currents: the literary current and the liturgical current. They do not necessarily have the same point of

²⁴ A. DI BERARDINO, «The Christian Apocrypha and Their Significance» in A. DI BERARDINO - B. STUDER (eds.), *History and Theology*, I, *The Patristic Period*, Collegeville, 1997, 225-249, at 237.

²⁵ Ch.M. THOMAS, *The Acts of Peter, Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel: Rewriting the Past*, Oxford - New York, 2003, 102.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷ É. JUNOD - J.-D. KAESTLI (eds), *Acta Iohannis*, Turnhout, 1983, vol. 2, 684.

departure. It can happen that the former leads us in the end to a source rather distant from the facts, whereas the latter lets us reach up in a straight line to contemporary events, to the very saint in person. In antiquity, as we have seen, the cult of the saint was established the day after his death. His martyrdom or sanctity are striking facts, known to all, and his tomb becomes immediately a sacred place. [...] This cult leaves its imprint on monuments, in liturgical texts, in the accounts of pilgrims. These are witnesses, whose uninterrupted series leads us to the day when the tomb was closed on the remains of the saint and to the place where they repose. As regards the tradition of the written texts which want to inform us about his actual life and deeds, it originated on a day a hagiographer was pleased to take up his pen; often centuries separate this moment from the actual origins.²⁸

A common methodological error in the study of the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles is to disregard the tradition about the cult of their heroes. This approach has left its mark on the work of not a few scholars who have studied these Acts as texts only without enquiring about the historical context of cult of the respective Apostles at their traditional tombs. Text and cult complete each other like word and life. Few writers discuss the cult of the Apostle Thomas at his tomb in India.

The Acts of Thomas

Let us now consider the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* and examine its theological and historical underpinning. The *Acts of Thomas* (hereafter *ATH*) was written originally in Syriac in the first half of the third century, perhaps 230 ca.²⁹ The author of the *ATH* remains anonymous. It has long been supposed that it was composed in Edessa, called in Syriac Urhai (modern Urfa in Turkey), the capital of Osroëne. But some recent studies doubt that Edessa was the place of its composition; others deny its unity of authorship.³⁰ Edessa, evangelized in the second century, was conquered and annexed to the Roman empire in 217/218, which facilitated increased Greek cultural influence but also the translation of some Syriac works like the *ATH* into Greek. The original Syriac text of the *ATH* has undergone several mutations not only through translation into and retroversion from Greek into Syriac but also through later

²⁸ H. DELEHAYE, *Sanctus*, Bruxelles, 1927, 217-219 (my translation).

²⁹ A.F.J. KLIJN, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, Leiden - Boston, 2003; E. HENNECKE - W. SCHNEEMELCHER (eds), *New Testament Apocrypha*, English translation edited by R.McL. Wilson, Philadelphia, 1963-1976; reprint, Cambridge - Louisville, 1991 and 1993, II, 322-411.

³⁰ S.E. MYERS, «Revisiting Preliminary Issues in the *Acts of Thomas*» in *Apocrypha* 17 (2006) 95-112; Y. TISSOT, «Les Actes de Thomas, exemple de recueil composite» in *Les Actes apocryphes des Apôtres*, Geneva, 1981, 223-232.

interpolations. It was translated early into several languages besides Greek: Armenian, Georgian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Latin, Arabic, and Paleoslav.

In its present shape the *ATH* consists of fourteen Acts or chapters. It exploits the story of the Apostle Thomas as 'the twin' to construct a theology. The real name of this Apostle was probably Judas, a name very common among the Jews. He is called Judas not only in the *ATH* but also in some other early Syriac writings. It would seem that among the twelve Apostles of Jesus there were three Judases: 1) Judas Iscariot, 2) Judas, son of James or (Judas Thaddaeus), and 3) Judas Thomas (Didymus). Thomas is not a Jewish proper name: it does not occur at all in the Old Testament.

Theology in the Acts of Thomas

Thomas is not a proper noun in Aramaic but a common noun (*thoma*), meaning 'twin', which is rendered into Greek as Didymus ('twin'). It was probably given as a nickname to the third Judas for the practical purpose of distinguishing him from the other Judases of the group. But nicknames need a hook for them to stick. 'Twin' probably implied that this disciple had some striking physical resemblance to Jesus. This seems to be suggested by the fact that Jesus had to be identified (with a kiss) by the traitor Judas Iscariot in the garden of Gethsemani, so as to avoid the wrong man being arrested (Mk 14:44). It is perhaps not without significance that the *Martyrology* of Rabanus Maurus adds a gloss to the name 'Thomas', namely, «Didimus, hoc est Christi similis».³¹ While the Greek-speaking Churches practically treated Didymus as a proper name, Syriac Christianity regularly referred to him as Judas Thomas and exploited theologically the idea and symbolism of the *twin*. In the *ATH* this symbolism is not something secondary or negligible but central and enduring. In summarising the *ATH* and reducing it to a story its inbuilt symbolism is often lost. The *ATH* sees and presents Thomas as a true and perfect disciple of Jesus who can say with Paul, «I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me» (Gal 2: 20). Thomas is an *alter Christus*, a theological view instilled and emphasized in the *ATH*.

Here is a synopsis. The Apostle Thomas is sold by Jesus as a slave - Jesus took «the form of a slave» (Ph 2:7) - and is sent to evangelize India. Just as Jesus was 'sold' or handed over to the 'Jews' by Judas Iscariot for thirty coins, Thomas is sold as a slave to Habban, the emissary of King Gundaphar of India. This sale may not strike as so repugnant if we recall the Psalmist's exclamation to Yahweh: «You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them» (Ps 44:12). The background for Thomas's sale is prepared by his reluctance to go to the Indians depicted with hype as a difficult people to reach and to teach. This scene may appear to be not in character with the hardy and audacious Thomas,

³¹ J. McCULLOH (ed.), *Rabani Mauri Martyrologium*, Turnhout, 1979, 129-130.

ready to go and die with the Master (Jn 11:16). But even Jesus had felt fear before his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane: he «began to be distressed and agitated» and prayed to the Father to «remove this cup» (Mk 14:32,36).

Thomas reaches Sandaruk (in Syriac) or Andrapolis (in Greek) in the company of Habban. He takes part in the celebration of a marriage feast and sings a beautiful nuptial hymn with Gnostic overtones, an *Ode to Sophia* (wisdom) on the union of the soul to Wisdom. Upon reaching the realm of Gundaphar, Thomas is employed as a carpenter - like Jesus, «the carpenter's son», - to build a palace for the king. Thomas builds a heavenly palace, recalling the mansion Jesus prepares for his disciples in his Father's house (Jn 14:2), but none on earth. The royal misunderstanding and indignation are cleared with a miraculous vision of this heavenly palace, which results in the conversion of the king and of his retinue and many others.

Thomas then moves out into another kingdom in India, that of Mazdai (Misdaeus), in the company of his general Sifur. There he heals the sick, casts out devils, raises the dead and performs many other miracles. Finally, he converts the queen to continence, which incenses the king, who orders his execution. Like Jesus on the cross, whose side was pierced with a lance - «one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear» (Jn 19:34) - Thomas dies a martyr's death by the spear thrust of soldiers. Before breathing his last he exclaims «My Lord and my God, [...] I have fulfilled thy work» - recalling the words of Jesus, «It is accomplished» (Jn 19:30) - I became a slave, therefore *today* I receive freedom (cf. «*today* you will be with me in paradise» [Lk 23:43]).

After his death, Thomas appears to Sifur and Vizan who are keeping watch like the 'two angels' keeping watch over Jesus' empty tomb (Jn 20:12; Lk 24:24). Thomas declares: «I am not here [...]. I have ascended unto my Lord [...]. But rise and go down hence [...].» - echoing the order of the risen Jesus to his «brethren to go to Galilee» (Mt 28:10). The tomb of the Twin is opened but «his bones are not found, for one of the brethren had taken them away secretly and conveyed them to the West». This recalls the empty tomb and the story about 'stealing' the body of Jesus (Mt 28:13), a parallel replicating mystically Jesus' resurrection in his 'twin', the Apostle Judas Thomas.

These and other parallels between Jesus and Thomas in the *ATH*³² have led Drijvers to the following conclusion: «Thomas and Jesus are identical not physically but spiritually. Judas Thomas is the Type of the true believer who preaches the gospel of Jesus and as it were embodies it».³³ This is symbolic theology. The *ATH* is a rich mine for the construction of a christology.

³² Eighteen parallels were found by J.N. FARQUHAR and are listed in his «The Apostle Thomas in North India» in *Bulletin of John Rhylands Library* 10 (1926) 80-111, at 85-86.

³³ H.J.W. DRIJVERS, «Thomas, Apostel» in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Bd. 33, Berlin, 2002, 430-433, at 431.

The deeds of Thomas are, like the miracles of Jesus, mighty and wonderful; indeed, the miracles performed by the Apostle are astounding, even fantastic — they had to be, since they had to be 'greater' than those performed by Jesus himself (Jn 14:12). They are narrated in the *ATH* artlessly; they are calculated to impress and evoke awe. Today they are not likely to be taken seriously; but their purpose was to stress the figure of Thomas as the mystical Twin, the *alter ego* of Jesus. Thomas is the *alter Christus* (Θωμᾶ ὁ δεύτερος Χριστός) as has been stated explicitly in a sort of paraphrase of the usage in the *ATH*.³⁴ The *ATH* exploits to the full the symbolism of the twin in the ancient Near East, extolling the identification between the believing disciple and the Master.³⁵

The bones of the Apostle continued to work miracles at his tomb and were later transferred secretly by a 'brother' or Christian faithful to the «region of the West». In textual history, this may be a later addition to the *ATH*, according to some critics like Tissot (see below).

There are four hymns in the *ATH*, which are also later interpolations: besides the above mentioned Ode to Sophia, there is a hymn on baptism, another on the Eucharist, and a fourth on the Pearl (symbol of the liberated soul). These hymns are a rich mine for liturgical theology and Christology. The hymn on the Pearl is introduced as sung by «Judas Thomas in the land of the Indians». In fact it must have originated «en milieu irano-parthe», as shown by «divers indices géographiques, linguistiques et historiques», latest in the first quarter of the III century (ÉAC I, 1419). The *ATH* ends as follows: «The acts of Judas Thomas the Apostle are completed, which he wrought in the land of the Indians, fulfilling the command of him who sent him; to him be glory for ever and ever. Amen».³⁶

The *ATH* became popular reading, especially with the Manicheans. In Manichaeism salvation is basically reunion with the Spirit (Christ), for which it is necessary to abstain from the works of the flesh, chiefly from sex through virginity and celibacy. The *ATH* presented the Apostle Thomas as the alter ego of Jesus the Saviour, who is exalted as the supreme model of encratist asceticism, especially of sexual abstinence. The *ATH* advocated also abstention from meat and wine. The encratist agenda of the *ATH* was later enhanced by the addition of two exquisite songs, «The Song of the Pearl», and the «Wedding Song». Borrowing some of the logia of the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, the *ATH* exploited the fame of the Apostle Thomas («the Twin of Jesus») to make him the herald of its own encratist message. Its interest was not so much the

³⁴ D. TAMILIA, «Acta Thomae Apocrypha» in *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei*, serie 5, 12 (1903) 385-408, at 389/9.

³⁵ R. KUNTZMANN, *Le symbolisme des jumeaux aux Proche-Orient ancien. Naissance, fonction et évolution d'un symbole*, Paris, 1983, esp. 164-182.

³⁶ NTA II, 531. Compare NTA II, *Acts of John* (258), *Acts of Peter* (321), *Acts of Paul* (385), *Acts of Andrew* (421), *Acts of Thomas* (530).

medium as the message, which is, strictly speaking, neither dualistic (matter-spirit, as in the *Acts of Andrew*: salvation is liberation of the soul from the body) nor Gnostic (as in the *Acts of John*) but eschatological. Richard Banckham has summarised this theology of the *ATH* as follows.

Sexuality is bound up not with the body as such, but with death (since it is death that makes procreation necessary), sickness and other evils of the flesh which became part of human life at the fall. Sexual continence is restoration of the condition of Adam and Eve in paradise, and is associated with immortality. Enormous importance is attached to *encrateia* because it is the key point in human life at which the forces of evil, which plague human life, can be resisted and overcome. The dualism here is between the transitory and the eternal, but not between the material and the spiritual.³⁷

The *ATH* uses language with double meaning, at two levels: literal and theological (or mystical or anagogical), as does the Gospel of John. In the *ATH* a true disciple of Jesus is his double, his twin, *didymus*; and the Apostle Thomas is the paragon Didymus.³⁸ Thus it is clear that the *ATH* is neither pure history nor sheer legend nor mere fiction but what? – theological history?

History in the Acts of Thomas: Its Literary Genre

The *ATH* is certainly not history as we understand it today. Nor is it just a missionary travelogue like Jordan Catalani's *Mirabilia Descripta* (1329). But to dismiss it as mere myth or legend, as is often done, is to prejudge it and misread it. There is surely need to study it critically; and this need was underscored long ago, for example, by the Bollandists, who wrote:

It is to be borne in mind that apart from what is written in the Gospels nothing is found in the tradition regarding the life and death of St. Thomas except in the apocryphal works [...]. If there is perhaps something that lies hidden in them that is not to be neglected by historians, it is the task of criticism to draw it out.³⁹

³⁷ R. BANCKHAM, «Imaginative Literature» in P.F. ESLER (ed.), *The Early Christian World*, London – New York, 2000, vol. 2, 791-812, at 809.

³⁸ For more on the theological symbolism in the *ATH*, especially of the «twin», see H.J.W. DRIJVERS, «Thomas, Apostel». Luc Devillers has suggested that the word 'twin' (*didymos*) is to be taken in the sense of «having a double meaning» (L. DEVILLERS, «Thomas, appelé Didyme – pour une nouvelle approche du prétendu jumeau» in *Revue Biblique* 113 [2006] 65-77). This double meaning, however, needs to be made more precise. We may recall that Mani, too, had a Twin (*Syzygos*), a sort of companion genie or angel of revelation (*Cologne Mani Codex*, 18: 15, etc.).

³⁹ *Propylaeum ad Acta Sanctorum Decembris, Martyrologium Romanum*, Bruxelles, 1940, December 21: «In mente habendum [est] praeter ea quae in evangeliiis scripta sunt, nihil de vita et morte S. Thomae traditum esse nisi in libris apocryphis [...]. Si quid forte in eis latitat quod ab historiae cultoribus contemnendum non sit, id operose eruere artis criticae est» (p. 595).

The assertion that there is no post-biblical *tradition* about the life and death of the Apostle Thomas, except in the apocryphal books, is questionable. It restricts tradition to *written* works, overlooks the patristic tradition and ignores the Indian tradition. At the time the apocryphal works like the *ATh* and the *Didascalia Apostolorum* were being written, Origen cited the tradition about Thomas's mission to Parthia, that is, Indo-Parthia or north India, as we saw above. The critical study to ascertain what is historical in the *ATh* has been undertaken in the last decades. Yves Tissot, for example, concludes his study as follows.

The *Acts of Thomas* gives the impression of being a composite collection. It is in fact made up of independent miracle stories, followed by a long encratite *Martyrium* (chapters 82-171). In my view, its composition is best explained on the hypothesis that this *Martyrium* was added to a pre-existing collection of miracles which the author touched up here and there in an encratite sense, especially by the insertion in the first story of the marriage at Andrapolis (chapters 4-16). [...] In short, how to interpret these composite texts, which have been rearranged and interpolated, of which in the end no one is truly the author?⁴⁰

As in the study of the Gospels one may suppose that there was «a pre-existing collection of miracles». If so, what is its historical value? And if we suppose that this so-called *Martyrium*, or the story of the martyrdom of the Apostle Thomas in India, was a later addition, we have to ask further why it was added. What is its provenance? And what is its historical value?

In trying to answer these questions we have to bear in mind the peculiar literary genre of the *AT*. As we saw, it is neither myth nor fiction nor novel. Nor is it pure history as we understand it today. Nor are the Gnostic and Manichean elements in it to be overemphasized.⁴¹ For example, a donkey identifies itself in the land of the Indians and speaks to Thomas, «the twin brother of Christ» inviting him to mount (*ATh*, Act IV, 39). Fable? Fiction? Narrative devoid of any historical value? But before addressing these questions and leaping to hasty conclusions one must note that the donkey is speaking like a biblical theologian! «I am of that race that served Balaam, and thy Lord and teacher also sat upon one that belonged to me by race». Balaam's donkey, which had spoken to his master in the OT (Num 22:28-30), is recalled in the NT: «a dumb ass spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness» (1Pt 2:16). Following this

⁴⁰ Y. TISSOT, «Les Actes de Thomas, exemple de recueil composite» in F. BOVON et al. (ed.), *Les Actes apocryphes des Apôtres : Christianisme et monde païen*, Geneva, 1981, 223-232, at 223, 232.

⁴¹ M. STAROWIEYSKI, «Alcune osservazioni sulla struttura letteraria degli atti degli apostoli apocrifi» in U. ZANETTI – E. LUCCHESI (eds), *Aegyptus Christiana. Festschrift Paul Devos*, Geneva, 2004, 19-28; P.H. POIRIER, «Les Actes de Thomas et le manichéisme» in *Apocrypha* 9 (1998) 263-287.

biblical precedent, the *ATh* makes the donkey speak to convey a theological lesson. For the Bible and the *ATh* the lesson is the kernel, the story is only the shell. Those who get too busy with the shell may miss the kernel. Those who dismiss the shell as mere fiction or legend, risk missing the point — and throw the baby away with the bathwater.

The Place Where the Apostle of Thomas Died

According to the *ATh* it is in «the land of the Indians» that the Apostle Thomas died ending his mission. He died there the death of a martyr, as an *alter Christus*. What is one to make of this geographical setting in India? Short of examining further internal evidence and studying critically the Indian tradition about the Apostle Thomas, which will take us too far afield, an approach by way of a shortcut to the answer to this question could be a comparative study of the five major apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles*, of Peter, Paul, John, Andrew and Thomas. These are the five most ancient and original apocryphal Acts. The Manichaeans assembled these five Acts together into a corpus replacing the canonical Acts of the Apostles. Photius, followed by Lipsius, maintained them as a group, and they have ever since been the object of comparative study by scholars.⁴² The *ATh* is not necessarily the last of these five Acts chronologically; but it is the longest and best preserved, although its original Syriac text underwent interpolations. These five Acts became the model for other Acts. In fact all the Apostles had their Acts by the sixth century. The following table furnishes a synoptic view of the five principal apocryphal Acts.

<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>	Author	Date A.D.	Place of Composition	Where the hero dies
<i>Acts of John</i>	Leucius	150 ca	Asia Minor	Ephesus
<i>Acts of Andrew</i>	unknown	150-200	Achaea? Asia Minor?	Patras
<i>Acts of Peter</i>	unknown	180-190	Rome?/Bythinia?	Rome
<i>Acts of Paul</i>	a presbyter	185-195	Asia Minor/Iconium?	Rome
<i>Acts of Thomas</i>	unknown	220-230	'Syria' (Edessa?)	India

This table reflects the broad consensus of present day scholarship regarding the date and place of composition of these major apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, although with varying degrees of certitude. For some precisions regarding dates we may mention *Acts of Peter* ca 180, *Acts of Paul* 160 (M.R. James) or 160-170 (L. Vouaux) or even 190-200, *Acts of John* ca 150, *Acts of*

⁴² J.N. BREMMER, «The Five Major Apocryphal Acts. Authors, Place, Time and Readership» in J.N. BRENNER (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, Leuven, 2001, 149-170.

Andrew ca 185. For these last two and *Acts of Thomas* the proposal of an earlier date 117-138 by E. Peterson has received little support. It may also be noted that the general agreement about Edessa as the place of its composition has also waned recently. But what do these five apocryphal Acts say about the *place of death of the respective Apostles?*

1) *Peter*. According to the *Acts of Peter*, St. Peter was crucified in Rome head downwards (NTA II, 319). Patristic tradition is unanimous about Rome as the place where Peter died. His tomb has been identified by tradition at the Vatican hill where Constantine built a basilica, later replaced by the present Basilica of St. Peter. Certain Protestant writers like A. Bauer and K. Heussi denied Peter's presence and death in Rome, whereas other leading Protestant scholars like Harnack, Lietzmann, Cullmann and Kurt Aland supported this tradition (NTA II, 49).⁴³ Scholarship is now generally agreed that Peter was martyred in Rome.⁴⁴ No other place challenges this title of Rome.

2) *Paul*. According to the *Acts of Paul*, St. Paul also was martyred in Rome by being beheaded (NTA II, 386). «The tradition that Paul died in Rome and not in another city can be accepted as historically accurate. All the sources are concordant in pointing to Rome as the site of his martyrdom, there being no rival claims».⁴⁵ Let us merely note that Tertullian (c. 200) wrote that Peter suffered martyrdom in Rome like the Lord (by crucifixion) and Paul like John the Baptist (by beheading).⁴⁶ Among other patristic witnesses of the same tradition may be mentioned Peter of Alexandria (306), Lactantius (316-321), Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 325), Chrysostom (400), etc. «By the middle of the 2nd century at the latest, a distinct *tropaeum* marked the grave and the Christian faithful were already making their way thither to pray [...] where the Basilica of Saint Paul's Without the Walls now stands».⁴⁷

3) *Andrew*. Andrew died, according to the apocryphal *Acts of Andrew* (NTA II, 417-423), as a martyr in Patras (Patrai, Petrae), 220 kms west of Athens, in Greece (Achaea), where he was crucified and buried. «It seems that the information regarding the zone evangelized by Andrew is historically well found-

⁴³ For recent archaeological evidence, see A. DONATI (ed.), *Pietro e Paolo. La storia, il culto, la memoria nei primi secoli* (mostra 30 giugno - 10 dicembre, 2000, Roma), Milan, 2000. See also *Pietro e Paolo. Il loro rapporto con Roma nelle testimonianze antiche*. XXIX Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana, Roma, 2001.

⁴⁴ B. GREEN, *Christianity in Ancient Rome. The First Three Centuries*, London, 2010, 44-47.

⁴⁵ H.W. TAJRA, *The Martyrdom of St. Paul*, Tübingen, 1994, 199.

⁴⁶ TERTULLIAN, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 36 (PL 2, 60). The difference was because, according to Roman law Paul (a Roman citizen, *civis*) could not be punished with crucifixion like Peter (a foreigner, *peregrinus*).

⁴⁷ H.W. TAJRA, *The Martyrdom of St. Paul*, 200.

ed, and Patras as the city of his martyrdom and death by crucifixion».⁴⁸ Origen mentioned Scythia as the place assigned by lot to Andrew but not as the place where he died. While Origen spoke of the mission *accomplished* by the Apostles Peter and Paul, both of whom were martyred in Rome, as was well-known, he only spoke of the mission *assigned by lot* to Thomas, to Andrew and to John (while adding in parenthesis regarding the last named that John stayed on in Ephesus and died there). Origen does not speak of the various places these three Apostles actually evangelized, but only the place they got by lot to evangelize, that is, the place to which they were assigned by the Lord (cf. Acts 1:24): namely, Parthia to Thomas, Scythia to Andrew, and Asia to John. But, according to the *ATh*, it was India that Thomas got by lot. This difference may not be casual but significant. Origen did not know the *ATh* or, if he knew it, he consciously ignored it. He does not state that Thomas actually preached the gospel in Parthia or Andrew in Scythia, although surely he implies this. Nor does he say that Parthia was the only place Thomas evangelized, or Scythia the only place Andrew Evangelized.

«The author of the Acts of Andrew did not just imagine the martyrdom at Patras but must have received it from a tradition».⁴⁹ If he were just inventing it, he would hardly have placed it in Patras, which was not even a metropolis like Athens or Corinth. No other city has claimed to possess the tomb of Andrew. The recent edition of the *Martyrologium Romanum* (Vatican Press, 2001), which was prepared according to the directive of Vatican II to render it «historically reliable» (SC 92c) and therefore was concerned «iudicio historicae disciplinae subicere et diligentius tractare quam antea» (5), has retained Patras as the place where the Apostle Andrew was martyred. The entry on 30 November reads: «Festum sancti Andreae, Apostoli, qui [...] post Pentecosten Evangelium traditur in Achaea praedicasse et apud Patras in cruce affixus esse [...]».

⁴⁸ E. PERETTO, «Andrea apostolo» in *Nuovo Dizionario Patristico e di Antichità Cristiane*, I, 285. Arguing chiefly from Origen's 'silence', Francis Dvornik had dismissed Andrew's martyrdom at Patras as legendary or unhistorical (F. DVORNIK, *The Idea of Apostolicity in Byzantium and the Legend of the Apostle Andrew*, Cambridge [MA], 1958, 197, 211s). But like most arguments from silence this is slippery. Origen's point was that «the holy Apostles and disciples of our Saviour were scattered throughout the world», that is, they fulfilled the Lord's command to preach the gospel to the whole world (EUSEBIUS, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, 1). In this regard Origen mentions the five Apostles we are considering. Paul evangelized a vast geographical area «from Jerusalem to Illyria», including Achaea. There was no need then to say that Achaea was evangelized after Paul also by Andrew.

⁴⁹ J.-M. PRIEUR (ed.), *Acta Andreae*, 2 vols., Turnhout, 1989, I, 80; Id., trans., *Actes de l'apôtre André*, Turnhout, 1995. L.R. LANZILLOTTA, *Acta Andreae Apocrypha*, Geneva, 2007 (textual study). For an earlier study see J. FLAMION, *Les actes apocryphes de l'Apôtre André*, Louvain - Paris - Bruxelles, 1911, and for the latest D.R. MACDONALD, *The Acts of Andrew*, Santa Rosa (CA), 2005.

4. *John*. As regards John, the question is a little more complex. According to the *Acts of John* (NTA II, 258) he died in advanced age in Ephesus, the capital of the Province of Asia [Minor], where he had ministered for long. He was buried there. This tradition is reported also by Eusebius, who cites Polycrates, who expounded «a tradition which had come to him», according to which «there is also John, who lay on the Lord's breast, who was a priest wearing the breastplate, and a witness, and teacher. He sleeps at Ephesus».⁵⁰ 'Witness' followed by 'teacher' indicates John as a self-affirmed «witness» (1Jn 1:1-3). This use of 'witness' (μάρτυς) in its primitive sense points to the antiquity of the tradition itself. However, this passage has been widely misunderstood as affirming that John died a martyr's death. But μάρτυς καὶ διδάσχαλος would be odd chronological sequence in the usual sense of 'martyr and teacher'. Instead, John is a qualified teacher precisely as witness. This interpretation is confirmed by the sentence which follows, in which Polycrates qualifies Polycarp as ἐπίσκοπος καὶ μάρτυς, bishop and martyr, inverting the sequence of words. John stayed on in Ephesus and died there a natural death in old age, not only according to the *Acts of John*⁵¹ but also according to Eusebius, Origen, Polycrates, and Irenaeus.⁵² This tradition is confirmed by the cult of the Apostle John at Ephesus. If it was the violent death of a martyr, the *Acts of John* would surely not have failed to exalt it not only with due epithets but a detailed narrative. In a study devoted to striking the historical bedrock in these five principal apocryphal Acts we are considering, Éric Junod observes with reference to the *Acts of John*:

L'auteur des *AJ* peut faire dire et faire faire à Jean quasiment ce qu'il veut, mais il ne peut aller à l'encontre des traditions relatives à la localisation de son activité et de sa mort, ainsi qu'à la nature de sa mort. S'il veut rendre crédible son ouvrage, il est contraint de respecter ces données traditionnelles.⁵³

It has been proposed that «the most likely date for the writing of the *AJ* is earlier than is generally supposed, viz. the second quarter of the second century».⁵⁴ This would mean that the *AJ* was written in less than fifty years after

⁵⁰ HE 5, 24. 2-7. K. LAKE (trans.), *Eusebius. Ecclesiastical History*, 2 vols., II, Harvard, 1926, 507, substitutes «witness» for «martyr». See also B.D. EHRMAN, *Lost Scriptures*, Oxford, 2003, «Acts of John», 93-108.

⁵¹ É. JUNOD - J.-D. KAESTLI (eds), *Acta Iohannis*, Turnhout, 1983.

⁵² IRENAEUS, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 1, 1; 3, 4.

⁵³ É. JUNOD, «Créations romanesques et traditions ecclésiastiques dans les Actes apocryphes des Apôtres» in *Augustinianum* 23 (1983) 271-285 at 279. It is not clear why Junod does not make use of the same argument he uses with regard to John when he turns to the consideration of the Apostle Thomas, who also has a tradition of cult at his tomb in India, well known also in the first millennium West.

⁵⁴ P.J. LALLEMAN, *The Acts of John*, Louvain, 1998, 272.

the death of John and not a few of those who had witnessed it were still alive. Even hearsay witnesses of the second generation would know for certain whether Ephesus was the place where the Apostle John had died. And so the author of the *AJ* could not have placed the Apostle's death in Ephesus from mere fancy. There were indeed certain ecclesiastical traditions contrary to the one centred around Ephesus but they had no consistency.⁵⁵ Thus it is historically certain that the place of John's death was really Ephesus.

5) *Thomas*. Finally, what about the Apostle Thomas and the apocryphal *ATH*, according to which he was martyred in India?⁵⁶ Not a few writers question the historical reliability of the *ATH* as they suspect it to be a creation of the Edessan Church in its bid for the glory of apostolic foundation. However, this hypothesis is weakened by three considerations. First, apocryphal writings originating certainly from Edessa assign the evangelization of Mesopotamia to Addai and Mari,⁵⁷ disciples of St. Thomas, whereas Thomas himself is regarded as the apostle of India in the entire Syriac tradition. Second, the *ATH* was composed before rivalry among the Churches arose in the sixth century on the claim of apostolic foundation as the basis for a superior ecclesiastical rank. Third, the *ATH* contains no sign of any such Edessan claims, for example, by tracing episcopal succession from the Apostle Thomas. Fourth, the *ATH* posited apostolic foundation in India rather than in Edessa, and this was owing to the force of history, since fiction could have posited it rather in Edessa itself. Fifthly, as regards the Indian tradition about the Apostle Thomas, it originated independently of the *ATH*.⁵⁸

Besides, from a comparative standpoint one may ask: if in the case of the four leading Apostles the place of the tomb mentioned in their respective apocryphal *Acts* corresponds to the historical truth, may it not be so also with the fifth? If it is, the *ATH* expresses the historical truth when it places the death of the Apostle Thomas in India. Thus all the five apocryphal *Acts* would be at one as regards the place of their respective hero's death. This may be resumed in the following synoptic table.

⁵⁵ J.-D. KAESTLI, «Le rôle des textes bibliques dans la genèse et le développement des légendes apocryphes. Le cas du sort final de l'apôtre Jean» in *Augustinianum* 23 (1983) 319-336.

⁵⁶ *ATH* 164-168; NTA II, 530; ÉAC I, pp. 1466-1468.

⁵⁷ A. DESREUMAUX (trans.), *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus (La doctrine d'Addai)*, Turnhout, 1993.

⁵⁸ G. NEDUNGATT, *Quest for the Historical Thomas* (cit. n. 9 above) deals with the Indian tradition about the Apostle Thomas (258-396), which is centred around four foci: 1) Indo-Parthia or North-Western India (today, Pakistan and Afghanistan), 2) Udayapur in Central India, 3) tomb at Mylapore in South India, and 4) traditions in Malabar. Some of these traditions are shared also by Hindus.

The five leading Apostles	The place of their death and burial
Peter	Rome
Paul	Rome
Andrew	Patras
John	Ephesus
Thomas	India

In the case of Peter it has been rightly stated: «The fact that a few apocryphal works mention the presence of Peter in Rome does not make it necessarily legendary. It only proves that at the time when the work was written people believed that Peter had gone to Rome».⁵⁹ This means that the *Acts of Peter* witnesses to a common historical tradition. The same is true also of the Acts of Paul, of Andrew and of John. Following the same reasoning, we can infer that when the *ATH* was written there was a widely shared common fund of knowledge that Thomas had gone to India, preached the gospel there and died there. Eugene Tisserant wrote as follows: «The author of the *Acts of Judas-Thomas* would not have written in Mesopotamia something which would have seemed too improbable to his countrymen sufficiently informed of what was happening in India».⁶⁰

All the five principal apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* may be regarded then as built on a common source of knowledge (tradition) available in the Church about the historical mission of the Apostles. In the first four cases the same places where the tombs of the Apostles are situated in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles are mentioned also in the literature on the Jewish-Hellenistic missions.⁶¹ It is where such information was lacking that the later minor apocryphal Acts started to be inventive and resorted to fiction by sending the other Apostles on fancied missions.

Evangelization of India in the Acts of Thomas: Fact or Fiction?

For a secure answer to the question whether the *ATH* expresses a historical fact in presenting Thomas as the apostle of India it is necessary to make a detailed textual and historical criticism. While awaiting the results of such study we may examine it considering it as a historical novel, whatever else it

⁵⁹ A. FLICHE – V. MARTIN, *Histoire de l'Église*, vol. 1, ed. J. ZEILLER, Paris, s. d., 228.

⁶⁰ «L'auteur des *Actes de Judas-Thomas* n'aurait pu en Mésopotamie écrire quelque chose qui fût trop invraisemblable aux yeux de ses concitoyens suffisamment informés de ce qui passait aux Indes» (E. TISSERANT, «Syro-Malabar, Église» in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* XIV/2, Paris, 1941, 3089-3162, at 3091.

⁶¹ K. BERGER, «Jüdisch-hellenistische Missionsliteratur und apokryphe Apostelakten» in *Kairos* 17 (1975) 232-248.

be also. Historical novels presuppose a common fund of knowledge concerning persons and places, which must be familiar to the readers. This may be illustrated with an example or two.

Stendhal's masterpiece *La chartreuse de Parme* (1839) describes Napoleon's march into Milan at the head of his troops (1796), the battle of Waterloo after his escape from the Island of Elba (1815), and the retirement of Fabritius, the novel's hero, to the Charterhouse of Parma. As a romance, it furnishes no formal *historical proof* that there ever was a man called Napoleon or that he invaded Milan or escaped from Elba and lost the battle at Waterloo; but these are historical *facts* which are known to the readers and it is on the that the novel is built – there is even a Carthusian monastery near Parma, vindicating the title.

The recent bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* weaves a criminal plot of murders perpetrated under cover of the Vatican, a power portrayed as intent on preventing the divulging of a sensitive secret about Jesus' presumed sly relationship with Mary Magdalen. And a man of the Opus Dei is featured in the story exploiting a diffuse public opinion that this is a secret society. People can be easily induced to suspect that a secret society is a criminal society. Thus an anti-Church and anti-Christ affect is cleverly conceived and artfully circulated: Jesus was after all a shadowy figure who led a double life, like so many decent men of today! The truth about him had long been suppressed by villainous churchmen and their minions. But now at last the secret has been exposed by historical research. The atheist author's cunning message: Be informed, be enlightened and be wise!

In order to spread a message of its own the *ATh*, too, draws on a commonly shared fund of historical knowledge about the Apostle Thomas and his mission to India. It points to the public opinion about Thomas obtaining in Mesopotamia in early third century. To quote from the *Cambridge Shorter History of India*,

The names of Gondophares and of some of his family have survived in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* [...]. These legends [regarding Thomas's visit to him] are important, not so much as regards the life of St Thomas, as because they show that in the first century A.D. in the milieu in which they arose, there was a certain amount of knowledge of India.⁶²

This «amount of knowledge of India» is historical but it is presented wrapped in fictional material. The ancient Greek novel, long supposed to have furnished the model for the apocryphal Acts,⁶³ may prove to be a wrong scent, just as the Greek *lógos* has misled not a few exegetes to think that it contained

⁶² H.H. DODWELL (ed.), *The Cambridge Shorter History of India*, Indian edition, Delhi, 1969, 71. What is affirmed further is suggestive though not necessarily conclusive: «Misdaios, the king in whose land St Thomas was martyred, is simply the 'Mazdaean' and is not mentioned by name. His general, Siphor or Sifur, is Shāpūr or Sapor, and his capital, Quantaria, is Gandhāra (Kandahār)» (72). The author of the *ATh* may not have had *precise* information.

⁶³ See J.J. BREMMER, «The Five Major Apocryphal Acts», references in footnotes on 152.

the key to the *Lógos* of the prologue of John. The apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* tell elaborate theological stories or parables in the manner of the apocryphal /deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament (like Judith, Esther, Jonah), or of *midrash* like Barlaam's ass. It is this biblical history or the historiography of salvation history that seems to have been taken as a model by the *ATh* and the other apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles*. Close attention needs to be paid to their peculiar literary genre, which is still under study. Those who neglect the progress report of this ongoing research may go astray and, as we said before, risk throwing the baby away with the bath water.

For biblical fundamentalists Genesis and Exodus and Jonah are pat history; even as the *ATh* is pat fiction or legend for the apocryphal fundamentalists. Both rush to conclusions ignoring or being impatient of literary genre. «The well known is what we have yet to learn» (T.S. Eliot). Many writers in the West have leaped to conclusions without critically examining the Indian tradition. The unwary can be taken in when historical figures are clothed in fictional vesture and the historical origins of peoples are couched in legends and myths. Here are two examples to illustrate the point.

First, as is well known, Marcus Tullius Cicero was a Roman orator, lawyer, politician and writer, who with his polished style set the standard for the Latin language. He was assassinated by the agents of his political rival Mark Anthony in 43 B.C., thus ending a brilliant career. A recent novel entitled *Imperium* features Cicero as the hero.⁶⁴ For those who are strangers to Roman history Cicero would be a mere fictional figure emerging from a novel as its tragic hero.

Second, in a recent collective work entitled *La leggenda di Roma* five scholars present the results of their critical study of the whole corpus of ancient literature on the origins of Rome. They draw on the findings of archaeology, numismatics and other such sources of history and reach the conclusion with historical certainty that Rome was founded by Romulus in the eighth century B.C. Not all may be convinced. However, Professor Carandini, who teaches archaeology and the history of Greek and Roman art at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza', states that *the mythical legend of Romulus founding Rome was an ancient way of narrating history*.⁶⁵

A fictional vest can hide a historical figure. Myths and legends have often been a way of narrating history in antiquity. This applies also to the Bible. For example, the first book Genesis uses the creation myth, the myth of the origin of giants and the legend of the flood. And in the NT the phenomena accompanying the theophany at the Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) have their parallel in a similar narrative in Philo of Alexandria and recall those of Mount Sinai at

⁶⁴ R. HARRIS, *Imperium. A Novel of Ancient Rome*, New York, 2006.

⁶⁵ A. CARANDINI et al., *La leggenda di Roma: Dalla nascita dei gemelli alla fondazione della città*, Milan, 2006, XIX and XLV-XLVI. This is the first of a three-volume work and contains an analysis of the literary sources and study of the mythical themes about the origins of Rome.

the giving of the Law (Ex 19:18-19). The NT *Acts of the Apostles* furnished the model for the apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles*, which did not hesitate to be more inventive. This point is pertinent in the interpretation of the *ATH*.

Long ago Bornkamm had rightly stated that the *ATH* is «a highly singular document», but he then proceeded on the assumption that it was of no use to history.⁶⁶ A recent study of the *ATH* states that it «does not furnish us with sufficient historical proof that Thomas actually went to India».⁶⁷ True, but a prior methodological question would be: May any historical proof be expected of an apocryphon? If so, what sort of proof? A more recent and scholarly study concludes that the *ATH* is founded on an existing Edessan tradition containing «information which had really originated in the Indo-Parthian area», which «the author used allowing free flight to his imagination in order to cater to the taste of his potential readers».⁶⁸ This is in keeping with the recent advances made in the study of the Christian apocrypha. In particular, the story of the mission of the Apostle Thomas to India narrated in the *ATH* was based on a known historical fact that he evangelized India, was martyred and buried there.

Indeed, with near unanimity the Fathers of the Church bear witness to the tradition about St. Thomas as the apostle of India.⁶⁹ The *Martyrologium Romanum*, newly revised (2001) in keeping with standard historiography, states for the feast of the Apostle Thomas on July 3 that, upon seeing the risen Christ, Thomas exclaimed, «My Lord and my God! And this faith he proclaimed, as tradition has it, evangelizing the peoples of India».⁷⁰

Conclusion

As recent critical studies have shown, the five early apocryphal Acts of the Apostles did not rely on mere fancy when they located the final stage and death of their heroes. Various monuments of tradition bear this out. It is historically certain that Peter and Paul died in Rome, Andrew in Patras and John in Ephesus, the places mentioned in their apocryphal Acts. As regards

⁶⁶ G. BORNKAMM, *Mythos und Legende in den apokryphen Thomasakten: Beiträge zur Geschichte der Gnosis und zur Vorgeschichte des Manichäismus*, Göttingen, 1933, 121.

⁶⁷ L.P. VAN DEN BOSCH, «India and the Apostolate of St. Thomas» in J.N. BREMMER, *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, Leuven, 2001, 125-148, at p. 133. His «reconstruction of Christianity in India» (143-148) is guided by historicism, contains convenient theories of «interpolation» (148) and ignores the Indian tradition completely as he speaks of «the ancient imagination of Thomas's visit to India» (125, 148).

⁶⁸ J. TUBACH, «Historische Elemente in den Thomasakten» in J. TUBACH - G.S. VASHALOMIZE (eds.), *Studien zu den Thomas-Christen in Indien*, Halle, 2006, 49-116, at 112-113.

⁶⁹ For the documentation see G. NEDUNGATT, *Quest for the Historical Thomas*, 177-253.

⁷⁰ *Martyrologium Romanum*, 2001 (see n. 49): «De qua fide indicos evangelizasse populos traditur».

Thomas, who according to the *ATH* died a martyr in India, comparable critical studies of the monuments of tradition have not been made yet. These monuments consist of several patristic texts as well as the constituents of the Indian tradition centred on four geographical foci. In the West, it is generally presumed that the source of the Indian tradition is the *ATH* and therefore not worth investigating. Such a presumption would be a misplaced act of 'faith' or 'belief' on the part of the historian.

A comparative study of the principal apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* points to the conclusion that the *ATH*, too, like the other four draws on a historical tradition in the early Church regarding the Apostle Thomas. To discount the *ATH* as mere fiction would be to misread it. With the symbolism of Thomas as the 'twin' it expresses a valuable theology of the discipleship of Christ. Christ's true disciple is one with the Master, having become mystically his twin, an *alter Christus*. Like Christ, Thomas preached the good news and died a martyr - in India.

To conclude. In the study of the historical origins of Christianity in India the proper methodology demands attention to the ongoing research into the lore of the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles in general and the *ATH* in particular. There has been a reevaluation of these Acts from the historical standpoint. This reevaluation can be detected in the recent edition of the *Roman Martyrology* and in the approach of Pope Benedict XVI, who cited the *ATH* along with Origen to affirm the evangelization of India by the Apostle Thomas as a historical fact. This view reflects the current scholarship about the New Testament apocrypha, which, if used critically, can be valuable sources of theology and church history.

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SUMMARY

The recent progress made in the critical study of the Christian apocrypha does not always seem to be reflected in the current writings on theology and church history. In the present article, after an overview of the apocrypha in general and an analysis of the *Acts of Thomas (Ath)* in particular, the author reviews comparative studies on the five principal apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (Peter, Paul, John, Andrew and Thomas). These Acts are not mere fiction but rather they reflect and build on the tradition concerning the life and ministry of these Apostles: Rome (Peter and Paul), Ephesus (John), Achaea or Greece (Andrew) and India (Thomas). In particular, the critical study of the *Ath*, which is still in progress, has to take account of the tradition about Christian origins in India attributed to the Apostle Thomas. This tradition is both Indian and Western, but has long been wrongly presumed to originate from the *Ath*, which is often dismissed as unhistorical. But a comparative study of the five principal apocryphal Acts of the Apostles leads to the conclusion that the narrative in the *Ath* about the mission to and martyrdom of the Apostle Thomas in India is based on historical facts.

I recenti progressi degli studi critici sugli apocrifi cristiani non sembrano sempre riflettersi negli scritti attuali di teologia e di storia della Chiesa. Dopo un percorso generale sugli apocrifi e in particolare un'analisi degli *Atti di Tommaso (Ath)*, l'articolo esamina alcuni studi comparativi di cinque apocrifi principali degli Atti degli Apostoli (Pietro, Paolo, Giovanni, Andrea e Tommaso). Questi Atti non sono semplici finzioni; riflettono piuttosto e si costruiscono partendo dalla tradizione che concerne la vita e il ministero degli Apostoli: Roma (Pietro e Paolo), Efeso (Giovanni), Acaia e Grecia (Andrea) e India (Tommaso). Lo studio critico degli *Ath*, che è ancora in fieri, deve fare i conti con la tradizione delle origini cristiane in India attribuite all'apostolo Andrea. Questa tradizione è a un tempo indiana e occidentale, ma si è per lungo tempo ritenuta per errore originata negli *Ath*, spesso scartati perché non storici. Uno studio comparativo dei cinque apocrifi principali degli Atti degli Apostoli conduce alla conclusione che il racconto negli *Ath* della missione e del martirio dell'apostolo Tommaso in India è fondato su fatti storici.