

# **Mar Thoma: The Apostolic Foundation of the Assyrian Church and the Christians of St. Thomas in India**

*Stephen Andrew Missick*

## **Ancient Indian Christianity**

*“In the days of Xerxes, who reigned from India to Ethiopia...” Esther 1:1*

This is the only mention of India in the Holy Bible; yet, contrary to the popular misconception, the Bible and Christianity have had an influence on India that is traced back to early Christianity. Many people assume India’s Christian population is a product of European colonization. In reality some of India’s Christians trace their origins back to apostolic times. An ancient Christian people live along the coast of Malabar in southern India whose origins extend back over one thousand years before they were discovered by European explorers. This community claims it was established by Judah Thomas, one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. They have survived as a vibrant community and make up about twenty percent of the population of the state of Kerala.<sup>1</sup> They call themselves *Mar Thoma Christians*, meaning the Christians of Saint Thomas. The Mar Thoma Christians belong to the churches of the Assyrian tradition. The Assyrians are Syriac speaking Christians. They are age-old inhabitants of an area that is presently divided among the various countries of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria in the Middle East. Syriac (also called Aramaic) was the language of Jesus Christ and the original Hebrew Christian church in Jerusalem and was also, along with Hebrew and Greek, one of the three languages in which the Bible was originally written. The Assyrian Church of the East, also known as the Nestorian Church, is the mother church of the Mar Thoma Christians. Saint Thomas is believed to be one of the founders of the Assyrian Church as well as the founder of the church in India. The oral traditions regarding the apostolic journeys of Saint Thomas in Assyria and India are confirmed by ancient written records as well as historical and archeological evidence.

## **The Assyrian Church of the East**

The Assyrian Church of the East did not only inherit the language of Jesus and the Apostles, but their missionary fervor as well. The Assyrian Church of the East “mounted the most ambitious missionary program in the history of the [Christian] Church, Syrian [meaning Assyrian] monks followed the Silk Road

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Miller “Kerala: Jewel of India’s Malabar Coast” *National Geographic* 173, no. 5 (May 1988): 592-617.

across the steppes of Central Asia and established Syriac as a lingua franca as far east as the China Sea.”<sup>2</sup> The T’ang Emperors of China (618-907) personally welcomed the Assyrian missionaries and commanded that churches and monasteries be built throughout their empire.<sup>3</sup> Several Mongol tribes converted to Christianity en masse. The family of Genghis Khan and that of his descendents included many Nestorian Christians. Assyrians established churches in Socotra, Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and also southern India.<sup>4</sup> Despite its possible apostolic origins the mission to India was continued, sustained and increased by the labors of Assyrian Christians belonging to the ‘Nestorian’ Church of the East. Other Assyrian missionaries, probably belonging to the Syrian Orthodox Church, carried the Gospel down to Ethiopia. Despite the fact that the Coptic Church of Egypt became dominant in Ethiopia, initial missionary work was carried out by Assyrians notably the “Nine Assyrian Saints” whose memory is still revered and intercession is still sought among the Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Briggs states, “Many churches [in East Africa] bear one or other of their names- Aba (Saint) Aregawi or Mikael, Aba Alef, Aba Tsama, Aba Aftse, Aba Gerima, Aba Liqanos, Aba Guba, Aba Yemata, and Aba Pantelon.”<sup>5</sup> According to *The Encyclopedia Judaica*, Assyrian missionaries “enriched Ethiopic [the Semitic ecclesiastical language of Ethiopia properly called Ge’ez] with Aramaic loanwords to express new Christian concepts, and the Ethiopic Bible translations consequently show signs of Syriac influence.”<sup>6</sup> Contact with the Assyrian Church was broken and the Egyptian Church took over the leadership of the Ethiopian Church, which became entirely Coptic. The other missions fared much worse. Islamic holy warriors eradicated the Assyrian Church of the East in Central Asia, and the church in China thus cut off from its religious leadership slowly faded away. Islamic intolerance also decimated the churches on Socotra and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> The Church of India is the only living testimony of the former missionary glory of the Assyrian Church. According to Steward, “with the exception of the small remnant in the neighbourhood of Qudshanis in Kurdistan, the only section of the Nestorian Church that has been able to maintain its

---

<sup>2</sup> Roderick Grierson, *African Zion: the Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Nigel Cameron, *Barbarians & Mandarins: Thirteen Centuries of Western Travelers in China* (New York: Walker/Weatherhill, 1970), 17-27.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 44-45 and 81-83, and Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 43-45.

<sup>5</sup> Phillip Briggs, *Guide to Ethiopia* 2d ed. (Old Saybrook, Connecticut: The Globe Pequot Press Inc., 1998), 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House LTD, 1971), 860-861.

<sup>7</sup> Laurence E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1967), 162-165 & 174-175.

distinctive identity down through the centuries to the present time is the Syrian Christian community of south-west India.”<sup>8</sup>

### The Apostolic Origins

The Assyrian Church of the East traces its origins to the evangelistic ministry of the Apostle Thomas along with Mar Mari and Mar Addai (Syriac for Saint Thaddeus), who were among Christ’s seventy disciples (Luke 10:1).<sup>9</sup> According to the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch:

*This church enjoys the greatest prestige in the history of Christendom since it is the first church which was established in Jerusalem out of the Apostles, Preachers, and other converted Jews, and was grafted in Antioch by those who were converted from among the Arameans and other gentile elements.*<sup>10</sup>

The Assyrian Church of the East has been known as the Nestorian Church because of its purported adherence to the teachings of Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople in 428 AD, who was deposed over a Christological dispute. The term ‘Nestorian’ also refers to a Christological doctrine that stresses the reality of the human nature of Jesus and distinguishes it from his divine nature. Although he did not found the Assyrian Church of the East, Nestorius, along with Theodore of Mopsuestia, did come to be recognized as the doctrinal authorities of that church.<sup>11</sup> The Assyrian Church of the East existed for centuries before the birth of Nestorius. According to Assyrian tradition, attested to in several ancient Syriac documents, the Church of the East was established in Assyria during the reign of King Abgar V, a contemporary of Jesus Christ, by St. Thomas and St. Thaddeus as well as other apostles of the original Hebrew Church founded by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Several of the most ancient Syriac writings such as *The Doctrine of Addai*, *The Chronicle of Arbela* and *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* record that Saint Thomas sent Thaddeus and Mari to preach to Abgar Ukkama (the Black),

---

<sup>8</sup> Rev. John Steward, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: the Story of a Church on Fire* (Trichur, Kerala State, India: Mar Narsai Press, 1961), 103.

<sup>9</sup> The story of the 70 (or 72 in some versions) disciples who were also missionaries is expanded in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* and in *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*.

<sup>10</sup> Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, <http://www.syrianothodoxchurch.org>

<sup>11</sup>The theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia is explored in Dimitri Z. Zaharopoulos, *Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Bible: A Study of His Old Testament Exegesis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). The Nestorian controversy is fully explored in John M. L. Young, *By Foot to China: Mission of the Church of the East, to 1400* (Lookout Mountain, Georgia: Grey Pilgrim Publications, 1991), 51-69.

King of the Assyrians at Osrhoene.<sup>12</sup> Eusebius, the Father of Church History, writing in 325 AD, states that he personally searched the state archives of the Assyrians in the capital city of Edessa and found official records of this apostolic visit which he translated from the Syriac originals and included in his monumental work *The Ecclesiastical History*, which is the first universal history of the Christian church to be written.<sup>13</sup> Ian Wilson, a modern historical and religious scholar, theorized that the apostles did indeed visit the Kingdom of Abgar and that they brought with them the Shroud of Jesus Christ, which bore his image, as a gift to that great monarch. Wilson traces the journey of the shroud from its display by the Assyrian Kings of Osrhoene in Edessa to its theft from the Assyrian people by larcenous crusaders to its current residence in Turin, Italy.<sup>14</sup>

It should come as no surprise that the Syriac speaking Assyrians would be among the first gentiles to hear the Christian message. The Gospels declare that Syriac speaking Assyrians heard of Jesus' fame during his public ministry and even came to receive healing and blessings from him (Matthew 4:24-25). *Acts of the Apostles* mentions that Assyrians were present at the day of Pentecost during the founding of the Christian church. It says, "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, natives of Mesopotamia, Edessa,<sup>15</sup> and Cappodocia" were present on that day (Acts 2:9). Perhaps hundreds from among the Assyrians embraced Christianity at that time (Acts 2:41). The Assyrians were particularly receptive to Christianity due to their sharing the Aramaic language with the apostles and due to the large numbers of Jews who lived among them. Jammo says, "The first wave of converts to Christianity in Mesopotamia...surely included a segment of the sizeable Jewish Diaspora of the land."<sup>16</sup>

The origin of the Jewish community in Mesopotamia was in exiles brought over from the kingdom of Israel which was defeated by Sargon II, king of

---

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson Eds. *The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325: Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 8 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 657-672.

<sup>13</sup> Christian Frederick Cruse, Trans. *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), 43-47.

<sup>14</sup> For the Shroud as an Assyrian relic see the following: Ian Wilson, *The Shroud of Turin: The Burial Cloth of Jesus Christ?* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1979), 126-135 and 147-155, and Ian Wilson, *The Blood and the Shroud: new Evidence that the Worlds Most Sacred Relic is Real* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 161-175 and 263-268, also Davis Van Biema, "Science and the Shroud" *Time Magazine* (April 20, 1998): 52-61. Even for those doubting the Shrouds authenticity (myself included) Wilson's overview of the introduction of Christianity among the Assyrians is interesting.

<sup>15</sup> Translating Edessa instead of Judea is given and argued for in Hugh J. Schonfield, trans. *The Original New Testament: The First Definitive Translation of the New Testament in 2,000 Years* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element, 1998), 203.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Sarhad Jammo, *Contemporary Chaldeans and Assyrians: One Primordial Nation, One Original Church* (The Diocese of Saint Thomas the Apostle in the United States, Southfield, Michigan 2000) <http://www.jps.net/ghanna/chald.html>

Assyria, in 722 BC and later exiles from the kingdom of Judah defeated by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. These captives were permitted to return to their homeland by Cyrus, King of Persia, in 539-530 BC, however many of the Jews elected to stay. The Jewish community prospered in Mesopotamia until the establishment of the State of Israel.<sup>17</sup>

According to ancient records Thaddeus and Mari went to preach to the Assyrians at the bidding of Thomas. Thomas later went and ministered to the Assyrians living in Parthia and in Assyrian principalities and villages along its borders. The liturgy used by the Assyrians and Chaldeans is believed to have been composed by the Apostles Thaddeus and Mari. Dalrymple states,

*Separated from the rest of Christendom by their extreme isolation, the Nestorians have preserved many of the traditions of the early church which have either disappeared altogether elsewhere or else survived only in the most unrecognizable forms. Their legends...are fragments of fossilized early Christian folklore, while their Eucharistic rite, the Anaphora of the Apostles Addai and Mari, is the oldest Christian liturgy in use anywhere in the world.*<sup>18</sup>

Further, Roberts and Donaldson state that the mission of Thaddeus seems a “historical fact, and if he found Abgar predisposed to believe and familiar with the story of Christ” this would account for the formation of the tradition.<sup>19</sup> *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* gives the following account of the foundation of the Assyrian Church:

*India, and all the countries belonging to it and round about it, even to the farthest sea, received the apostolic ordination... from Judas Thomas, who was the guide and ruler in the church he had built there, in which he also ministered... Edessa, and all the countries round about it... and all the regions on the borders of Mesopotamia - from Addeus [meaning Addai] the Apostle, one of the 72 apostles, who himself made disciples there, and built a church there, and was priest and ministered there in his office of Guide he held there...The whole of Persia, of the Assyrians... as far as the borders of the Indians... received the apostles ordination from Aggeus, the disciple of Addeus the apostle.*<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Dvora and Rabbi Menachem HaCohen, *One People: the Story of the Eastern Jews*, revised edition (New York: Adams books, 1986), 10-37.

<sup>18</sup> William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey Among the Christians of the Middle East* (New York : Henry Holt & Co., 1997), 141.

<sup>19</sup> Roberts & Donaldson, *The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, vol. 8, 647.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 671-672.

## **Diversification in Church: East and West Syrian Traditions: A Contemporary Profile**

A number of Syriac-speaking churches have survived today. The original Assyrian Church has split into two different traditions in the form of rivaling doctrinal loyalties: East Syrian (Nestorian) and West Syrian (Jacobite, named after Jacob Baradaeus, died 578). The doctrinal division was highlighted by linguistic distinction in the form of different dialects and distinct Syriac scripts. The doctrinal difference centered on the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ. Presently, the Syriac-speaking churches survive under the following:<sup>21</sup>

### **East Syrian (Mesopotamian or Persian) Tradition**

1. Assyrian Church of the East – New Calendarian, Tehran, presently based in Chicago (Mar Thoma Christians in Trichur, a city in Kerala, have preserved their connection with this their mother church). This church suffers from a plethora of names. The Nestorian Church, the East Syrian Church, the Persian Church and the Church of the East all refer to the same church.
2. Assyrian Church of the East – Old Calendarian, based in Baghdad, Iraq.
3. Chaldean Church, an Assyrian Uniate church, which means it has united with the Roman Catholic church
4. Syro-Malabar of India

### **West Syrian Tradition**

1. Syrian Orthodox of the Patriarchate of Antioch including its Church in India
2. Syrian Orthodox of the Autocephalous (meaning independent) Malankara Church of India
3. Syrian Catholic, another Uniate church
4. Maronite, a Syriac church that is independent of the Nestorian or Jacobite churches, but since it uses the West Syrian dialect it is considered of that tradition. It was founded by Saint Maron but has united with the Roman Catholic Church. Most of the Maronites are Lebanese and spoke Syriac till about one hundred years ago when its use finally gave way to Arabic. Syriac is preserved as a liturgical language.
5. Malankara Catholic of India
6. The Church of Mar Thoma, a church of India that broke off from the Syrian Orthodox Church and blended Eastern Orthodoxy with Anglicanism.

Mar Thoma in this paper refers to all Christians in India who came from or out of the Assyrian Church in India that was established by Saint Thomas.

---

<sup>21</sup> Alfred Stirnemann & Gerhard Wilflinger, *Syriac Dialogue: First Non-Official Consultation on Dialogue Within the Syriac Tradition* (Vienna: Foundation Pro Oriente, 1994), 7.

---

## **Syriac (Aramaic): the Language of the Assyrian Church**

Both the East and West Syrian churches use Syriac, the language spoken by Jesus Christ. Syriac, which is also called Aramaic, is a Semitic language, meaning it is closely related to Hebrew, Maltese, Arabic, and certain Ethiopian languages. In ancient times Aramaic was used as a language of diplomacy by the empires of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians, since it was the dominant language of the ancient Near East (The ancient Assyrians spoke another Semitic language, now long dead, called Akkadian). Aramaic remained the language of the Near East until Arabic became more dominant centuries after the Islamic conquest. Aramaic was widely used from Egypt to Iran for thousands of years. The Aramaic alphabet found its way from Persia into India where it formed the basis from which most of the alphabets in use in India today were developed. All three parts of the Hebrew Bible (the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings) have portions written in Aramaic.<sup>22</sup> Besides ancient inscriptions in Aramaic, found among the ruins of the Assyrian, Egyptian, Persian, Nabatean and Palmyran Kingdoms, various Jewish writings in Aramaic, including the Elephantine Papyrus and the Dead Sea Scrolls, have been discovered. The Aramaic Targums (ancient paraphrases of the Old Testament), the Talmud, Kaddish (A popular Jewish prayer) and the Kaballah (the Jewish Mysticism classic), are all written, completely or partially, in Aramaic. Before the time of Christ the Hebrew language had died and was replaced by Aramaic. Jesus both spoke and taught in Aramaic and several of his Aramaic utterances are transliterated in the New Testament.<sup>23</sup> St. Paul, when he quotes from the Old Testament in his epistles uses, not a Hebrew or a Greek text, but Aramaic texts called the Targums.<sup>24</sup> Since the Apostles saw it as their duty to preach “to the Jew first and also to the gentiles” (Romans 2:10) they immediately proclaimed the Christian message to their fellow Jews and fellow Syriac speakers who were concentrated in Assyria and Babylonia. Antioch in Syria was the first gentile city to welcome Christianity (Acts 11:26). According to the New Testament, St. Peter and St. Paul labored

---

<sup>22</sup> Old Testament Portions written in Aramaic include Genesis 31:47, 2 Kings 18:17, Jeremiah 10:11, Daniel 2:4-7:28, Ezra 4:6-8 & 7:12-27.

<sup>23</sup> Aramaic sections of the New Testament include the following: Matthew 5:22, Mark 5:41, 7:34, 14:36, 15:34, Luke 16:13, John 1:42, 9:7, 19:16, 20:16 & 20:24. Acts 1:19, 4:36, Romans 8:15. I Corinthians 16:22 and Galatians 4:6. For additional information on Aramaic Biblical studies see F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments: Some Chapters on the Transmission of the Bible* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1978) and S.J. Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament: Combined Edition of Essays on the Semitic background of the New Testament and A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Paul’s quotation of Deuteronomy 30:13 in Romans 10:7 follows a Targum reading in *Targum Neofoti* see Wayne A. Meeks, ed. *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 2130.

among the Assyrians. Peter preached in Antioch and wrote an epistle from Babylonia (majority of Biblical scholars believe that Babylon is used as a euphemism for Rome) and Paul preached in Antioch, Damascus and Nabatean Arabia (where Aramaic was also spoken).<sup>25</sup>

When Thomas and other apostles traveled east, they established Syriac speaking Christian communities especially in the area of Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

The Assyrians produced a wealth of Christian literature in Syriac, including *The Odes of Solomon*, *The Diatessaron of Tatian the Assyrian*, and *The Acts of Thomas*. Assyrian Church Fathers wrote many important homilies and commentaries on the Holy Bible, most notably those by Rabulla, Ephraim, Aphrahat, Narsai, Isaac of Nineveh and Bar Hebraeus.<sup>26</sup> Syriac served as an important conduit of Greek learning to the West. The Arabs discovered the works of Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Galen through Syriac translations. According to Bowersock et. al. "As a means of transmission of Hellenistic civilization into Arabic, and from there, later, into medieval Europe, Syriac played a prominent role."<sup>27</sup> The discovery of these Arabic versions of the Greek classics by Europeans is credited with sparking the Renaissance.

Another important Syriac work is the Peshitta, the Syriac translation of the Holy Bible, it is one of the oldest translations of the Bible and its Old Testament displays a clear Jewish influence. The Peshitta is recognized as the authorized version of the Sacred Scriptures by all the churches of the Assyrian Christians, including those in India.<sup>28</sup> The word *Peshitta* (Pshitta is a more accurate transliteration), in Syriac means 'simple' or 'plain'. Through the Peshitta it is possible to read the entire Bible in the language of Christ and his disciples. The Peshitta may have been translated by the Jews of Babylon and Assyria for their own use (as a Targum) or it may have been translated or revised by the Christian community with Jewish assistance. Assyrian tradition recorded by the Jacobite historian Bar-Hebraeus says that it was translated under the command of King Abgar, by disciples from the Holy Land.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Acts 9: 20, Galations 1:17, 2:11-13 and 1 Peter 5:13

<sup>26</sup> Edip Aydin, *A Birds Eye View of the Syrian Language and Literature*

<http://www.netadventure.com/~soc/ChHist/GD51EAydin.html>

<sup>27</sup> G. W. Bowersock et. al. ed. *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post Classical World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belkap Press, 1999), 713.

<sup>28</sup> Translations from the Aramaic version of the Bible into English are available: Dr. George Mamishu Lamsa, trans. *The Holy Bible From Ancient Eastern Manuscripts Containing the Old and new Testaments Translated from the Peshitta, the Authorized Bible of the Church of the East* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1981) and *The Aramaic-English Interlinear New Testament* (Volume I, II &III) (New Knoxville, Ohio: American Christian Press, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 193 and *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol. 4: B, 858-859.



Syriac became a liturgical and diplomatic language everywhere the Assyrian Church established itself, including Mongolia, China, and India. Assyrian Christian writings and inscriptions have been discovered throughout India, China and Central Asia.<sup>30</sup> A form of the Syriac alphabet is still used in Mongolia and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in China.<sup>31</sup> In India and all the places where Assyrians founded Churches, Aramaic was used as the language of worship. All Indian Nestorian priests were required to be literate in Syriac. A wealth of Syriac writings was kept in India but most was destroyed by the Portuguese during the inquisition of the Mar Thoma church from 1599-1653. Syriac is still used as a liturgical language by Mar Thoma Christians.

### The Origin of the Saint Thomas Church

There is sufficient historical evidence to indicate that the presence of Saint Thomas in India is a historical reality and not a myth. Mar Gregorios states:

*There is a wealth of corroborative evidence to support, and no reason to doubt the living tradition of the St. Thomas Christians that the Apostle arrived in Kondungalloor (Muziris) in Kerala in 52 AD, established seven churches, and moved on to other kingdoms, returning to Madras (Mylapore) in 72 AD where he was martyred that year. The church founded by St. Thomas must have been rather spread out in the subcontinent, including the North-west, the Western and Eastern coasts of the peninsula, probably also reaching Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Tradition associates the ministry of St. Thomas with the Indo-Parthian king, Gondophares in the north and with King Vasudeva (Mazdeo) of the Kushan dynasty in the south. It was the latter who condemned the Apostle to death. From their base in the then flourishing theological school of Nisibis, Nestorian missionaries began moving to India, Central Asia, China and Ethiopia to teach their doctrines probably associating with the work of St. Thomas the Apostle, whom the Persians must have venerated as the founder of their own church.<sup>32</sup>*

*The Encyclopedia of Asian History* also refers to the Apostle Thomas' ministry from Parthia to India describing *The Acts of Thomas* as tracing the

---

<sup>30</sup> See the photo insert section of Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), plates 8-36) and *The Book of A Thousand Tongues* revised editions (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972).

<sup>31</sup> Peter T. Daniels & William Bright, ed. *The Worlds Writing Systems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 540-556.

<sup>32</sup> Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios, The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Church: A Historical Perspective, <http://members.aol.com/manj/odoxl.html>

journeys of Thomas to Baluchistan and Punjab, where Gondaphernes (Gundaphernes, Gundaphar, or Gundaphorus), ruled as king. According to *The Acts of Thomas* and oral tradition in India, Thomas took the sea route to India, arrived in Malabar and then traveled north to the Kingdom of Gondaphernes. Based on the Gondaphernes coins and the Takht-I-Bahai inscription (a more recently discovered inscription made during the reign of Gondaphernes) we know that Gundaphernes established his reign in 46 AD.<sup>33</sup> Oral tradition and the writings of the early church fathers are the only substantiation of the later travels of Thomas to the Kingdom of Mazdai, thought to be in southern India. *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* mentions that Eusebius, Jerome, Rufinus and Gregory of Nazianzus stated that Thomas began the church in Edessa, Parthia and Persia, other church fathers stated he preached the Gospel in India and was martyred there.<sup>34</sup> Later inscriptions in India in Syriac and Pahlavi also testify to the antiquity of the Mar Thoma Church and the tradition of its establishment by Thomas.

### **India in the Era of Saint Thomas**

Kerala, also known as Malabar, is the home of the Saint Thomas Christians. Kerala forms a narrow fertile strip on the southwest coast of India between the Lakshadweep Sea and the Western Ghats Mountains. Three factors shaped society in southern India during the first century. These are internal warfare, international trade and the Hindu caste system. These factors have left an indelible mark on the culture of Kerala to this day.

India has long suffered from internal warfare due to the fact that the sub-continent is as large as Europe and has as many different racial and linguistic groups. India was never unified until it was incorporated into the British Empire. India has constantly been invaded and ruled over by foreigners such as Aryans, Greeks, Parthians, Huns, Turkish Mamelukes, Persian Mughals, Portuguese, French, and British.<sup>35</sup> Southern India, home of the Mar Thoma people, was never part of any of the Great Empires of India, such as the Gupta and Asoka empires, and Malabar itself was divided into several rival kingdoms. Wars were frequent and occurred at the slightest provocation as the kings competed for control of territory and sovereignty. This period of divided kingdoms fits the description of India found in *The Acts of Thomas*. According to this source, Thomas was accepted by some kings and persecuted unto death by others.

Many people imagine that there was no contact between Imperial Rome and India. How could then Thomas have gone to India during the first century?

<sup>33</sup> Ainslie T. Embree, ed. *Encyclopedia of Asian History* vol. 4 (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1988), 92.

<sup>34</sup> Everett Ferguson, ed. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2d edition (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1997), 570-571.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63-67.

Historians have discovered that India was in contact with the Greek and Roman world of the time. It was opened to the west through the expansion of the Empire of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC). Alexander's officers established Greek kingdoms in India that endured for centuries. These Greek kingdoms in India were under the authority of the Seleucids in Antioch, Syria. Antioch was also the end of the Silk Road, the overland trade route that brought goods from China and India to the west. The Silk Road connected to India also passed through Edessa, which along with Antioch was an important center of early Christianity.<sup>36</sup> Megasthenes (c. 350- 290 BC), a Greek, traveled to India and wrote a four-volume history of India that was consulted as an authority in Europe for over one thousand years. Ferguson states that India was open to trade with the Roman Empire. It states that excavations of Roman settlements in the region of the southwestern and southeastern coasts of India have turned up first century Arretine pottery and hoards of Roman coins from the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. Ancient records show that there were diplomatic exchanges between India and Rome as well.<sup>37</sup> Rome received pearls, spices, pepper, silk and ivory from India. India acquired tin, lead, gold and silver coins, wine, coral, beryl, glass, and Roman soldiers from Rome.<sup>38</sup> According to Brown, "Pliny (AD 23-79), Ptolomey (AD 100-160) and *The Periplus Of The Erythrean Sea* give a good deal of detailed information about the trading centers of Malabar."<sup>39</sup> Evidence of trade is seen in *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, which means *The Voyage of the Indian Ocean*. Shillington points out that this was a navigational guide written in Greek in the great Egyptian trading port of Alexandria around 100 AD."<sup>40</sup> It described ports and trading centers from southern India to the region around modern Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. It was intended as a guide for Greek trading ships to the known ports of the Indian Ocean. 120 ships a year traveled from Egypt through the Red Sea to the Malabar Coast of India. One of these ships may have taken Saint Thomas to India. Gillman and Klimkiet mention that, "There was no technical difficulty in the way of Christianity reaching India in that period."<sup>41</sup>

Once arriving in India, early Christians encountered Hindu civilization. The rules and regulations concerning caste are part of the Hindu religion. Bearak describes the Hindu caste system in the following manner,

---

<sup>36</sup> William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain*, 66.

<sup>37</sup> Ferguson, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 570-571.

<sup>38</sup> Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 158.

<sup>39</sup> Leslie Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 60.

<sup>40</sup> Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* revised edition (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Education LTD, 1995), 122-124.

<sup>41</sup> Gillman Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 159.

*Indian Civilization, so rich with wonderment and greatness, has been marred by the proposition that all men are created unequal. Ancient Hindu scriptures tell of how the gods created the world and the social order within it by sacrificing a primeval man, Purusha. From his face came the priestly elite Brahmans, his arms the warrior Kshatriya, his thighs the merchant Vaishyas, his feet the servile, hapless Shudras. Beneath them all were those whom nature had ordained to be unclean- people destined to do the filthy work. Names for sub-castes have varied, and sometimes the hierarchical order has differed as well, but the result has always been the same, a ranking of human worth.*<sup>42</sup>

The caste system infected the practices of both the Jews and the Saint Thomas Christians. The Jews divided into White Jews, Black Jews and Freedmen.<sup>43</sup> The White Jews were also called *Paradesi*, meaning foreigners. They were usually descended from Jewish families from the Middle East. The term 'White Jews' later referred to the European Jews who settled in India to escape persecution. The Mar Thoma Christians also have divisions in their community based on race and class. Among the Mar Thoma Christians some claim descent from Assyrian settlers and others from the converts of Saint Thomas. These two groups are called the Northists and the Southists.<sup>44</sup> The Southists are fairer in complexion and consider themselves as having pure Assyrian blood flowing through their veins. In both the Syrian Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Uniate churches they are given separate dioceses under their own bishops.<sup>45</sup> These groups would never consider intermarriage any more than Hindus would consider marriage outside of caste. Another subclass, the Christian fishermen of Travancore has also emerged, which is among the poorest, but the most devout of the Christians of Kerala.<sup>46</sup> Assyrian missionaries accepted the caste system as an unchangeable reality of the culture of South India and decided to adapt to it. Assyrian merchants from Syria and Persia that settled in India acquired certain caste privileges for themselves. They were considered aristocrats and about equal to the Brahmans.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Barry Bearak, "Caste Hate, Murder Outlast Indian Reforms" *The New York Times* (Sept. 19, 1998) See also Thomas Wagner, "Caste System Firmly Entrenched in Backward, Rural Areas of India" *Houston Chronicle* (April 2, 1998): 80, Barbara Crossette "Caste May Be India's Moral Achilles Heel" *New York Times* (October 20, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 622.

<sup>44</sup> K.K. Kuruvilla, *A History of the Mar Thoma Church and its Doctrines* (Madras, India: Christian Literature Society for India, 1951), 2.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 174-175.

<sup>46</sup> F. A. Plattner, *Christian India* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1957), 41-46.

<sup>47</sup> Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 179.

## Merchants, Missionaries, and the East Syrian Church in India

Many Syriac-speaking people including Assyrians from the Near East who belonged to the Ancient Church of the East immigrated to southern India. They came for religious freedom and also for economic opportunities. An early Syriac-speaking settler (Thomas of Cana), in 345 A.D. brought with him 72 families amounting to about 400 people.<sup>48</sup> These settlers were given jurisdiction over cities in India.<sup>49</sup> Assyrian Christians from Persia who came to India in the 8<sup>th</sup> century found an open position in the society that they were able to fill in that there was an absence of a Vaishya or trader caste at this time. Assyrians became a type of merchant class and were welcomed by every ruling family in south India.<sup>50</sup> The bishops Mar Sabr-ishu and Mar Peroz strengthened the Assyrian community upon their arrival in 794 bringing with them more settlers as well as spiritual guidance. The Assyrian immigrant merchant community in India brought both material and spiritual prosperity to Kerala. Assyrian Christians who settled in India formed a military group as well upon whom local rulers could call for assistance in emergencies.<sup>51</sup> Assyrian monks came and began monasteries in India at Angamali, Kuravilangad, Edapalle, and Mylapore. There is also the possibility of the existence of Assyrian Kings and Assyrian kingdoms in India. Brown indicates that there is a strong belief that the Assyrian community in India elected King Beliarte, as the King of the Christians of St. Thomas, to rule over them and to represent them before the other kingdoms of southern India.<sup>52</sup> The tradition is supported by the fact that Pope Eugenius IV (d. 1447) sent a letter to the king of the Assyrian Christians in India.<sup>53</sup>

### The Early Witnesses

The apostolic mission to India was recorded by Eusebius, the first Christian historian, in the year 325 AD. According to Eusebius, in the year 190 Panteus of Alexandria (in Egypt) arrived in India to work as a missionary. Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical Historia* (History of the Church) states:

---

<sup>48</sup> Kuruvilla, *A History of the Mar Thoma Church and its Doctrines*, 1. see also Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume I: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 266-267.

<sup>49</sup> Cardinal Eugene Tisserant, *East Christianity in India: A History of the Syro-Malabar Church from Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Bombay, India: Orient Longman, 1957), 9-10.

<sup>50</sup> Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 169.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 169 & 183.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 175.

*Panteus there found his own arrival anticipated by some who were familiar with the Gospel of Matthew, to whom Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached, and had left them the Gospel of Matthew in the Hebrew, which was also preserved until this time.*<sup>54</sup>

It is possible that Eusebius meant Saint Thomas (*Mar Thoma* in Syriac) and not Bartholomew, who was another disciple of Jesus; Eusebius might have meant Syriac when he wrote Hebrew. In the first century Aramaic was sometimes called Hebrew since it was the language spoken by the Hebrews.

Mani the Prophet, who founded Manicheanism in 241 AD, traveled throughout India in an attempt to retrace Thomas' steps while preaching his own new religion. It is also assumed that Mani went to India because "he wanted to follow the footsteps of the apostle Thomas and convert the Christians of those regions to his own faith."<sup>55</sup> Mani believed that Jesus and Thomas were great prophets and that he, Mani, had been chosen as the greatest prophet. Manicheanism was a successful religion for many centuries and spread across Central Asia and into China. For a short time Manicheanism was widespread in Europe. Saint Augustine was an adherent of this religion until he converted to Christianity.

Historical records of the Ancient Assyrian Church of the East contain some of the oldest evidence to indicate the antiquity of the Indian church. At the Council of Nicea during the writing of the Nicene Creed in 325 AD, Mar John, Archbishop of India in his signature to the decrees of the Council, gave his title as 'Prelate of Metropolitan of Persia and the Bishop of Great India.'<sup>56</sup> Bardaisan (154-222), one of the Early Church Fathers, in his "*Book of the Laws of Countries*" mentions Christianity as having been established in India.<sup>57</sup> *The Chronicle of Seert* states that in 300, Bishop David of Basra visited India, traveled the country and won converts.<sup>58</sup> Assyrian Church history also testifies that John of Edessa was sent to be the third bishop of India by the Catholicos of Persia [Church of the East] in 345 AD.<sup>59</sup> *The Chronicle of Seert* also states that in 470 AD Bishop Mana of Edessa translated the writings of Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia from Greek into Syriac with the assistance of an Indian priest named Daniel. These translations, along with Syriac religious discourses and hymns, were sent to India.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Cruse, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, 190.

<sup>55</sup> *Encyclopedia of World Art* (London: McGraw-Hill Company LTD, 1958), 435.

<sup>56</sup> Dr. Joseph Chathaparampil, *Kerala Catholics: A Brief History*

<http://www.kerala.org/religion/christian/contribs/kerala-catholics.html>

<sup>57</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 47; see Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 159; and Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Volume I*, 64-67.

<sup>58</sup> Ferguson, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2d. edition, 570-571.

<sup>59</sup> Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 167.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

The Early Church Fathers wrote of the deeds of St. Thomas and support the traditions of the Assyrians and the Christians of south India. Among those who wrote of Thomas in Parthia and Mesopotamia are Clement, Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa and Rufinus. Those who refer to Thomas in India include St. Ephraim, St. Gregory of Nazainzus, St. Gaudentius, Jerome, St. Paulinus of Nola, and St. Gregory of Tours.<sup>61</sup>

Cosmas Indicopleustes [*Indicopleustes* is Latin for ‘Indian Navigator’] was a Nestorian Christian from Egypt who traveled to south India between 520 and 525 AD. He wrote about his experiences in 535. He was a merchant who traveled the world and wrote about the Christians of India and Ethiopia. Cited in Brown, Cosmas documents the existence of large Christian communities in southern India, Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Socotra. He states:

*Even in the island of Taprobane in Inner India where the Indian Sea is, there is a church of Christians, with clergy and a congregation of believers... And such is also the case in the land called Male where the pepper grows. And in the place called Kalliana there is a bishop appointed from Persia, as well as in the Island of Socotra in the same Indian Sea.*<sup>62</sup>

Chathaparampil mentions several of the earliest records of the church in India. He specifically mentions the arrival of Mar Thomas Cana, also called Knaithomman, in the year 345 AD (Other scholars have dated Thomas of Cana’s arrival to 754 or 825). Thomas Cana brought some settlers with him to Kerala and was given various privileges by a local monarch. Most of the earliest artifacts of the Mar Thoma Church, such as stone crosses and inscriptions, are dated to the 600’s and 700’s.<sup>63</sup>

Friar Odoric of Udine arrived in India in 1321. There he discovered Nestorian Christians whom he referred to as “vile and pestilent heretics.” He visited 15 Nestorian families around Quilon and Mylapore.<sup>64</sup> Other European travelers who visited the Christians of India include Father Jordanus in 1321-1323 and Marignotte in the later part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Western travelers who wrote about the Assyrian Christians of India include John of Montecorvino, Jordanus Catalani, John of Marignolli, Nicolo Conti, Ludovico di Varthema and Duarte Barbosa.<sup>65</sup> Nicolo Contini, writing in 1469 described the tomb of St. Thomas in India. He says,

---

<sup>61</sup> Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 161-162.

<sup>62</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 68.

<sup>63</sup> Dr. Joseph Chathaparampil. Kerala Catholics: A Brief History  
<http://www.kerala.org/religion/christian/contribs/kerala-catholics.html>

<sup>64</sup> Henry Yule, trans. *Cathy and the Way Thither* vol. II *Odoric of Pordenone* (Nendeen, Liechenstein: Klaus Reprint Limited, 1967), 142.

<sup>65</sup> Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 172-176.

*The body of St. Thomas lies honorably buried in a very large and beautiful church; it is worshiped by heretics who are called Nestorian, and inhabit this city [Mylapore] to a number of a thousand. These Nestorians are scattered over all India, in like manner as are the Jews among us.*<sup>66</sup>

Not all of the European travelers were affected by the prejudice against Christians of other persuasions, as were most Catholics of that era. Ludovico di Varthema, an Italian, visited India in 1505. He takes a more Christian attitude towards the Nestorian Christians in India when he says,

*In this city [Quilon] we found some Christians of those of St. Thomas, some of whom are merchants and believe in Christ, as we do. They say that every three years a priest comes there to baptize and that he comes from Babylon.*<sup>67</sup>

An Italian letter written from India at the same time continues to praise the devotion of Christians belonging to the Assyrian Church of the East in India,

*In this kingdom [Cochin] there are many Christians converted by St. Thomas, whose apostolic life their priests follow with great devotion and strictness. They have churches where there is only the cross....From these people our men learned that the body of St. Thomas lies 150 leagues from Cochin, on the seacoast, in a city of small population called Mylapore.*<sup>68</sup>

Marco Polo also visited southern India and the Saint Thomas Christians. Marco Polo repeats the story of Saint Thomas' visit to India, and also mentions visiting the place where he was buried in India. Marco Polo traveled throughout India and the Far East from 1271 until 1292. He may have visited India in the year 1288 AD. Concerning the tomb of Saint Thomas, Marco Polo says,

*The body of Saint Thomas lies in the province of Malabar in a little town. There are few inhabitants, and merchants do not visit the place for there is nothing in the way of merchandise that could be got from it, and it is a very out – of – the-way spot. But it is a very great place of pilgrimage both for Christians and Saracens [Moslems]. For I assure you that the Saracens of this country have great faith in him*

---

<sup>66</sup> Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 175.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Francis M. Rogers, *The Quest for Eastern Christians: Travels and Rumor in the Age of Discovery* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), 122.



*and declare that he was...a great prophet and call him Aariun, that is to say 'Holy Man'.*<sup>69</sup>

Marco Polo also recounts the veneration of Saint Thomas in south India and miracles ascribed to him by the Mar Thoma people. He recounts another version of the death of Saint Thomas, which is very similar to the death of Krishna who while meditating in the forest is struck dead by the stray arrow of a hunter. Marco Polo states Thomas was accidentally killed by a Hindu in such a manner.<sup>70</sup>

Several non-European accounts of India have been preserved written by Jews, Muslims, and even Mar Thoma Christians themselves. Arab and Jewish travelers to India lived among the St. Thomas Christians and wrote about their experiences. Accounts in Arabic travel narratives, like the one by Ibn Battuta (who lived in Malabar from 1342 till 1348), Amr ibn Matta (AD 1340) and Mafazzal ibn Abil Fazail (AD 1358), testify to the early traditions of the missionary journeys of Saint Thomas and the presence of a strong Assyrian Christian community in India.<sup>71</sup> In 1167, Rabbi Benjamin of Toledo unintentionally retraced the steps of St. Thomas in a voyage across Assyria and Babylonia on his way to India. He wrote of his quest to visit the Jews of the eastern lands. He describes southern India and the Jews that reside there as being "black."<sup>72</sup> Indian Christians have also left us important accounts of southern India and its Christians. John the Indian arrived in Europe in 1122 and told of miracles associated with St. Thomas that occurred in the land of India.<sup>73</sup> Another prominent Indian traveler was Joseph, priest over Cranganore. He journeyed to Babylon in 1490 and then sailed to Europe and visited Portugal, Rome, and Venice before returning to India. He helped to write a book about his travels titled *The Travels of Joseph the Indian* which was widely disseminated across Europe.<sup>74</sup> In 1498 Vasco De Gama arrived in India expecting to find Christians there. He was so convinced that India was the home of a vast multitude of Christians that when he arrived in India he went into a Hindu temple and saw a picture of Kali, mistook it for an Icon of the Virgin Mary and began venerating it.<sup>75</sup> In Europe a legend of a priest-king in India had arisen. Somewhere in India, they believed, there was the mighty King John of India or Prester John of the Indies. He was immortal, wealthy and powerful and also eager to join with

---

<sup>69</sup> Marco Polo and Rusticello of Pisa, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 274.

<sup>70</sup> Marco Polo and Rusticello of Pisa, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 276.

<sup>71</sup> Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 164.

<sup>72</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Illustrated Atlas of Jewish Civilization: 4,000 Years of Jewish History* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 73 & 210.

<sup>73</sup> Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India*, 19.

<sup>74</sup> Rogers, *The Quest for Eastern Christians*, 117-121 and Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 122.

<sup>75</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 12.

Europe to fight a crusade against the Muslims. The legend of Prester John had three historical sources; the Saint Thomas Christians of India, the Christian Empire of the Ethiopian Coptic Christians, and the Nestorians of Mongolia and Central Asia. When the stories of Christians in southern India, east Africa or Central Asia arrived in Europe they became garbled and confused and eventually gave birth to the legend of Prester John. This was mostly due to the fact that Europe had no accurate knowledge of world geography. For centuries Africa, India and China were all thought to be the Indies.

Europeans discovered the Christians of India when the Portuguese arrived in Southern India on May 20, 1498. The Portuguese quickly decided that the Saint Thomas Christians were heretics. As early as 1543, Francis Xavier and other clerics advocated the setting up of the Holy Office of the Inquisition to deal with the Nestorians and the Jews in India. It was established in India in 1560.<sup>76</sup> For 55 years the Christians of Southern India endured persecution from the Roman Catholic Church. Indian priests were arrested and put through the inquisition and some were executed. Harassment of Nestorian Christians began in 1558. On 26 June 1599 at the Synod of Diamper the St. Thomas Christians were coerced to join the Roman Catholic Church and to conform to European practices. The Roman Catholics gathered all the Syriac books they could find and put them to the torch. Records of centuries of Assyrian church history in India and perhaps additional accounts of the work of Saint Thomas in India were lost forever. The Portuguese forced the Saint Thomas Christians to profess themselves to be Roman Catholics.<sup>77</sup> The Christians of India resented the arrogance and intolerance of their European oppressors. When a Syrian Orthodox priest arrived in India, all the Saint Thomas Christians rallied to him. They all adhered to the Syrian Orthodox Church and renounced Roman Catholicism. Originally India's Christians belonged to the Assyrian Church of the East. After the Portuguese arrived their connection with the Nestorian Church was broken. Abraham demonstrates the Indian point of view concerning this incident:

*In 1653 the Church shook off the shackles of ecclesiastical slavery [to Rome] and ascertained its freedom and autonomous nature by taking an oath called the Crooked Cross Oath.*<sup>78</sup>

It was called the Crooked Cross Oath because the oath was made at an ancient Assyrian cross that had become crooked with the passing of the centuries. With this event the allegiance of the Mar Thoma church went from East Syrian to West Syrian.

---

<sup>76</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1355.

<sup>77</sup> Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 122-127.

<sup>78</sup> Dr. T.P. Abraham, *The Mar Thoma Church : A Historical Sketch*

<http://www.marthomachurch.org>

## **The Ancient Artifacts**

Kuruvilla mentions several ancient artifacts of the Christians of India including the crosses of the Old Syrian church at Kottayom and on Saint Thomas' Mount near Mylapore by Madras. Both date back to the seventh or eighth century. The inscriptions on these crosses are written in Pahlavi, the language of the Persian Sassanid Empire.<sup>79</sup> The other crosses at Kottayam date back to the tenth century and bear inscriptions written in Pahlavi and Syriac. One such ancient inscription reads, "My Lord Christ, have mercy upon Afras, the son of Chaharbukht, the Syrian [Assyrian], who cut this."<sup>80</sup>

In Tamil Nadu, the state that borders Kerala to the east, there is a mountain known as San Tome, or Mount Saint Thomas. It is six miles southwest of Madras and is the traditional place of the martyrdom of Saint Thomas. Plattner mentions an excavation of this mountain. He describes an ancient sculpture that was discovered that "undoubtedly represents St. Thomas, who is depicted holding the Gospels in one hand while the fingers of the other are extended as if ready to be thrust into the wound in Christ's side."<sup>81</sup> The body of Thomas, or portions of it, were removed from India and carried to the Assyrian city of Edessa where they were venerated.

Brown mentions that the grants of privileges, perquisites and land made by south Indian rulers were usually recorded on copper plates, as much more durable and permanent records than the palm leaf strips which were in general use for literature or business transactions.<sup>82</sup> The Mar Thoma Christians possess several such copper plate charters. A typical copper plate grant is 14 inches by 4 inches written on both sides in Tamil-Malayalam, Pahlavi, or Arabic. One deed names Iravi Cortan of Crangamore, an Assyrian settler, as representative of the Christian community in the little principality of Manigramam and elevates him to the position of Sovereign Merchant of Kerala. Another deed was granted under the orders of King Sthanu Rai Gupta, to a colony of Assyrian settlers who arrived in Quilon under the leadership of two Nestorian bishops from Persia Mar Sapor-Isho and Mar Peroz. These grants gave Assyrian Christians tax-free lands and supervision over certain castes in their district. These two deeds are dated 774 AD and 824 AD.<sup>83</sup> Other copper plates, including the one granted to Thomas of Cana were confiscated by the Portuguese and were soon lost. Perhaps, like the Syriac books, they were destroyed on the suspicion of being heretical. These copper plates, along with the names of the bishops who visited Malabar in this

---

<sup>79</sup> Kuruvilla, *A History of the Mar Thoma Church and its Doctrines*, 2; and Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios *The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Church: A Historical Perspective* <http://members.aol.com/manj/odoxl.html>

<sup>80</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 80.

<sup>81</sup> Plattner, *Christian India*, 30.

<sup>82</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 85.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75; and Kuruvilla, *A History of the Mar Thoma Church and its Doctrines*, 2.

period, and the travel narratives mentioned earlier, prove conclusively that the Mar Thoma Church was in ecclesiastical connection with the Ancient Assyrian Church of the East based in Persia. The Jews also possess copper plates. According to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* the earliest evidence of the settlement of Jews of the Malabar Coast is two copper plates now in the possession of the White Jews.<sup>84</sup>

### The Saint Thomas Tradition

One of the most popular and yet most controversial Syriac writings is *The Acts of Thomas*. It is the earliest writing about the life of an apostle outside of the New Testament (and only one to have survived in its entirety) and it is one of the most ancient Christian books in Syriac.<sup>85</sup> It tells of the missionary journeys and the adventures of St. Thomas in India. *The Acts of Thomas* has been interpreted various ways. LaFargue argues that it is an allegory serving as instruction of the Gnostic religion.<sup>86</sup> Farquhar and Garitte attempt to tie it to history by fixing exact dates for events mentioned in it, making historical identification of people mentioned and naming geographical locations of places it refers to.<sup>87</sup> *The Acts of Thomas* is not only an important example of early Christian Syriac literature it also makes manifest the importance of Saint Thomas among the Assyrian people.

In December 1952, the sixth year of India's independence (August 15, 1947), F. A. Plattner, a Roman Catholic, arrived in Malabar to celebrate two important anniversaries of the Christians in India, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Saint Francis Xavier (who ministered and died in India) and the 1900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of St. Thomas in India and his founding of the Church of India. During the celebrations the Archbishop of Ernakalum (a city in South India) serving as the Metropolitan of the Syro-Malabar Catholics (Mar Thoma Christians who acknowledge the Roman Catholic pope), said to the Papal Cardinal Legate as he received his credentials, "You come from Peter; and we are the sons of another Apostle Thomas."<sup>88</sup>

Judah Thomas, the Apostle of Assyria and of India, is the famous "Doubting Thomas" who refused to believe the resurrection of Christ until he

---

<sup>84</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 622-624.

<sup>85</sup> William Barnstone, ed. *The Other Bible: Jewish Pseudopigrapha, Christian Apocrypha, Gnostic Scriptures* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 464-481.

<sup>86</sup> Michael LaFargue, *Language and Gnosis: The Opening Scenes of the Acts of Thomas* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 1-2.

<sup>87</sup> C. Bernard Ruffin, *The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles after Calvary* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 1984), 119-134 J. N. Farquhar & G. Garitte, *The Apostle Thomas in India, According to the Acts of Thomas* (Kerala, India: Syrian Church Series, 1972), 21-23.

<sup>88</sup> Plattner, *Christian India*, 29.

could see, touch and feel the risen Jesus.<sup>89</sup> He is only mentioned in lists of names of the disciples in the New Testament except for *The Gospel of John* which tells of a few fascinating incidents involving Thomas that give us insight into his personality. Thomas, or *Thoma* in Syriac, means Twin. The Greek word for twin, *Didymus*, is also used in reference to Saint Thomas in the New Testament. This led to the blasphemous assertion in certain heretical Gnostic sects in Syria that Thomas was the twin brother of Jesus Christ (Gnosticism was a widespread school of esoteric occultism that plagued the early church). Schonfield says, "There are legends that Judas Twin [his translation of Judah Thomas] was so-called because he bore such a striking resemblance to Jesus."<sup>90</sup> It has also been argued that Thomas might be the same as Saint Jude who was the youngest of Christ's brethren and the author of *The Epistle of Jude*. This is unlikely because Jude speaks of the Apostles as an elder generation and thus was too young to have participated as a disciple during the public ministry of Jesus Christ (Jude:17).

The name Thomas appears only twelve times in the New Testament. Only three stories directly involving Thomas appear in the New Testament and all three are found in *The Gospel of John*. In the first Thomas expresses despair at Christ's willingness to confront his enemies in Judea yet also states that his devotion to Christ is so great that he is willing to die with him.

*The disciples said to Jesus, "Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone you, and you are going there again?"...Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16)*

In the second incident Thomas questions Jesus about 'the way' during the final dialogue between Christ and the Disciples before the crucifixion.

*Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, and how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:5-6)*

In the third, and most famous incident, after the crucifixion Thomas refuses to believe the stories he is told about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

*Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the*

---

<sup>89</sup> Mark Buchanan, "The Benefit of the Doubt: The Disciple Thomas Reveals an Important Truth About Faith," *Christianity Today* (April 3, 2000): 62-67.

<sup>90</sup> Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Jesus Party* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1974), 299.

*print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side [where he was stabbed with a spear while on the cross], I will not believe. And after eight days his disciples were again inside and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at my hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into my side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." And Thomas answered and said, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said unto him, "Thomas, because you have seen me you believe. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:24-29)*

In all of these stories Thomas is presented, not as a man of great faith, but of fear, doubts, questioning and hesitancy. In Thomas' last appearance in *The Gospel of John* his presence is noted at the miraculous draught of fishes in the only list of the apostles names given in *The Gospel of John* (John 21:2). Interestingly his name immediately follows Peter's, which may be an indication of the prominence in which Thomas was held.

After a mention in the book of *Acts of the Apostles*, Thomas disappears from the New Testament. However Thomas apparently played a significant role in the history of the early church. Several apocryphal writings are attributed to him, these being *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Acts of Thomas*, and *The Apocalypse of Thomas*.<sup>91</sup> All of these writings, many of which are pseudoepigraphal, are believed by scholars to have originated in the Near East and to have originally been composed in the Syriac language. The most important and genuine work was discovered in Egypt in the 1940's. Fragments of which had been discovered earlier by Bernard Pyne Grenfeld and Arthur Surrige Hunt in their expedition in 1895. They made their discovery at Futuh el Bahnasa, which was known in ancient times as Oxyrhynchus, in an ancient seventy-foot high rubbish heap.<sup>92</sup> The fragments of *The Gospel of Thomas* they discovered were dated before 200 AD. Marvin Meyer used this information to date the composition of *The Gospel of Thomas* to the time of Thomas himself. Meyer says,

*Since the earliest of the Greek Oxyrhynchus fragments have been assigned a date of around 200 AD, the Gospel of Thomas must have been composed during the second century or even the latter part of the*

---

<sup>91</sup> *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (dated 110 AD), *The Gospel of Thomas* (dated late first century), *The Acts of Thomas* (dated early second or late first century) and *The Apocalypse of Thomas* (early third century) all are found in William Barnstone, ed. *The Other Bible: Jewish Pseudopigrapha, Christian Apocrypha, Gnostic Scriptures* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 398-403, 299-307, 464-481 and 551-553.

<sup>92</sup> Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics: An Introduction to the Gnostic Coptic manuscripts discovered at Chenoboskion* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1986), 227-233.

*first century AD. Considering the prominent place of Thomas in Syrian [meaning Assyrian] Christianity, we may suppose that the Gospel of Thomas was composed in Syria, possibly at Edessa (modern Urfa), where the memory of Thomas was revered and where, it is said, even his bones were venerated.*<sup>93</sup>

*The Gospel of Thomas* is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus which many scholars believe if not to be genuine at least as reputable as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.<sup>94</sup> Elaine Pagels in *The Gnostic Gospels* describes the exciting discovery of a complete edition of *The Gospel of Thomas* among the Nag Hammadi Codices in December of 1945.<sup>95</sup>

The Nag Hammadi codices were buried around the year 400 AD. They were probably purged from a monastery library during the period the church was purifying itself of the Gnostic heresy. Most of the Nag Hammadi Codices are Gnostic. *The Gospel of Thomas* has a slight Gnostic flavor to it. This is due to five or six verses, which may be either later additions to the text or possibly errors in translation. *The Gospel of Thomas* begins with the statement; “These are the secret sayings of the living Jesus which Judah Thomas the Twin wrote down. Whoever discovers the meaning of these sayings will gain eternal life.”<sup>96</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas* is a collection of teachings and wise saying of Jesus some of which are found in *The New Testament* but many others are not. Most of the new sayings that are not found in the Bible are in harmony with Christ’s message, method, and style of preaching. *The Gospel of Thomas* is the only complete reputable extra biblical gospel yet discovered.

The second important work is *The Acts of Thomas*, which records the story of Thomas’ missionary journey to India. *The Acts of Thomas* is an apocryphal Christian book. It was written in either the late 100s or the early 200s AD in Syriac and was soon translated into Greek, Latin and Ethiopic. *The Acts of Thomas* begins with the apostles casting lots to see which region of the world each of them were to go to spread the light of Christ’s gospel. The lot of India fell to Saint Thomas. He did not wish to go, saying that he was too weak to travel so far, and said, “How can I, who am a Hebrew, go and preach to the Indians?” That night Jesus appeared to Thomas in a dream compelling him to go, but still Thomas refused. The next day, according to *The Acts of Thomas*, a merchant

<sup>93</sup> Marvin Meyer and Harold Bloom, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 10.

<sup>94</sup> Certain left-wing Bible scholars are attempting to raise *The Gospel of Thomas* to the stature of the four canonical Gospels. Robert J. Miller, ed. *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (San Francisco: Polebridge Press, 1994), 301-329; and Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>95</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), xi-xii.

<sup>96</sup> Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, 355.

from the kingdom of King Gundaphernes in India arrived in Judea looking for workers. Jesus came to the merchant in the form of a normal man. Jesus asked the merchant if he were looking to buy a carpenter. (According to legend St. Thomas was a carpenter. Thomas is the Patron Saint of Architects for the Roman Catholic Church). The merchant replied that he was. Then Jesus said to the merchant, "I have a slave who is a carpenter and wish to sell him." He then showed the merchant Thomas at a distance. Jesus then sold Thomas to the merchant and wrote a deed of sale:

*I, Jesus, the son of Joseph, the carpenter, confirm that I have sold my slave, Judas Thomas by name, to Abban, Merchant of Gundaphernes, the king of the Indians.*

The merchant then showed Thomas the deed and asked, "Is this your Master?" And the apostle said, "Yes, he is my Lord." "I have bought you from him," replied the merchant. Thomas then resigned himself to going to India.<sup>97</sup> Thomas went to India as a carpenter and eventually preached the Gospel to King Gundaphernes and his royal court and despite initial opposition, converted the King. Thomas then traveled across India going to the Kingdom of Mazdai spreading the good news until, according to tradition, in the year 72 AD Thomas was attacked by a worshiper of the goddess Kali who thrust a spear through Thomas' heart at the command of King Misdeus. Thomas was thus martyred because he refused to worship Kali while passing by one of her temples on her holy day. Christians and Hindus mourned his death.<sup>98</sup>

*The Acts of Thomas* contains many legendary, and even fantasy elements but may be based on a historical tradition. For centuries most scholars dismissed *The Acts of Thomas* as a complete myth. They claimed there never existed a king in India named Gundaphorus. In the nineteenth century a treasure of ancient coins was discovered near India. These coins bore the name of King Gundaphar and were dated to the time of Saint Thomas.<sup>99</sup> Stanley Wolpert in *A New History of India*, mentions King Gundaphernes in connection with Saint Thomas. He states that Gundaphernes was a Parthian ruler "whose name has long been associated with that of the Apostle Thomas."<sup>100</sup> Gundaphernes has been discovered to have ruled over a Parthian kingdom that stretched from eastern Iran to northern India.

Professor M. M. Ninan, as part of the Fremont Celebrations connected to the 50<sup>th</sup> Indian independence anniversary presented, "The Story of Saint Thomas

<sup>97</sup> J.K. Elliot, ed. *The Apocryphal Jesus: Legends of the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 161-174.

<sup>98</sup> Peter Bamner, *The Kingdoms of Christ: From the Days of the Apostles to the Middle Ages* (New York: McGraw hill, 1956), 226-227.

<sup>99</sup> Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Volume I*, 29-30.

<sup>100</sup> Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, 73.



the Apostle and the St. Thomas Christians of India,” in which he discussed the oral tradition of south India concerning the ministry of Saint Thomas in India.<sup>101</sup> According to Professor Ninan local tradition and folklore gives almost complete support to *The Acts of Thomas*. He mentions various time-honored oral traditions in Malabar, which were handed down the generations in *The Songs of the Nazranis* known as *Margom Kali*.

In 1601 Thoman Parvam recorded the Indian traditional version of the story of Saint Thomas in India for the Niranam Church. Parvam’s work is titled *Thomma Parvam*. According to this source the Apostle Thomas landed in Cranganoor and took part in the wedding of Cheraman Perumal and then proceeded to the courts of King Gondophernes. The initial visit of St. Thomas to Kerala lasted only eight days. During this period his converts were the Jews who had settled in Malabar in the vicinity of Cochin. Later Saint Thomas returned to Kerala and on this visit over three thousand became Christians. His first Hindu convert was a Brahmin (the priestly caste and a high caste in India) from Maliyakal who became Thomas Maliyakal the Rambam, from whom Thoman Parvam believed himself to have been descended. Among the three thousand converts were 75 Brahmin families as well as other castes such as Kshatriyas, Nairs, and Chettiars. More Jewish converts were made notably a Jewish prince named *Kepha*, Syriac for Peter, who was ordained as a bishop when Thomas left to continue his work throughout India. The seven original churches established by St. Thomas, according to Professor Ninan and *Thomma Parvam*, were located at Malayankara, Palayar, Koovakayal, Kokkamangalam, Kollam, Niranam and Chayal.<sup>102</sup> Other versions of the story have survived in letters written in Syriac by Indian priests.<sup>103</sup>

I have spoken to several Christians from Kerala who believe they were descended from Brahmins converted by the Apostle Thomas. I have also seen genealogies written in Malayalam, the Dravidian language dominant in Kerala, that purport to trace the family line of several Mar Thoma families to Brahmins and others converted by Saint Thomas. Many Mar Thoma Christians trace their Christian families back 40, 48 and even 80 generations.<sup>104</sup> In an oral tradition it has been said that Thomas approached four Brahmans worshiping the sun god in a sacred river. Thomas asked them of their practices, declared there is only one God, and performed a miracle that compelled the Brahmans to become his disciples. This story is probably one of the many stories about Saint Thomas that are told to children in India.

---

<sup>101</sup> Prof. M.M. Ninan, *The Story of St. Thomas the Apostle and the St. Thomas Churches of India*, <http://www.marthomasf.org/thomas/thomas.html>

<sup>102</sup> The Syriac letter of Mar Thomas in 1721 and the letter of Matthew in 1725 see Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 50.

<sup>103</sup> Prof. M.M. Ninan, *The Story of St. Thomas the Apostle and the St. Thomas Churches of India*, <http://www.marthomasf.org/thomas/thomas.html>

<sup>104</sup> Gillman and Klimkiet, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, 164.

Despite all this evidence some church historians have dismissed the story of Thomas and ascribed the founding of the Malabar Church to Thomas of Cana in 345 AD (or as late as 825). However, the Jewish community in India and the contact between Rome and India in the first century made the apostolic visitation highly probable. It is difficult to dismiss the reference of Eusebius Pamphylus to the visit of Panteus of Alexandria in the year 190 AD. According to this account Panteus, a scholar from the theological school of Alexandria, arrived in India and found the church already established there and the Christians were claiming that their land had been visited by an apostle and they were using the Syriac language for worship.<sup>105</sup> The visit of Panteus is further substantiated by the fact that his student, Clement of Alexandria, speaks “accurately and positively of Bactrian and Indian Buddhism.”<sup>106</sup> The information about Buddhism was acquired by Panteus in India.

The veneration of Thomas in India and among the Assyrian Christians in Mesopotamia and the wealth of literature attributed to Thomas points to a historical missionary journey by Saint Thomas. Besides, if it is a complete myth, why choose Thomas, the disciple with the weakest faith, as the founder? If it is just a myth why didn't India go along with the Bartholomew story? When Thomas of Cana arrived in India *The Acts of Thomas* had already been written and accounts of a church in India founded by an apostle had been known for over a century. Even if Thomas did not found the Church of India it is still one of the oldest churches in the world.

Early in the Christian era St. Thomas, or some other Syriac speaking Christian, traveled to southern India with a Roman trading expedition. India was discovered to be a receptive mission field for the Christian gospel. News of the success of the mission was received in Assyria. The Church of the East continued its mission work in Malabar. More Assyrian missionaries were sent to India. Assyrian families came and settled in southern India to work as missionaries. Other Assyrian Christians came and settled in southern India for the economic opportunities. Kerala was and is still one of the economic leaders in India. More Assyrian clergy were sent to minister to the Assyrian community that had been established. Persecution arose in the Middle East and after the Muslims defeated the Persians persecution intensified. India has a strong tradition of tolerance so many Assyrian Christians fled to India for religious freedom (other peoples such as the Jews and Zoroastrian Parsis also fled to India for religious tolerance). Eventually the numbers of Christians in India grew to almost one fourth of the population. The legend of Saint Thomas became a source of pride for the Christians in southern India and made their faith strong. This enabled the Mar Thoma church to escape the fate of their Nestorian brethren in Central Asia and China.

In support of Saint Thomas tradition Bishop Leslie W. Brown said,

---

<sup>105</sup> Cruse, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, 190.

<sup>106</sup> Ferguson, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2d. edition, 570-571.

*The tradition of St. Thomas death in South India is not entirely disproved, and no other place in the world claims the event. We cannot prove that the Apostle worked in South India any more than we can disprove the fact, but the presence of Christians of undoubtedly ancient origin holding to the tradition, the proof of very considerable commercial contact between the western world and the Malabar coast in the first century of our era, and the probable presence of Jewish colonies at the same time, may for some incline the balance to belief that the truth of the tradition is a reasonable probability.<sup>107</sup>*

### **Summary and Conclusion:**

The Christians of southern India are not just the products of Assyrian evangelism. Many from among them are direct descendents of the Syriac-speaking people who emigrated from the Middle East and settled there. In fact, the Southists claim to be full-blooded natives of the Middle East Syriac-speaking descent without intermarriage with native Indians.

During the high Middle Ages the Nestorian Church had thousands of churches spread across the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Far East. Today all that remains is a small minority in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and the church of India, which is the only living testimony of the former missionary glory of the Nestorian Church. Although there are large Assyrian communities living in Diaspora, they are in serious danger of linguistic, cultural and ethnic extinction. Under the circumstances, the recapture of the missionary zeal of the past, in collaboration with other Syriac-speaking Christians, may bring about revitalization to the church as well as the nation.

Assyrian (Syriac) is still spoken in Christian villages in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and among the Assyrian immigrant communities in Diaspora, especially in the Western world. Many Mar Thoma Christians, especially in Trichur, study Syriac and use it during church services, but it is not a living language among them. Recently Mar Thoma Christians have become noted experts of Aramaic. George Mookan, now known as the Most Rev. Mar Aprem,<sup>108</sup> and Father Thomas Arayathinal<sup>109</sup> are Mar Thoma Christians who have recently published comprehensive studies on the Syriac language and helpful handbooks for students of Aramaic. India has about 30 million Christians.<sup>110</sup> The states of

---

<sup>107</sup> Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, 59.

<sup>108</sup> Rev Dr. Mar Aprem, *Teach Yourself Aramaic: A Grammar Guide to Learn the Language of Jesus Christ Explained in English Medium With a 1000 word Vocabulary* (Trichur, Kerala, India: Mar Narsai Press, 1981).

<sup>109</sup> Rev. Thomas Arayathinal, *Aramaic Grammar*, 2 vols. (Mannanam, Kerala, India: St. Joseph Press, 1957).

<sup>110</sup> Christianity in India, <http://members.tripod.com/adaniel/Christianity.html>

Mizoram and Nagaland, in northeast India, both have Christian majorities but they were not established by the work of Saint Thomas or by the Nestorian Church. Goa is also dominated by Christians who were converted by Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries. The major centers of Christianity in India are Tamil Nadu, Goa, Manipur, Mizoram and Kerala. Kerala is 60% Hindu, 20% Muslim and 20% Christian. Kerala's literacy rate is 90%, the highest in India. Kerala is the most progressive state in India, its living standard and progress is almost equal to that of Europe. The Mar Thoma Church is an indigenous, self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating church.<sup>111</sup> It has become a global church due to Keralites emigrating abroad. Important Christian denominations in southern India include the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Mar Thoma, the Church of South India, Tamil Christian Fellowship, the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Evangelical Church of India.<sup>112</sup> In the city of Trichur in Kerala the Christians have remained faithful to the Nestorian Assyrian Church of the East despite tireless efforts by Roman Catholic missionaries directed against it.<sup>113</sup> The Pentecostal 'Charismatic' renewal movement has gained strength in Kerala and across all of India.<sup>114</sup>

St. Thomas was not the last Christian to have been martyred in India. Several Christians in India have given their lives for their faith in Christ as recently as 1999. India is quickly becoming one of the most dangerous places for Christians to live. Radical Hindus are making violent attacks against Christians and are attempting to create discriminatory laws directed against Christians. Mobs have attacked Christian villages and burned homes leaving thousands of Christians homeless.<sup>115</sup> Several incidents of violence against Christians have erupted in recent years. In 1995 a Christian Church worker in Kerala was attacked in broad daylight and stabbed more than 40 times by her assailants who were supporters of the new Hindu Fundamentalist movement.<sup>116</sup> In 1999 an Australian humanitarian missionary was burned to death by Hindu zealots along

<sup>111</sup> Dr, P. T. Abraham *The Mar Thoma Church: A Historical Sketch*,

<http://marthomachurch.org>

<sup>112</sup> Richard Vara "All for One: Christians From India Unite for Christmas," *Houston Chronicle* (Saturday, Dec. 19, 1998), Section E, 1 & 5.

<sup>113</sup> Kuruvilla, *A History of the Mar Thoma Church and its Doctrines*, 54.

<sup>114</sup> Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World: The Day by Day Guide for Praying for the World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 273-291.

<sup>115</sup> Celia W. Dugger "Shiva verses Jesus: Hindus burn Homes of Christians"

<http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/asia/032399india-christians.html>

<sup>116</sup> Peter Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out: The Worldwide Tragedy of Modern Christians Who are Dying for Their Faith* (Dallas: World Publishing, 1997), 97-104.

with his 7 and 10 year old sons.<sup>117</sup> Later that same year, a Catholic priest was also attacked by Hindu fanatics who shot him through the chest with an arrow and then beat him to death.<sup>118</sup> The government of India actively oppresses the Naga Christians of Nagaland. Hostility towards Christianity is increasing despite the recent passing away of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and a visit by the Catholic pope.

Despite the amazing and long-lasting successes of the Assyrian Church in its global expansion, its missionary evidence has almost disappeared except for the church in India. This church has not only survived; it is now really thriving. The church in India shares with its mother church the apostolic foundation by Saint Thomas. Dr. T. P. Abraham wrote that,

*The Ancient Church [of the East] came into being as a result of the strenuous missionary activities of St. Thomas the Apostle. It is against this background [that the church of India] claims its uninterrupted link with the Syrian [meaning Assyrian] Church... the church also affirms that it constitutes and essential part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.*<sup>119</sup>

The Christians of Malabar took their Syriac name from Saint Thomas and are still known as Mar Thoma Christians.

---

<sup>117</sup> Michael Fisher "The Fiery Rise of Hindu Fundamentalism: After a Missionary and his Two Sons are Martyred, Christians in India press for greater religious freedom," *Christianity Today* (March 11, 1999): 46-49.

<sup>118</sup> "Catholic Priest's Killers Target of Indian Dragnet," *Houston Chronicle* (September 4, 1999).

<sup>119</sup> Dr. P. T. Abraham [The Mar Thoma Church: A Historical Sketch](http://marthomachurch.org)  
<http://marthomachurch.org>