

# Thomas:

## *A Brief Biography*

Tony Tench

**W**ITHOUT DOUBT, the apostle Thomas is best known as “doubting Thomas.” Of course, there is some element of truth in that phrase. Yet, as William Barclay observed, “there is also something very much like a slander” in that description.<sup>1</sup>

Biblical and extra-biblical sources identify Thomas as a loyal and confident disciple of Jesus—an exemplary believer! Such sources describe Thomas as:

*An Apostle of our Lord:* Thomas is listed among the twelve apostles in each of the synoptic Gospels (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15) and among the number who gathered in the upper room to select Judas Iscariot’s successor in Acts 1. He is also mentioned as a lead player in the dramatic stories of John’s Gospel (11:16; 14:5; 20:24-28; 21:2).

*A Teacher of the Church:* Eusebius, the church historian of the third century, wrote that Papias, an early church writer, had recorded the teachings of the apostles. Eusebius quoted Papias:

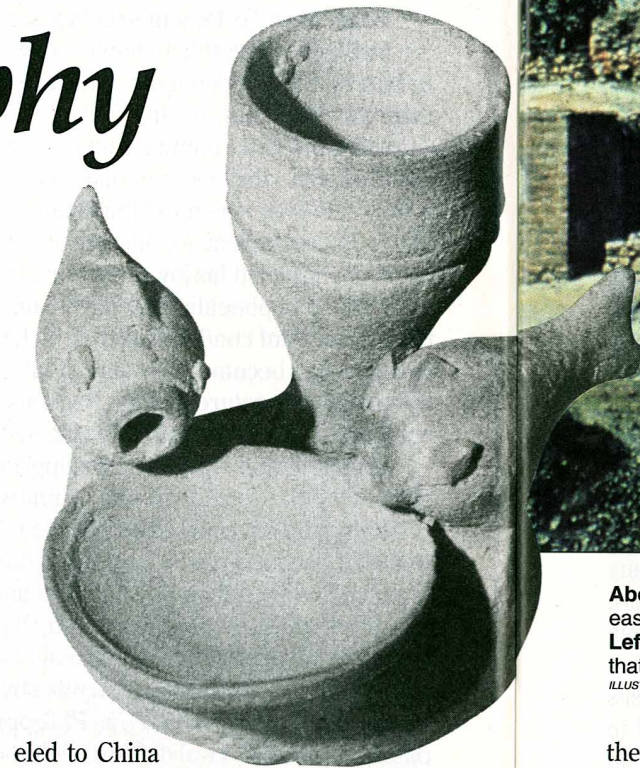
If anyone chanced to come who had actually been a follower of the elders, I would inquire as to the discourses of the elders, what Andrew or what Peter said, or what Philip or what Thomas or James or what John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples [had said] . . .

Thomas was recognized for his teaching among the leaders of the early church.

*A Missionary for the Lord:* Two strands of tradition mark the church’s knowledge of Thomas’ ministry following the resurrection of Jesus. The first strand begins with Eusebius’ notation that when the disciples decided to which parts of the world they would proceed with the gospel, “Parthia was allotted to Thomas.”<sup>3</sup> Parthia was a kingdom that stretched from the Indus to the Tigris rivers and from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea.<sup>4</sup>

The second strand takes Thomas beyond Parthia to south India. Sophronius, writing in the sixth century, said that Thomas preached the gospel “to the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Carmanians, Hyrcanians, Bactrians, and Magians and died at Calamina in India.”<sup>5</sup> Though the term “India” was used vaguely in the ancient world, in south India there exists a church by the name “Christians of St. Thomas.”

When the Portuguese explorer Vasco Da Gama arrived in India in A.D. 1500, he found this church and learned of its mysterious traditions. The church’s own account of its origin remembered Thomas preaching the gospel to the natives and baptizing many believers. According to their tradition, Thomas trav-



eled to China with great success, and on his return to India, he was opposed by the Brahmins. A riot was incited against him which resulted in his death at the point of a spear.<sup>6</sup> Other church fathers mentioned Thomas’ contribution to the preaching of the gospel in India including Gregory of Nazianzen (A.D. 329–390), Ambrose of Milan (A.D. 333–397), Jerome (A.D. 342–420), and Isidore of Seville (A.D. 560–636).<sup>7</sup>

*Personal Identity:* The name “Thomas” is the Greek form of the Aramaic word which means “twin.” John says that Thomas was known as Didymus (11:16; 20:24; 21:2), which is the Greek word for “twin.” Because there is an absence of evidence that shows these terms as proper names in

the first century,<sup>8</sup> Thomas’ actual proper name is unknown to us. In the ancient world first names were given accompanied by a second distinguishing name. Both Thomas and Didymus are distinguishing names (“twin”), thus we may assume that there is another name for Thomas.<sup>9</sup>

If Thomas was a twin and he had another name, why was he called “twin,” and can his other name be found? Church historian Eusebius told that Thomas sent Thaddaeus to Edessa. He based this account on a Syriac document he found in the archives of Edessa which reads: “After the Ascension of Jesus, Judas—who is called Thomas—sent to him the apostle Thaddaeus.” The name “Judas Thomas” also appears in the Syriac *Doctrine of Addai*.<sup>10</sup> Thus, some scholars

have proposed that Thomas’ first name was Judas. If so, why was Judas called “twin”? Such a reference would by implication suggest that his twin was more important than he. No evidence exists that would suggest Thomas was the brother of any of the other disciples. We do not know who Thomas’ twin was; any attempt to name his twin would be speculation.

The testimony of Thomas from Scripture reveals a personality to be admired and imitated. Many authors mark Thomas a “pessimist.” Their comments include: “[He was] another of that unhappy and much afflicted company. Thomas looked upon life with sad eyes. He carried about with him everywhere a heavy heart. He was a melancholy man.”<sup>11</sup> “Thomas was constitutionally a

pessimist.”<sup>12</sup> Even so, Thomas appears to this writer to be more a realist than a pessimist. Thomas saw the need to proclaim Christ’s message in word and in deed even though the resultant danger loomed large. He was a realist. He took Jesus at His word and was prepared to “take up his cross daily.”

Thomas’ realism was evident in his courageous stand in John 11. Jesus heard that Lazarus was dying in Judea. The disciples knew it was dangerous for Jesus to go to Judea (11:8). Nevertheless, Thomas was ready to stand with Jesus to the death; he said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (11:16). Thomas had no doubts. He made his stand with confidence by his Lord even though it could have meant his demise.

Thomas’ realism is seen as well in his

**Lesson reference:**  
BBS: John 20:1-8,11-16;  
13:33-35; 14:1-6,12-20;  
21:3-6,12-19



**Above:** The village of Bethany. Bethany was about two miles southeast of Jerusalem on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives.

**Left:** Miniature Persian fish fountain of unglazed clay from the Parthian Period. Eusebius said that Thomas went to Parthia as part of the disciple’s missionary activity.

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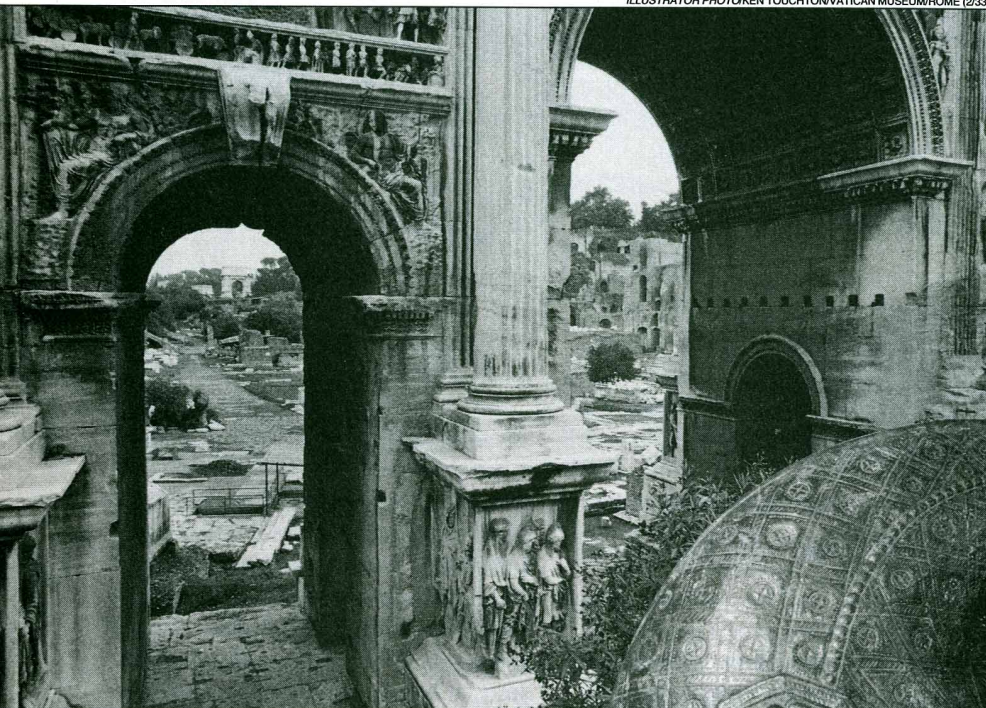
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practical questioning of the Lord. He dealt with reality. If he was not sure of an answer then he asked the question. Following the last supper, Jesus told His disciples, "You know the way to the place I am going" (John 14:4). But Thomas spoke up in verse 5 saying, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" How could they know the way? No one had gone the way of Jesus before! Thomas simply wanted to

A review of the biblical references also gives us a picture of Thomas' relationship with Jesus. Though he was not listed among the inner circle of apostles, Thomas was close to Jesus—wholly committed to Jesus as Lord of life. Jesus would later say, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Thomas was ready to go with Jesus to the death in this greatest expression of love (John 11:16).

wanted to be close to Jesus; once Jesus was crucified, Thomas could not bear the pain of his loss. Thomas may have been so caught in the reality of death that he could not believe the words of resurrection. He needed to experience the reality of resurrection (as the other disciples had experienced it before him). As it was before the crucifixion, Thomas was changed by his personal encounter with the resurrected Lord. His confession of faith ("my Lord and my God") was closer to the heart of Jesus than any other had been.

Thomas was so changed by the resurrection power of Christ that he became a leader of the early church. John records him as second only to Peter in the chapter 21 seashore story. Church history remembers Thomas as such a leader. Thomas, "the twin," was an exemplary disciple because his ambition was to be an earnest follower of Jesus. Paul wrote, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29). Perhaps Thomas was known as "twin" because his greatest desire was to so follow Jesus that he should be conformed to Jesus' likeness. Such an ambition should be the desire of all believers as they, like Thomas, express allegiance to Jesus with realistic courage and dedication.

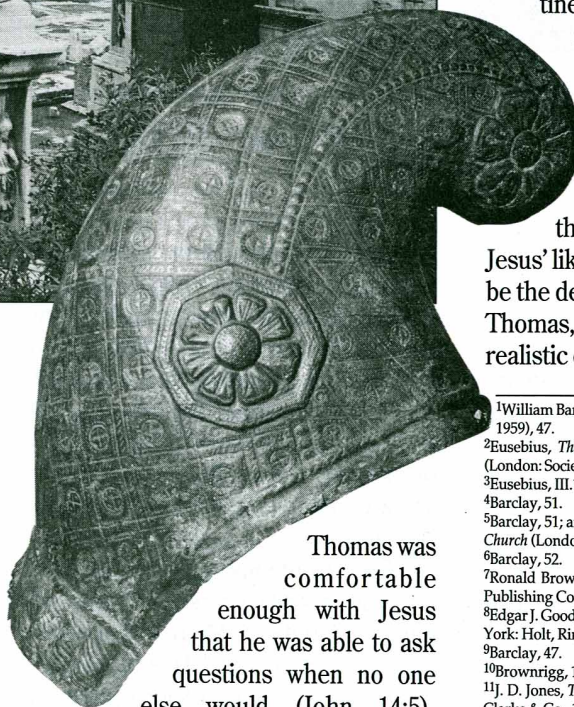


ILLUSTRATOR PHOTOKEN TOUCHTONVATICAN MUSEUM/ROME (2/33)

**Above:** Arch of Septimius Severus (203 A.D.) with Roman Forum in background. **Right:** Brass Helmet, Parthian or Kushan. With its elaborate patterning imitating a quilted fabric, this helmet is strikingly similar to the headdresses frequently represented in the art of the Parthian Period.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS/BOSTON (322/1)

know *how* they would know the way. He asked the question that was on everyone's mind. What is the practical reality of eternal life? Jesus answered him saying, "I am the way." The church must be thankful for "Practical Thomas'" question that prompted Jesus' most basic and most profound description of the way to eternal life (John 14:6; see also Acts 4:12).



Thomas was comfortable enough with Jesus that he was able to ask questions when no one else would (John 14:5).

Thomas desired a personal relationship with Jesus. He was absent from the other disciples when Jesus appeared following the resurrection. Why was Thomas absent? He may have been grieving! He

<sup>1</sup>William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), 47.

<sup>2</sup>Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1927), III.39.

<sup>3</sup>Eusebius, III.1.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 51.

<sup>5</sup>Barclay, 51; and F. L. Cross, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1272.

<sup>6</sup>Barclay, 52.

<sup>7</sup>Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1974), 186-188.

<sup>8</sup>Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Twelve: The Story of Christ's Apostles* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957), 43.

<sup>9</sup>Barclay, 47.

<sup>10</sup>Brownrigg, 180.

<sup>11</sup>J. D. Jones, *The Glorious Company of the Apostles* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1914), 174.

<sup>12</sup>Barclay, 48.

Scripture references are from *The New International Version*.

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