

Chapter 2

The First Missions to India

"Remember, St. Thomas came to India when many of the countries of Europe had not yet become Christian, and so those Indians who trace their Christianity to him have a longer history and a higher ancestry than that of Christians of many of the European countries. And it is really a matter of pride to us that it so happened."

—Dr. Rajendra Prasad, President of India, 1952-1962; quoted in S. G. Pothan, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala*

India and "The Apostle to Asia"

One of the oldest and strongest traditions in church history is that Thomas the apostle carried the gospel to India not long after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. It traces as far back as about the year 200 when a Christian in Edessa, on the great bend of the Euphrates River between Roman Asia and Persia, wrote a lively account of how the apostle had been sent out from Jerusalem to India protesting bitterly, a reluctant missionary, but one who preached fearlessly before kings and founded the Indian church. That early Christian romance, called the *Acts of Thomas*,¹ became the most popular of a number of similar apocryphal *Acts* that appeared in the third century, perhaps in answer to an insistent demand from a growing number of believers for more information about the original Twelve than is given in the canonical New Testament. Its importance in Asian church history is that it survives as the oldest narrative account of a church in Asia beyond the borders of the Roman Empire.² It makes strange reading today, with its incredible miracles and exaggerated asceticism, but the vivid picture it paints of Thomas as the "apostle to Asia" is a fitting introduction to the story of the church in Asia.

The Asian roots of the church, of course, lie deeper than such traditions and they do not begin with Thomas or with India. They begin with Jesus Christ, for Bethlehem is in Asia and so also is Golgotha. But when Jesus was born the little town of Bethlehem was ruled by Rome, and Rome was Western, so that part of Asia was drawn into Western church history. Paul's mission to the Gentiles moved the gospel still more decisively west in the histories, for there was a historian, Luke, accompanying Paul. No such contemporary historian recorded the gospel's eastward march, but there is no doubt that the gospel did move east even while Paul was opening a beachhead in Europe at Philippi. And however Western scholars may write their histories of the church, from time immemorial Asia has linked the church's expansion east to the missionary travels of the apostle Thomas.

The evidence for that link is traditional, of course, and only peripherally historical.³ But the tradition is so ancient and the support so strong even in the normally skeptical twentieth century that it may be wise to admit that underlying some of the most improbable legends there often lies a foundation of fact.⁴ So let us begin at the beginning with the legend itself.

The Acts of Thomas

The story opens impressively with the eleven apostles (Judas Iscariot not yet being replaced) gathered in Jerusalem to plan a strategy, of obedience to the command of Jesus, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel."

At that time we disciples were all in Jerusalem . . . and we divided the regions of the world that each one of us might go to the region which fell to his lot. . . . India fell to Judas Thomas, who is also Didymus [Twin], but he did not wish to go, saying that through weakness of the flesh he could not travel, and "How can I, who am a Hebrew, go and preach the truth among the Indians?" . . . And . . . the Saviour appeared to him by night and said. . . . "Fear not, Thomas, go to India and preach the word there, for my grace is with thee." But he would not obey and said, "Send me where thou wilt—but somewhere else! For I am not going to the Indians." (*Acts Thom.* 1:1)

Faced with such recalcitrance not altogether uncharacteristic of their fellow disciple Thomas, the others prayed for help and Jesus appeared in a vision. There happened to be in Jerusalem at that time, according to the story, an agent of the Indian king Gundaphar (Gundaphorus) looking for a carpenter to build a palace for the king, and in an ingeniously contrived solution to the problem of how to get a reluctant Thomas to India, the author has Jesus appear to the agent and offer to sell Thomas to him as the carpenter he needs.

The Lord said to him, "Dost thou wish to buy a carpenter?" He said, "Yes." And the Lord said, "I have a slave who is a carpenter . . ."

It should be remembered that in some Asian traditions Thomas the Twin was twin brother to Jesus and therefore a carpenter and that in the New Testament all the disciples gladly called themselves "slaves of Jesus Christ."

And when the sale was completed the Saviour took Judas who is also Thomas and led him to the merchant Abban. And . . . Abban . . . said to him, "Is this thy master?" And the apostle . . . said, "Yes" . . . But he [Abban] said, "I have bought thee from him." And the apostle was silent. On the following morning the apostle prayed . . . "I go whither thou wilt, Lord Jesus. Thy will be done." . . . So they began their voyage.

Their first stop on the journey was Adrapolis (Sandaruk, in the Syriac version). Its location is uncertain and not important if the *Acts of Thomas* is just a Syrian *Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegory. But many now take it more seriously as an imaginative but conscientious effort

to reconstruct half-forgotten events that had actually occurred, the author believed, a century and a half before. If so, mention of the port city might refer to a provincial capital on the Nile route to India, Nomos Andropolites, or less likely to the Andhra territory on the Indian coast. At any rate, the account of the apostle's ministry in Adrapolis confirms a fact noted elsewhere, that in the earliest outreach of Christian missions the Jewish communities of the Second Diaspora were often the starting point for missionary evangelism in Asia. Thomas's first convert is a little Jewish flute girl at the king's court.

Another aspect of the apostle's mission in Adrapolis as reported in the *Acts* raises a question that will persist throughout the reading of the narrative. Can a story so full of miraculous fantasies be believed about anything? One example will suffice. Thomas is invited to the wedding of the king's daughter and is rudely slapped by a cup bearer. He turns on the man and tells him sharply that God may forgive him in the world to come, "but in this world . . . I shall see the hand that smote me dragged by dogs." This is no sooner said than the man is torn to pieces by a lion and a black dog picks up his right hand in its mouth and carries it into the banquet hall in triumphant vindication of the apostle's prophecy (*Acts Thom.* 1:6, 8, 9).

Thomas left Adrapolis in some haste, having angered the king by converting his daughter at her own wedding to a gospel of Christian virginity (*Acts Thom.* 1:11, 12). The ascetic emphasis is an often recurring theme in these early apocryphal *Acts* of the apostles.

At last he reached India and the realm of King Gundaphar. Here for a time the tale is at its best—apostolically artless and simple. Gundaphar set Thomas to the building of a royal palace and gave him a large amount of money for the project. But the apostle looked about at the countless poor around him and could not bring himself to give his life only to the providing of more luxury for the rich:

[He] took it all [i.e., the building fund] and dispensed it, going about . . . distributing it and bestowing alms on the poor and afflicted, and he gave them relief. . . . But when the king came to the city he inquired . . . concerning the palace. . . . They said to him, "Neither has he built a palace, nor has he done anything else of what he promised to do, but he goes about the towns and villages, and if he has anything he gives it all to the poor, and he teaches a new God and heals the sick and drives out demons and does many other wonderful things; and we think he is a magician. But his works of compassion, and the healings which are wrought by him without reward, and moreover his simplicity

and kindness and the quality of his faith show that he is righteous or an apostle of the new God whom he preaches." (*Acts Thom.* 1:19-20)

When the king heard these things, the story continues, he shook his head and sent for Thomas. "Have you built my palace?" he asked. "Yes," said the apostle. "Then when shall we go and see it," the king asked. "Not now but when you die," said Thomas. Whereupon the frustrated ruler ordered him clapped into jail.

At this point the story returns again to fantasy. That night the king's brother died. In the abode of the dead he saw a beautiful palace and asked to live in one of the lower apartments. "No," said the angels. "This palace is one which that Christian is building for your brother." Startled, he begs leave to return and tell the king. Permission is granted for him to appear to his brother in a vision, and when at last Gundaphar is convinced that his palace has indeed been erected, not, however, on earth but in heaven, he brings the apostle out of prison and listens gladly to his preaching. Upon profession of conversion the king receives the three signs of admission to the Christian faith: anointing with oil ("the seal"), baptism ("the added seal"), and the Eucharist. Such details may tell us more about early third-century liturgical practice in Edessa than about what actually happened in first-century India, but at any rate this part of the story of the apostle's mission ends with great success: "And many others also, believing . . . came into the refuge of the Saviour" (*Acts Thom.* 2:22-27).

The final chapters of the *Acts of Thomas* close with the apostle's journey overland into other parts of India. He appoints a deacon to "preach Jesus" and take his place in the land of King Gundaphar. (*Acts Thom.* 7:66). Then he travels on to his final mission and death in the realm of King Misdaeus (Mazdai, in the Syriac), which tradition locates in Madras, in east India. There again the apostle's radical, ascetic teaching against marriage brings trouble. Some of the chief women of the kingdom, including the queen, are converted and in obedience to the new teaching faithfully shun the marriage bed. The king, understandably angry, accuses Thomas of bewitching them and orders his execution. He is led to a mount outside the city. The spears of the soldiers are poised to run him through as Thomas begins to pray, and he ends his apostolate as he had begun it long before in Jerusalem with the words of his great confession, "My Lord and my God":

My Lord and my God, my hope and redeemer and leader and guide in all the lands . . . I have fulfilled thy work and accomplished thy com-

mand. I have become a slave, therefore today do I receive freedom. (*Acts Thom.* 13:167; cf. John 20:28)

The Tradition Evaluated

Historians have not always been kind to this legend. Its fantasies do not inspire academic confidence. Besides, as was often pointed out, no king by the name of Gundaphar was known in Indian history. Of other kings there were plenty—Chandragupta, Ashoka, Menander. But no Gundaphar.

Then astonishingly in 1834 an explorer turned up a treasure of ancient coins in the Kabul Valley of Afghanistan. Many bore the pictures and names of forgotten kings and among them were some with a name stamped both in Greek and in an old Indian script. The name was Gundaphar, in various spellings.⁵ Other discoveries followed fast, and Gundaphar coins were found from Bactria to the Punjab. The British Museum alone has thirty-three coins of King Gundaphar; the Calcutta Museum twenty-four. Further research has dated the coins as being from the first century A.D.⁶

Near the end of the nineteenth century more precise dating became possible when a stone tablet was discovered in the ruins of a Buddhist city near Peshawar bearing six lines in an Indo-Bactrian language. Deciphered, the inscription not only named King Gundaphar, it dated him squarely in the early first century A.D., making him a contemporary of the apostle Thomas just as the much-maligned *Acts of Thomas* had described him. The inscription reads, in part: "In the twenty-sixth year of the Great King Gundaphara in the Samvat year three and one hundred, in the month of Vaisakh . . ." There is some disagreement in identifying the year referred to, but the general consensus is that the "samvat year 103" refers to a numbering system beginning in 58 B.C. (the "Ykama era"), which would set the inception of Gundaphar's reign in A.D. 19. He would still have been ruling, therefore, in 45 or 46, very near to the traditional date of the arrival of Thomas in India.⁷

So as far as history can be pieced together from the ambiguous evidence of the coins and from the even rarer inscriptions, it would seem that the Greek Bactrian kingdoms on India's northwestern borders from Kabul to the Ganges did not fall directly into the hands of the migrating Yueh-chi nomads but were first conquered by Saka warriors (eastern Scythians) whom the Yueh-chi were driving before them.⁸ It is plausibly suggested that when Parthian rule of Persia weakened in 88 B.C., the Suren princes of the eastern Persian prov-

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the vigorous Saka newcomers, invaded and conquered northwest India, and ruled for a time as an independent Partho-Scythian dynasty called the Pahlava (Parthian) dynasty in Indian histories.⁹

It is at this point that Gundaphar emerges into the light of history not as the figment of some credulous Edessan Christian's pious imagination but as the most powerful king to rule the Indian north in the stormy years between the end of the Maurya empire and the rise of a Kushan dynasty in the Punjab about A.D. 70. Gundaphar's territory stretched from Kandahar in eastern Persia (now southern Afghanistan) to the Punjab and probably as far north as Kabul. His capital is thought to have been Taxila. If it is true that he was of the princely house of the Suren, as E. Herzfeld has conjectured,¹⁰ this would help to explain why the warlike but simpler Saka might accept a Persian alliance and a Parthian king, for the Suren were no weak, provincial governors but the greatest nobles in the Persian Empire, second only to the royal family. They had the hereditary right of crowning the emperor at royal investitures. Their greatest triumph had been the defeat of the Roman general Crassus at Carthage in 52 B.C. by a Suren general who rode to war with a harem of two hundred wives, a baggage train of one thousand camels, and a personal army of ten thousand horsemen.¹¹ The fact that the Persian emperor instead of rewarding his victorious general had jealously put him to death could further explain the break with the empire by the Suren, their alliance with the Saka, and the rise of a Gundaphar as king of India.

All such reconstructions of the shadowy Saka-Pahlava relationships are tentative,¹² but two important facts are clear. The first is that there was a king in India named Gundaphar in the first half of the first century. The beginning of his reign in A.D. 19 has been called "one of the few fixed dates" in this chaotic period.¹³ The other important established fact is that this Gundaphar was the dominant ruling figure in the swirling mixture of races, religions, and rulers in a time of violent political change in northwest India. For a time there in the first century A.D. he was perhaps even more powerful than his contemporaries, the Persian emperors.¹⁴ But it is a return to fantasy to speculate, as some scholars have done, that Gundaphar was Gaspar, first of the Wise Men who came from the East with gifts for the Babe of Bethlehem.¹⁵

The question to ask is not whether Gundaphar went to Bethlehem but whether Thomas went to India. Proof of the existence of a King Gundaphar does not guarantee the historicity of accounts of Thomas preaching in India, however much it may enhance the credibility of the Thomas tradition. Positive assurance of the apostle's

Indian mission is as elusive as proof of the generally accepted mission of Peter to Rome.

But there is another important line of support for the tradition that must not be discounted, namely, the abundant evidence now available that travel back and forth between India and the Roman Empire was far more commonplace in the first century than some earlier skeptics had once thought possible. The visit of a trade agent from an Indian king to Jerusalem and even a voyage to India by an apostle would have been not at all unusual. Strabo did not exaggerate when he reported that on a visit to Egypt about the time of Christ he found as many as 120 ships a year sailing for India from the Egyptian head of the Red Sea.¹⁶ Among the surviving documents of the first century, in fact, is a mariners' manual, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written by an Egyptian Greek about A.D. 60, which corresponds closely to the traditional date for Thomas's mission (between 50 and 72). With the precision of one who had made the voyage himself, the author of the *Periplus* describes the route in detail, with a wealth of helpful hints on winds and tides, harbors and flourishing markets, and local tribes and rulers.¹⁷

India was quite possibly more open to direct communication with the West in the first two centuries of the Christian era than in any other period of history before the coming of the Portuguese fifteen hundred years later. E. H. Warrington describes the time as an age of new discoveries and enterprises. Roman peace and prosperity encouraged traders to turn east both by sea and by land—by sea through Greek and Arab middlemen and by land through Jewish, Syrian, and Armenian traders. The main channel for trade was the sea because of Roman-Persian wars along the land routes. For travelers from Alexandria the first stage was usually a week's journey up the Nile by riverboat, then overland by camel to Myos Hormos six or seven days (or somewhat longer to Berenice). The voyage from there to India in the time of Christ could take months crawling along the Arab and Persian coast for fear of the open sea.

But about A.D. 40 an epoch-making discovery revolutionized the journey. A navigational secret closely guarded from the Romans by Arab and Parthian sailors was betrayed to the West by a Greek mariner, according to the *Periplus*. It was the secret of the monsoons, winds blowing steadily for months at a time in one direction across the Arabian Sea. In the summer they blew toward India, in the winter back toward the Red Sea. From May to September, therefore, ships needed no longer to hug the shore but could sail before the wind across the ocean all the way to India. The whole trip, including

completed in about ninety-four days, and larger ocean-going ships could replace the little coastal craft used hitherto. Some had as many as seven sails, and averaged between 200 and 300 tons.¹⁸ (The Mayflower of the Pilgrims in 1620 was only 180 tons). Indian poems, very old, speak graphically of waves curling from the bows of the great "Yahvana" (i.e., Greek and Roman) ships entering Kerala ports on the Coromandel coast.¹⁹

From India the ships brought back peacocks and ivory, pepper and spice, Kashmir wool and precious jewels to such an extent that the emperor Tiberias complained about the cost of Eastern luxuries. In the other direction, the ships carried slaves and wines, coral, glass, and British tin from the Mediterranean to India. Perhaps about A.D. 50 one such ship also carried a Jewish Christian missionary, a carpenter, to India, for carpenters are mentioned in documents of the time as being much in demand in the East. Greek carpenters were brought, for example, to build a palace for a king in the southern Tamil kingdom of the Chola people.²⁰

"Even if we cast aside as unhistorical every allegation of fact in the stories of St. Thomas," writes Warrington in his classic treatise on Roman trade with India, "we must at least admit that they reflect voyages habitually taken to India." In the Thomas tradition he finds echoes of three distinct stages through which that commerce developed. First was the discovery of the monsoons, as reflected in the apostle's voyage to the Indus or to some point on the west coast of India under Andhra control ("Andrapolis"). This is the North Indian tradition of Thomas's mission. Second was the discovery, after A.D. 40, that by sailing "off the wind" a great circle route to the south would bring ships to the rich Malabar Coast. This fits the South India tradition of a landing close to Cranganore about A.D. 51. Finally, "when that same tradition brings him (Thomas) overland from Malabar to the Chola coast, we have an echo of inland penetration of Greek merchants, possibly to Madura, Aragaru, and so on, as appears from the discoveries of coins, from Tamil poems, and from details in Ptolemy's *Geography*."²¹

Of course, it is one thing to say that Thomas could easily have gone to India and quite another to leap to the conclusion that he actually did so. Nevertheless there is another line of evidence that has been adduced for just such a conclusion. This is the testimony of the early church fathers, and it is true that a satisfying number do refer to Thomas as the apostle to India. However, the witness of the church fathers is clouded by the fact that there are two divergent lines of tradition among them. Early documents from Syria confirm the tradition of the *Acts of Thomas* that the apostle went to India. But

Christian writers in Egypt from about the same time report a different tradition, that Thomas went to Parthia. Moreover this theory, the Parthian tradition, is the one followed by Eusebius, called "the father of church history."²²

The Syrian line specifically locates Thomas in India. The Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum*, for example, which may have been written in Edessa as early as 250, speaks of how the early churches collected the testimony of the apostles who had gone out to spread the gospel to the world: James in Jerusalem, Mark in Egypt, Peter in Syria and Rome, and Thomas in India:

India, and all its countries, and those bordering on it even to the farthest sea, received the Apostle's Hand of Priesthood from Judas Thomas, who was guide and ruler in the Church which he built there . . .²³

St. Ephrem the Syrian, writing about a hundred years later, confirms the tradition of Thomas in India.²⁴

In Egypt, on the other hand, the Alexandrian tradition places the mission of Thomas not in India but in Parthian Persia. Like the Syrian tradition, it also can be traced back to the third century, to Origen (d. 251), whom Eusebius quotes,²⁵ and to the *Clementine Recognitions*.²⁶

It would appear that of the two traditions the Syrian has a slight edge in credibility if only for the fact that the eastern church in Syro-Persia, which might well have been tempted to claim for itself the apostolic origin offered it by the Alexandrian writers, modestly ceded Thomas to India, and claimed in the *Didascalia*, not one of the Twelve but an evangelist named Addai from a lesser circle of disciples, the Seventy who are mentioned by Luke (Luke 10:1-24). This tradition makes Addai the apostle to Edessa and Addai's disciple Aggaeus the pioneer in Persia.²⁷

Actually, the two traditions are not necessarily contradictory. If Gundaphar was a Parthian Suren, as seems possible, a mission to India might loosely but not incorrectly be referred to as a mission to Parthians. But the evidence of these two traditions in the statements of the church fathers on Thomas in India are too scattered, too ambivalent, and too late to be taken as contemporary evidence.²⁸

We must turn therefore to the Indian church itself for the most insistent and enduring tradition that Thomas was indeed, as far-off Edessa acknowledged him to be, "the apostle to India." For centuries the Christian communities of southwest India have proudly called themselves "Thomas Christians." The evidence is oral and tradi-

sources that historians prefer. But the songs and poetry of a living community handed down from generation to generation sometimes strike closer to the truth of ethnic and religious origins than manuscripts and mutilated inscriptions.

There is, for example, a Kerala wedding song, the "*Thomas Rabban Pattu*" ("Song of Thomas"), which dates the apostle's arrival to A.D. 50. It has been traced in writing, it is said, back to 1601 (or 1101) and beyond that date to an oral narrative handed down in one family line for forty-eight generations.²⁹ Another song, the better known "*Margam Kali Pattu*," was put into writing in 1732. This locates the apostle's building of a king's palace in the Chola kingdom of south India. Whether or not these old Indian poems represent a reworking of the story from the *Acts of Thomas* or are an independent memory of very ancient church history is debatable, but in either case the variations and additions they give to the story are important.

The general consensus of local Indian traditions is that Thomas came first to south India, not to the Punjab of King Gundaphar. He landed on the Malabar Coast near the ancient port of Muziris, which is mentioned in the *Periplus* as the major southwestern port of the peninsula. The date was A.D. 50 or 52. He founded seven churches, usually named as Cranganore (two miles from his landing on the island of Malankara), Quilon, Paravur, Kokkamangalam (or Godhamangalam), Niranam, Palayur, and Cayal. In these towns he is said to have set up seven crosses, "the crosses of St. Thomas." He built a palace for the king that turned out to be a heavenly not an earthly mansion, as in the *Acts of Thomas*. Thousands were converted—6,850 of the Brahman caste, 2,590 Kshatriyas, and 3,780 Vaishtyas, not to mention 2 kings and 7 village chiefs whom he ordained as bishops and leaders of the church. He preached both west and east and even beyond the borders of India into China, according to the "*Margam Kali*." And it was in the east that he died, at Mylapore near Madras where his tomb is held in reverence to this day.³⁰

An interesting difference between the local traditions and the Syrian version is that in India Thomas's martyrdom is attributed not to royal resentment of his persuasively ascetic and celibate Christianity but to the enmity of the Brahmans and the powerful opposition of the Indian religion. The Indian story of the apostle's confrontation with Hinduism contains one of the most charmingly unbelievable of all his miracles. It happened, according to the song, near Pelayur in Kerala. A group of Nambudiri Brahmans were performing their ritual ablutions in the water of a temple basin. The apostle was watching them throw water into the air while they chanted their prayers. "Why do you do that?" he asked. "It is our sacrifice to the gods."

they said. "Why don't your gods accept it, then? It keeps falling back on you," said Thomas. The Brahmans were indignant. "Who can make water stay up in the air?" "I can," said Thomas, and when they asked him to prove it, he said he would but only if they would promise to be baptized if he succeeded. They agreed, and the saint threw the water up and it caught and hung in the sunlight glittering like diamonds.³¹

In the end, however, the enmity of the Brahmans prevailed. A group of them ordered Thomas to worship the goddess Kali in her sacred grove. The apostle refused, and as he made the sign of the cross the grove burst into flames before their eyes. Angered, they speared him to death with a pointed stake.³² He is buried, the story continues, on a hill outside Madras. On this point the Indian version agrees with the Syrian. Marco Polo visited the site in the thirteenth century and reported that even the dust of the shrine near Madras was believed to have curative powers; and seven hundred years before Polo, Gregory of Tours (ca. 540–594) wrote of a great monastery in India where a lamp burned day and night by the body of St. Thomas though no one fed it oil.³³

There is a difference, of course, between tradition and history. Can we say with any certainty that Thomas was in truth the planter of the church in India? Few have dared to answer that question with an unequivocal yes or no. Given the difficulty of proving a negative answer and an equal hesitation to accept unwritten traditions without some reservation, most opinions range from "possible" to "probable," with a discernible trend toward the latter position since the discovery of the Gundaphar evidence and the renewal of interest in oral tradition as a source of history.³⁴

A secondary question is whether the apostle's mission, if historical, was to northern or to southern India.³⁵ The Syrian tradition, as in the *Acts of Thomas*, suggests a northern base in the Punjab of King Gundaphar and is favored by those historians who see in the Gundaphar discoveries some contemporary supporting evidence for the tradition.³⁶ But, as proponents of the southern theory point out, all that the evidence can prove is that there was once a Gundaphar, not that there was even a hint of Christian mission in his realm. The deities on his coins are pagan—Zeus, Athena, a winged Victory.³⁷ No ancient crosses have been found in the north to indicate the presence of an early Christianity, and no ancient Christian community has survived there to claim an apostolic origin.

The south Indian tradition, on the other hand, has the strength of a living community behind it and of ancient communal memories with the atmosphere of a living tradition.

crosses dating back at least to the seventh or eighth century, as we shall see in a later chapter.³⁸ It lacks only what the north India theory has in its Gundaphar coins, that is, contemporary though indirect evidence from the first century. The nearest the south India theory comes to contemporary archaeological evidence is the discovery, in 1945, of a Roman trading station south of Madras dating to before A.D. 50 and containing a size of brick apparently not used after the end of the first century A.D. but similar to those in the tomb of St. Thomas at Mylapore.³⁹

The consensus of the majority is that both theories are reasonable and, far from being mutually exclusive, can be interpreted as strengthening each other.⁴⁰ It is not implausible to believe that after preaching in Gundaphar's kingdom in the north, Thomas moved on as all traditions affirm, to preach the gospel to other kingdoms as well, the kingdoms of southwestern and southeastern India, until at last he was put to death, perhaps near Madras. If, as seems quite possible, he was the apostle to India at all, it is satisfying to believe with considerable reason that he was the apostle to all India.

The Mission of Pantaeenus (ca. 180 or 190)

About a hundred and twenty years after the traditional date of the martyrdom of Thomas, a second Christian mission is reported to have reached India. The great church in Alexandria, center of Egyptian Christianity, sent its most famous scholar, Pantaeenus, head of the theological school in that city, "to preach Christ to the Brahmins and philosophers there," wrote Jerome in the fifth century.⁴¹

Pantaeenus is a remarkable figure. Born a Jew and thoroughly trained in Greek philosophy—probably in Sicily, for Clement calls him "the Sicilian bee" in recognition of his diligent study habits—he was converted to the Christian faith and moved to Alexandria. There his scholarship won him appointment as principal of the catechetical school for the training of the priesthood. He was soon acknowledged as the greatest Christian teacher of his age. Among his disciples were Clement of Alexandria and Origen. In background he was a Stoic with a mixture of Pythagorean Platonism, but his fame in Christian studies was as expositor of the Scriptures. Jerome, the Bible translator, acknowledges his debt to the many commentaries of Pantaeenus, none of which unfortunately survive; and Clement pays tribute to him as his last but best teacher.⁴²

Strangely, this great teacher owed to an illiterate bishop his rise to prominence. Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria and Pantaeenus

were an oddly assorted pair. The bishop was a countryman, a rustic layman who could neither read nor write; he even had a wife, which ordinarily would have disqualified him for high church office. But his predecessor had been told in a vision on his deathbed, it is related, that the man chosen by heaven as the next bishop would appear the next day bringing a present of grapes. Precisely on schedule the unsuspecting Demetrius showed up carrying bunches of grapes from his farm and was taken almost by force, hastily ordained, and thrust against his will upon the throne of St. Mark as the twelfth patriarch of Alexandria. Surprisingly, he ruled the Egyptian church long and well for forty-two years and built the catechetical school attached to his cathedral into a world-famous center of learning under three great masters, Pantaeenus, Clement, and Origen.⁴³

Sometime after the startling accession of Demetrius, which is dated by some as in 179, by others as 189 (the dating depends on the year accepted for the death of St. Mark), a deputation from India reached Alexandria. Impressed by the erudition of Pantaeenus, according to Jerome, they asked Demetrius to send him to India for discussions with their own Hindu philosophers, and it is to the credit of the good bishop that he judged the Christian world mission to be no less urgent a priority than the advancement of Christian learning. Without hesitation he took his most famous scholar from the theological school and sent him as a missionary to the East.⁴⁴ Eusebius gives this early account of the mission:

[Pantaeenus] displayed such zeal for the divine word that he was appointed as a herald of the Gospel of Christ to the nations of the east and was sent as far as India. . . . It is reported that among persons there who knew Christ, he found the Gospel according to St. Matthew which had anticipated his own arrival. For Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language which they had preserved till that time.⁴⁵

There is a shock hidden in that rather matter-of-fact statement. The Egyptian church would not have noticed it, for Eusebius was simply following the Alexandrian tradition, which had never, apparently, associated the apostle Thomas with India. The surprise, of course, is the mention of Bartholomew as the pioneer to the East. In one way it is a welcome independent confirmation of the Indian church's ancient and apostolic origin, but it seems to take away the apostolate from Thomas and give it to the lesser-known Bartholomew. If, as the church in India has always claimed, Thomas was

And what was Bartholomew, who was, according to tradition, "apostle to Armenia" and missionary to Arabia and Persia, doing in India with a Hebrew Gospel of Matthew?

Perhaps because of this slight to the memory of Thomas some Indian church histories tend to downplay the mission of Pantaeus. The mention of Bartholomew they explain either by relegating him to a secondary role in the Bombay area after the ministry of Thomas,⁴⁶ or they ingeniously suggest that Pantaeus, having difficulty with the language of the Thomas Christians he encountered, misinterpreted their references to *Mar Thoma* ("Bishop Thomas") as *Bar Tolmai* (the Hebrew name of Bartholomew).⁴⁷ Other Indian writers agree with the flat denial by a few Western historians that Pantaeus ever reached India. This rests on the assumption that Eusebius and Jerome simply confused India with Arabia or Persia as was often done by classical writers of the time.⁴⁸

But the visit of Pantaeus to India is not to be dismissed so lightly. He may not have been "the first historical missionary to India," as some have called him,⁴⁹ for that implies too sweeping a judgment in favor of the evidence for Pantaeus and against the evidence for Thomas. But there are indirect, presumptive indications from the period of his mission that tend to support the later references to his journey.

Pantaeus's pupils and successors, Clement and Origen, for example, write about India as if they knew more of that land than passing myths and in no way confused it with Arabia and Persia. They speak of Indian Brahmins and "gymnosophists," and Clement writes discerningly of the difference between "Sarmanae" and "Brahmans," describing the former in terms that suggest the hermits or holy men of India.⁵⁰ This is the kind of information that they might have learned from Pantaeus himself. Moreover, Jerome would seem to be quite clearly pointing to India proper and not to Arabia when he speaks of Pantaeus preaching "to the Brahmins."⁵¹

The fact that Pantaeus was probably Jewish lends another touch of authenticity to the narrative. It explains his particular attention to the Hebrew copy of the Gospel of Matthew he is said to have brought back to Alexandria.⁵² Jewish colonies are known to have existed in India from very early times. The Bene-Israel, at Kalyan near Bombay, traces its beginnings back to the period of the Second Temple, about the time of Christ. The arrival of Jewish immigrants farther south along the Malabar Coast at Cochim may have been not much later, perhaps at the time of the destruction of the Temple, A.D. 70, or in 136 when Jerusalem was torn down stone by stone in the reign of Hadrian.⁵³ So there were already Jewish colo-

nies in India when Pantaeus is said to have arrived, and perhaps they were even there as early as the time of Thomas. The *Acts of Thomas* mentions a Hebrew flute girl on the route to India, though she was more likely a slave than a colonist. If there were, as the tradition asserts, Hebrew or Aramaic⁵⁴ copies of the Gospel in circulation as early as that, it is not unreasonable to imagine a Jewish missionary using one in his evangelistic work, for it was in the apostolic missionary tradition to preach first to the Jewish community.

As to whether the apostle in this particular case was Bartholomew as Pantaeus understood it or Thomas as most Indian Christians would insist, the evidence is too slight for a firm conclusion. Suffice it to say that the overall evidence for an apostolic presence in India overwhelmingly favors Thomas. Even Jerome, who is one of the two earliest sources for the mention of Bartholomew, seems elsewhere, when writing to Marcellus, to acknowledge the primacy of Thomas:

He [Jesus] was present in all places with Thomas in India, with Peter in Rome, with Paul in Illyria, with Titus in Crete, Andrew in Greece, with each apostle and apostolic man in his own separate region.⁵⁵

So the tradition remains and grows stronger with the years that already before the end of the second century the Christian church had been planted halfway across Asia in India, first by the apostle Thomas, not Bartholomew, and was then strengthened by the visit of the theologian Pantaeus from Egypt.

NOTES

1. Two modern translations are available: A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1962) and G. Bornkamm, "The Acts of Thomas," in E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, ed. W. Schneemelcher, English edition by R. M. Wilson (London: Lutterworth, 1965). Klijn, using the surviving Syriac text, stresses the essential orthodoxy of the writer. Bornkamm, working from a Greek text, deduces heavy Gnostic-Christian influence. Both the surviving texts are from a lost Syriac original. See also M. R. James, "The Acts of Thomas," in *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 364-438.

2. The Abgar legend, claiming even earlier sources, would place the earliest Christian church outside the empire in Edessa (see chap. 3, p. 49), but it can be traced no further back than the Syriac *Acts of Thaddaeus*, probably written at the end of the third century, several generations after the *Acts of Thomas*.

3. On tradition and Thomas see, for example, A. M. Munday, *Sixteenth-Century Traditions of St. Thomas Christians* (Bangalore, India: Dharmaram College, 1970); Podipara J. Placid, *The Thomas Christians* (London: Darton, Longman and Tidd, 1970); and B. H. Streeter, *The Primitive Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), chap. 1.
4. The Thomas tradition is accepted by almost all Indian Christian writers and by an increasing number of secular historians as well, e.g., R. Thapar, *A History of India*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1966), 134, "not beyond belief"; A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, 3rd ed. (London: Fontana-Collins, 1971), 345, "the story in its main outline is not impossible"; H. G. Rawlinson in *A Cultural History of India*, ed. A. L. Basham (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 432 "apparently based on a kernel of historical fact"; E. J. Rapson, *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1922), 579, "The Legend of St. Thomas has thus [i.e., by archaeological discoveries] been furnished with an historical setting which is chronologically possible"; and even the often critical K. M. Panikkar, *Studies in Indian History* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963), 13, referring to the south India tradition, "Though there are a few scholars who still claim that this is only a legend . . . [many of the facts] go a long way to confirm the truth of the tradition."
5. The explorer was Charles Masson, a deserter from the British army in India who also passed as James Lewis, according to Stephen Neill. He received a royal pardon and brought back more than fifteen hundred ancient, historic coins. S. Neill, *A History of Christianity in India*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), 27f.
6. The first scholar to connect the coins with Thomas was M. Reinand in 1848. The name on the coins appears in many spellings, in Greek as Gondapharou, Gondapharou, and Undopherrou; and in the Indian script as Gudaphara and Gudapharna. See P. Gardner, *The Coins of the Greek and Scythic Kings of Bactria and India in the British Museum* (London: British Museum Trustees, 1886), xii-xiv, 103-106, 174; and V. A. Smith, *Catalogue of the Coins in the Indian Museum in Calcutta*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906), 36-38, 54-56; and A. E. Medlicott, *India and the Apostle Thomas, an Inquiry with a Critical Analysis of the Acta Thomae* (London: David Nutt, 1905), 3-10. Medlicott's book is a detailed and perhaps too vigorous defense of the Thomas tradition.
7. The text of the inscription on the stone, which is now in the Lahore Museum, is given in S. G. Potlun, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala* (Bombay and London: Leaders Press, 1963), 13. Authorities tend to agree that the "samvat year 103" refers to the Vikrama era. See F. W. Thomas, "The Date of Kaniska," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (London, 1913): 636; Rapson, ed., *Cambridge History of India*, vol. 1, 576; W. W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1951), 348ff.; and J. F. Fleet, "St. Thomas and Gondaphares," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (London, 1905): 223-36. The major challenge to the dating comes from T. V.

- Lohuizen-De Leeuw, "The 'Scythian' Period" (doctoral diss., Leiden, 1949) who places the end of Gundaphar's reign at 10 B.C.; but her dating is not widely accepted. See G. M. Moraes, *A History of Christianity in India*, vol. 1 (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1964), 22-24.
8. See chap. 1, p. 15. According to this theory, it was some time later in the first century A.D. that the Kushan dynasty of the Yueh-chi displaced the Pahlava dynasty.
9. A. K. Narain gives the most satisfying summary of the numismatic evidence in *The Indo-Greeks* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), 101-64, but argues that the Saka came independently from the northeast via Kashgar, Tashkurgan and Gilgit into the Swat valley. Most authorities prefer to place the invaders on the easier route from the west, that is from Sakastan via the Bolan pass. See Rapson, ed., *Cambridge History of India*, 560; G. Woodcock, *The Greeks in India* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 123f. Tarn thinks they first came up the Indus River from the west coast, in his *Greeks in Bactria and India*, 321f. It is possible that there were two conquests, one by the Saka chief Maues about 85 B.C. and another by the later Pahlavas.
10. E. Herzfeld, "Sakastan," in *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, vol. 4 (Berlin, 1931-32): 101 n. 25.
11. See chap. 1, p. 11; chap. 3, p. 47. On the Suren, see T. Mommsen, *The Provinces of Rome*, vol. 2, trans. W. Dickson (London: Bentley, 1886), 6-8.
12. Another view is that the Saka and Parthians remained enemies and that the Saka, after taking the Indus Valley from the Indo-Greeks, were in turn conquered by the Parthian Suren. The succession of names of rulers on the coins is a confusing mixture of Saka and Pahlava: Maues is Saka, Vonones is Parthian, Spalirises, Azes, and Azilises perhaps Saka, and Gundaphares again Parthian. See Tarn, *Greeks in Bactria and India*, 346f., 494, 498f., 501; and S. Konow, "Kalawan Copper-plate Inscription of the Year 134," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, new series, 63 (London, 1932): 955.
13. Tarn, *Greeks in Bactria and India*, 494ff.
14. Tarn, *Greeks in Bactria and India*, 501.
15. "Gutschmid tries to show that Gaspard (or Casper), one of the three kings of the Christian legend, is identical with Gondaphares." Gardner, *Coins of the Greek and Scythic Kings*, xliii.
16. Strabo, *Geographica* 2, 5.12.
17. *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, trans. W. H. Schoff (London: Longmans, Green, 1912).
18. E. H. Warrington, *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India*, 2d ed. (London: Curzon, New York: Octagon, 1974), 6ff.
19. Moraes, *History of Christianity in India*, 37, quoting from the *AganaNwRu*.
20. Warrington, *Commerce*, 61.

22. Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.1.
23. The Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum*, ed. and trans. W. Cureton, in *Ancient Syriac Documents* (London, 1864; reprint, Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1967).
24. For the dating of the manuscript (fifth century) and the writing (third century), see 147n, 166n and A. Mingana, "The Early Spread of Christianity in India," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 10, no. 2 (July 1926): 16.
25. G. Bickell, *St Ephraemi Syri Carmina Nisibena* (Leipzig: Bruckhaus, 1866), 163f.
26. Origen *Commentary on Genesis* 3, quoted by Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.1.
27. Syriac *Didascalia*, ed. Cureton, 34. Luke gives no names of the Seventy, and some manuscripts read "seventy-two."
28. Two other writers supposedly from the third century are sometimes quoted as giving even earlier witness to Thomas in India than those cited above. They are Hippolytus (d. 239) and Dorotheus of Tyre (end of third century). But the identification is probably spurious and the dates doubtful, so the authors are usually styled Pseudo-Hippolytus and Pseudo-Dorotheus. See W. R. Phillips, "The Connection of St. Thomas the Apostle with India," reprint from *Indian Antiquary* 32 (Bombay: 1903): 145ff.
29. Manuscripts in the Mannanam monastery, translated into Italian by Fr. Rocca, "La leggenda de S. Tomaso Apostolo," *Orientalia Christiana*, 32, 89 (Rome, 1938); 169ff., cited by A. M. Mundadan, *Sixteenth-Century Traditions of St. Thomas Christians* (Bangalore, India: Dharmaram College, 1970), 60-63; and L. W. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1956), 49-50. Brown questions the antiquity of the song, noting that its vocabulary is not always seventeenth century and that years are given in Christian reckoning introduced by the Portuguese.
30. Mundadan, *Sixteenth-Century Traditions*, 61ff., 81ff.; and Brown, *The Indian Christians*, 52ff. See also L. K. A. Ayer, *Anthropology of the Syrian Christians* (Ernakulam; Cochin Government Press, 1926), 13-16.
31. As retold in Peter Bannu, *The Kingdoms of Christ: The Story of the Early Church*, tr. by C. Holme (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), 224; Pothan, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala*, 14f. Pothan's version, probably more accurate, has the water drops taking the shape of a flower.
32. Brown, *The Indian Christians*, 51.
33. On the site of the tomb at Mylapore, a suburb of Madras, see Mundadan, *Sixteenth-Century Traditions*, 2-37. On Polo see Henry Yule, trans., and H. Cordier, ed., *The Book of Ser Marco Polo* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1903), 11, 353f.; Gregory of Tours *De gloria martyrum* 32 (in Migne, PL, series 71, col. 733).
34. For bibliography on the subject see Mundadan, *Sixteenth-Century Traditions*, xxx-xxiv; Fr. H. Hosten, who lists and annotates 700 Latin and French

- in his *Antiquities from San Thome and Mylapore* (Madras 1936); also the bibliography in Moraes, *History of Christianity in India*; and Brown, *The Indian Christians*. For an example of an unqualified no, see R. Garbe, who says, in effect, "There are no traces of Christianity in India before the fourth century," in his *Indien und das Christentum* (Tübingen, 1914), 339-79. For a more recent and equally emphatic yes, compare Panikkar, "The mission of the apostle to the Kerala coast . . . is now generally accepted [as having taken place] in A.D. 52," in his *Studies in Indian History*, 13.
35. See Mundadan's four categories of opinion on St. Thomas and India as outlined by E. R. Hambye in "St. Thomas and India," *Clergy Monthly* 16 (1952): (1) Some deny any Indian apostolate; (2) some support the north India apostolate and deny the southern; (3) some support the southern theory and are uncertain about the northern; and (4) some combine both northern and southern theories. See also the St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia, 2 vols., Trichur, India, 1982, 2: 1-12.
 36. Advocates of the northern theory include A. Philpote, *The Apostolic Origin and Early History of the Syrian Church of Malabar* (1904); T. K. Joseph, "Constantine and India," *Journal of Indian History*, 28 (1950); and Brown, *The Indian Christians*. G. M. Rae, *The Syrian Church in India* (Edinburgh, London: Blackwell, 1892), treats both theories as reasonable.
 37. Joseph, argues unconvincingly that the so-called Gundaphar symbol on the coins is a Christian symbol, a chalice ("Constantine and India," 2).
 38. See chap. 22, p. 498ff. Advocates of the southern theory include Mundadan, *Sixteenth-Century Traditions*; Panikkar, *Studies in Indian History*; Pothan, *The Syrian Churches of Kerala*; E. Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957); and many others.
 39. George Schurhammer, Franz Xaver, *Sein Leben und seine Zeit*, vol. 2 (Freiburg, 1963), 547-79.
 40. Among those who accept a dual ministry for Thomas in India are: Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas*; J. N. Farguhar, "The Apostle Thomas in North India" and "The Apostle Thomas in South India," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 10, 11 (1926, 1927); Juhanon Mar Thoma, *Christianity in India and A Brief History of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church*, 4th edition (Madras: K. M. Cherian, 1968); and Moraes, *History of Christianity in India*.
 41. Jerome, *Epistola LXX ad Magnum oratorem utris Romae* (in Migne, PL, chap. 22, col. 667).
 42. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* (in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 [New York, 1903], 301).
 43. J. M. Neale, *A History of the Holy Eastern Church: The Patriarchate of Alexandria*, vol. 1 (London: Masters, 1847), 16ff.
 44. Jerome, *Liber de viris illustribus*; see also E. de Pressensé, *The Early Years of Christianity*, 2, *The Martyrs and Apologists* (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1870), 271.

45. Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.10.
46. Moraes, *History of Christianity in India*, 43–45, argues that Bartholomew's assignment to "India Felix", mentioned by Byzantine writers, refers to Kalyan, near Bombay, which may be translated "happy" in English, "felix" in Latin. He places Bartholomew in the Deccan at the same time that Thomas was in the Punjab. See also A. C. Perumali and E. R. Hambye, *Christianity in India: A History in Ecumenical Perspective* (Aleppey, India: Prakason Publications, 1972), and H. Heras, S.J., *The Two Apostles of India* (Tichinopoly: Catholic Truth Society, 1944).
47. Pothan, *Syrian Christians of Kerala*, 19.
48. For the very real confusion between India and Arabia often seen in Roman writers, see Warmington, *Commerce*, 13. For denials of Pantaenus's connection with India, see J. L. Moshem, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. A. Madaine (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1879), vol. 1, "Second Century," part 1, chap. 1:3, 51f.; and A. Mingana, who says, "It will be a matter of surprise if any responsible writer will ever mention in the future Pantaenus in connection with India proper" ("The Early Spread of Christianity in India," 17).
49. Rae, *Syrian Church in India*, 65; and George Smith, *The Conversion of India* (London: John Murray, 1893), 11.
50. Clement, *Stromata*, 15.
51. Jerome, *Epistola LXX ad Magnum oratorem urbis Romae*.
52. Some have denied that Pantaenus was Jewish (Valesius, Dupin) but most accept the implication of Clement that he was. See Neale, *History of the Holy Eastern Church*, 18 and note.
53. See Moraes, *History of Christianity in India*, 38ff., 44; and Warmington, *Commerce*, 59, 131f.
54. Brown, in his *The Indian Christians* (79n), suggests that it might have been a Pahlavi translation in Aramaic script. The question of the possible existence of a Hebrew Matthew at so early a date prompted E. J. Goodspeed to comment on the reference in Eusebius, "A very perplexing statement!" (*The Twelve* [NY: Collier Books, 1972], 97f).
55. Jerome, *Epistola LIX ad Marcellam*.

Chapter 3

The Church of the East: The Syrian Period

"What shall we say of the new race of Christians whom the Messiah has caused to arise in every place and in all climates by his coming? For lo, wherever we may be, we are all called Christians after the one name of the Messiah. On one day, the first of the week, we assemble ourselves together. . . . Wherever they are, and in whatever place they are found, the local laws cannot force them to give up the law of their Christ."

—Bardaisan of Edessa, ca. 196, in
his *Dialogue on Fate*

"The first bishop which the country of Adiabene had was, according to the doctor, Habel, Mar Pkidha on whom the apostle Addai personally laid his hands. He was the son of a poor man named Beri, who was in the service of a *Magi*."

—*Msiba-zkha*, in *Sources Syriacques*
(Mingana), sixth century