

## **TRUTH TRIUMPHANT: CHAPTER 19**

### **The St. Thomas Christians of India**

With all its intolerance and its terrors, the Inquisition was set up at Goa (India) in the sixteenth century; and when it was resolved to subjugate the Syrian Church to papal jurisdiction, this relentless institution was used to overawe it, and to prevent the arrival of bishops from Babylon. The subjugation was consummated by the Synod of Diamper in 1599, and for nearly two generations Rome's tyranny endured, until the splendid rebellion of the Assyrian Church at Coonen Cross.<sup>1</sup>

IN INDIA, the land of color and romance, the gospel was proclaimed as early as it had been in Italy. Christ had told His disciples that they should be witnesses for Him unto the uttermost parts of the earth, (Acts 1:8.) and the apostles were ready to go anywhere. With a faith great enough to remove mountains, they did not hesitate to evangelize any tribe or nation regardless of how terrifying the situation to be encountered.

An early ecclesiastical writer states that when the world was portioned off for evangelization, Thomas was assigned to Parthia.<sup>2</sup> There is evidence enough that Thomas worked in Parthia. Libraries are full of literature telling of his founding churches in India.<sup>3</sup>

The accounts that tell how Thomas raised up and established Christianity in India form an interesting link in the lives of the apostles. The Master chose young men as His disciples, who were able to carry on the work for many years after His crucifixion in A.D. 31. Paul was beheaded about thirty-five years later. Thomas was killed, some authorities state, in 72 on the west coast of India by the lance of a Brahman.<sup>4</sup> Evidence shows that the apostle John, living to the ripe old age of one hundred (according to Jerome), must have heard all about the spiritual victories in India before he wrote his Gospel and the book of Revelation.

#### **Thomas and the Gospel in India**

The question of whether Thomas ever labored in India or not has been discussed by many authors, and immense research has been done in the hope of arriving at an irrefutable conclusion. It is well known that if the Church in the Wilderness ever suffered in any country, it certainly suffered in India. All are desirous of knowing who was the founder of that church. A. Mingana writes:

It is the constant tradition of the Eastern Church that the apostle Thomas evangelized India, and there is no historian, no poet, no breviary, no liturgy, and no writer of any kind who, having the opportunity of speaking of Thomas, does not associate his name with India.<sup>5</sup>

J. M. Neale testifies:

There is a constant tradition of the church, that the gospel was first preached in India by the apostle St. Thomas. Having evangelized Arabia the Happy, and the Island of Zocotra, he arrived at Cranganor, a town situated a little to the north of Cochin, and where the most powerful among the princes who ruled in Malabar then resided. Having here wrought many miracles, and established a church, he journeyed southward to the city of Coulan. Here his labors were attended with equal success, and after traversing the peninsula he arrived at Meliapour, a town close to the more celebrated city of Madras. Sailing from this port he preached Christianity in China, and returning again to Meliapour, extended

the knowledge of the faith so widely as to excite the envy and hatred of the Brahmins. Two of them watching an opportunity, stirred up the people against him; they fell on him and stoned him. One of the Brahmins remarking some signs of life in the holy apostle, pierced him with a lance, and thus completed his martyrdom.<sup>6</sup>

M. L'Abbe Huc, the brilliant Jesuit traveler and writer, says:

The circumstance of St. Thomas having preached at all in India has been frequently called in question by writers deserving of attention; but we find it supported by so much evidence, that it seems difficult for an unprejudiced mind to refuse credit to a fact guaranteed by such excellent historical authorities. All the Greek, Latin, and Syriac monuments proclaim that St. Thomas was the apostle of the Indies, who carried the torch of faith into the remote regions where he suffered martyrdom. Some writers have affirmed that he prosecuted his apostolical labors as far even as China; and the mission and the martyrdom of Saint Thomas in the Indies have been alluded to in all the martyrologies, and in the ancient liturgies, which form the most pure and authentic source of Christian tradition.<sup>7</sup>

W. F. Adeney, citing the origins of the Armenian, the Abyssinian, and the Georgian Churches, says:

The Syrian Church in India, which claims St. Thomas as its founder - all of them independent churches in regions outside the Roman Empire - will claim our attention later on; because as they have remained in independent existence on to our own day we shall want to know something about the course of their history right down the centuries.<sup>8</sup>

The testimony of J. D. D'Orsey is this:

Amidst the clouds which cover the traditions of the Christians of St. Thomas, the following account seems to possess the greatest amount of probability, and the nearest approach to truth. After having established Christianity in Arabia Felix, and in the island of Dioscorides (now called Socotra), the holy apostle landed at Cranganor, at that time the residence of the most powerful king on the Malabar Coast. We know, from the historians of the Christian people, from Josephus and from the Sacred Books themselves, in the account of the miracle of Pentecost that before the birth of Jesus Christ, there went forth from Judea a great number of its inhabitants, and that they were scattered throughout Egypt, Greece, and several countries of Asia. St. Thomas learnt that one of these little colonies had settled in a country adjacent to Cranganor. Love for his nation inflamed his zeal; and faithful to the command of Jesus Christ who had enjoined His apostles to proclaim the faith to the Jews, before turning to the Gentiles, he repaired to the country which his compatriots had chosen for their asylum; he preached to them the gospel, converted them, and changed their synagogue into a Christian church. *This was the cradle of Christianity in India.*<sup>9</sup>

### **Entrance of Christianity Into India**

In the days of Thomas the apostle, one authority states, "One hundred twenty great ships sailed for India from Egypt every year."<sup>10</sup> As witnesses to the vast trade carded on between Rome and those eastern countries before and after Christ, large quantities of Roman coins have been found in south India lands. Theodor Mommsen evaluated the Roman coinage sent annually to India as being worth five hundred thousand pounds sterling.<sup>11</sup> There is, therefore, nothing to render improbable the pioneer evangelization of Parthia and India by the apostle Thomas.

"Their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world," the apostle Paul could say in his day of those who had spread the gospel.(Romans 10:18.) Consider how many nations were represented at Jerusalem on the eventful Day of Pentecost, and the character of their representatives. "Devout men, out of every nation under heaven," is the record. Who were they? "Parthians and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia,... Cretes and Arabians."(Acts 2:5, 9-11.) The story of Pentecost spread as if on the wings of the wind when these visitors enthusiastically returned to their homes and hearths. Tradition claims that Thomas reached India soon after Pentecost.<sup>12</sup>

Another situation which favored the rapid expansion of the gospel to the East was the dispersion of the Jews throughout Asia. The progeny of Abraham covered the East; there was hardly a land or city where they had not gone. These descendants celebrated their holy days in a way which recalled their Jewish associations.<sup>13</sup> The beginnings of Christianity in Edessa (modern Urfa in Asia Minor), the first intellectual center for the spread of Christianity to the East, was among the Jews.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Jews for a long time formed the major portion of the infant church.<sup>15</sup>

Another medium for the diffusion of the gospel to the Orient was the Aramaic language. The Hebrew, Syriac, and Aramaic - the latter, Christ's native speech - were cognate languages. History tells that Josephus, the famous Jewish author in the days of the apostles, wrote his *Wars of the Jews* first in Aramaic and later in Greek because of the large Aramaic reading constituency in the East. The Aramaic had widely penetrated the Parthian Empire, including Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the brilliant twin-city capital of that empire.<sup>16</sup>

### **Christianity's Early Growth in India**

Naturally, the Church of the East looking back to Thomas as its founder, placed no value on the claim that Peter was the "rock" upon which Christ would build His church and that He would give the "keys" to Peter only. The difference between the Church of India in dating its origins from the apostle Thomas and the Church of Rome in dating its origins from the apostle Peter, is a difference of doctrines and practices. This contrast appears in the account given by the historian Gibbon of the first meeting between the Jesuits when they arrived on the coast of India, and the St. Thomas Christians. He writes:

When the Portuguese first opened the navigation of India, the Christians of St. Thomas had been seated for ages on the coast of Malabar.... The title of Mother of God was offensive to their ear; and they measured with scrupulous avarice the honors of the Virgin Mary, whom the superstition of the Latins had almost exalted to the rank of a goddess. When her image was first presented to the disciples of St. Thomas they indignantly exclaimed, "We are Christians, not idolaters!"<sup>17</sup>

How much the world owes to the brave stand made by Christianity in India, man will never know until the judgment. For the first six hundred years the churches of southern India grappled successfully with dominant Buddhism; then for the succeeding one thousand years they contended with a degraded and wily Hinduism. But the real struggle began in the seventeenth century when the Jesuits, supported by the guns of Portugal, entered their parishes. It was not the missionaries from Rome, therefore, who first entered India. The type of New Testament faith first planted on the Malabar Coast nineteen hundred years ago is still there and is similar to that of the rest of the Protestant world.

For sixteen hundred years the St. Thomas Christians refused to put the church above the Bible. They found their starting point in the Sacred Scriptures, rather than in the catch phrase that the church was

"instinct with heavenly life." They refused to accept the teaching that the clergy only and not the laity were capable of interpreting the Bible. Accordingly, they clung to the Sacred Writings as the only channel through which the saving and transforming influence of the Holy Spirit could work. They refused to choose salvation through the sacraments rather than through the Scriptures. "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life," said Jesus,(John 6:63.) and they cherished His admonition.

"Any attempt," Mingana writes, "to speak of early Christianity in India as different from the East Syrian Church, is, in our judgment, bound to fail. Christianity in India constituted an integral part of the church that began to develop vigorously towards the end of the first century in the Tigris valley."<sup>18</sup>

About this time three great revolutions of significance took place - one in the bosom of Christianity, one in the Parthian Empire, and the third in the Roman Empire. The first revolution occurred when the Church of the East definitely broke with the West by electing Papas of Seleucia as its independent supreme head (A.D. 285), thus recognizing the importance of a regular autonomous organization of its own. Why did this new catholicos ten years after his election make India into one of the grand ecclesiastical divisions of the world field and ordain David of Basra, famous for his learning, as the first supervising director of the new division?<sup>19</sup> The answer is not far to seek. The Persians, led on by fanatical Zoroastrianism, organized themselves with new strength, attacked, and overthrew the Parthians. Here was a new situation for the believers. As the victorious Persian Empire was intolerantly Zoroastrian, or Mithraistic, it was necessary for the Church of the East to meet the changed situation by a new setup of its own. This it did by electing Papas as catholicos.

The third revolution was the compromise of Christianity with paganism. The emperor, Constantine, saw it to his advantage to straddle the issue. The last pagan persecution of New Testament believers was raging furiously when Constantine assumed the imperial purple and decreed the termination of religious hostilities. His Sunday law of 321 was a bait thrown to compromising Christians and an appeasement for those Romans who glorified the day exalted by the sun-worshipping Zoroastrians.

But Constantine did not stop there. Persecution began anew. This time it was not against all Christians, but against those churches who were determined to defend the faith once delivered to the saints. They fled. The hatred of the Romans by the Persians meant hatred of the new Roman Christianity and sympathy for the gospel believers. Therefore, refugees, some of the best church members in Europe, followed in the steps of their brethren who were persecuted by pagan Rome one hundred years previous, and joined the Church of the East. Following this growth of the Assyrian Church, a new migration of believers, composed of skilled mechanics, merchants, artisans, and clergy, left for India in 345.

It is amazing to learn how quickly blindness settled over the hierarchy of the West after the Council of Nicaea. The Dark Ages, destined to overshadow papal lands for a thousand years, drew on. In the East there was a light. The Church in the Wilderness was the ark which carried the Sacred Writings over from the apostolic age to the dawn of modern liberty. Claudius Buchanan in his researches in 1812 found among the St. Thomas Christians of the Malabar Coast a copy of the Bible which he believes has been among them from the days before the Council of Nicaea. Thus he wrote: "In every church, and in many of the private houses, here are manuscripts in the Syriac language: and I have been successful in procuring some old and valuable copies of the Scriptures and other books, written in different ages and

in different characters."20 He wrote of another city in Travancore, "In this place I have found a good many valuable manuscripts."21

### **Christianity in India During the Dark Ages**

Upon report from India on the condition of the Malabar Christians, the catholicos sent Thomas, a merchant, with clergymen, deacons, artisans, and skilled workmen (a company of three thousand persons) to settle among the brethren in Travancore (c. A.D. 345). The king of Malabar received them kindly and gave them social and commercial privileges of great value. Some believe that these privileges granted by King Perumal ranked these Christians and their disciples among the nobility.

For more than one hundred years fresh bands of believers kept arriving from Persia. The reign of Shapur II, who was ruling Persia after the adoption of Christianity in the Roman Empire by Constantine, lasted for more than sixty years. When Persia was at peace, primitive believers coming from the West were well treated; but in war it was different. The two empires being in conflict following the death of Constantine, it was natural that the Zoroastrians would be suspicious of all Christians and claim that they were spies in the pay of the Roman Empire. How India would be likely to become a haven of refuge to the persecuted is thus easily understood.

That the existence of Christians in India appealed to the imagination of believers in Europe may be seen from the many references to the fact found in the writings of the second, third, and fourth centuries.

The evangelical and simple spirit shown by the high reverence of these Christians for the Holy Scriptures characterized them as neither papal nor Jewish. Mingana writes: "The fifth century opens with an Indian Christianity which was in such a state of development that she is able to send her priests to be educated in the best schools of the East Syrian Church and to assist the doctors of that Church in their revision of the ancient Syriac translations of the Pauline Epistles."22

Thus the opening of the year A.D. 500 discloses communities of Assyrian Christians throughout India. Faithful in their evangelical missionary life, they assembled for worship on the Sabbath day.<sup>23</sup> When priests from Rome entered India a thousand years later, papal hatred stigmatized the persecuted church as Judaizers. These St. Thomas Christians watched carefully over the spiritual training of their children, having no higher purpose in life for them than to be ministers or missionaries. Their schools were on a level with the best in the world and were far above those in many lands. The speedy and commodious passage by sea direct from Egypt to southern India, as well as from the Persian Gulf to the same destination, kept them in touch with thought and scholarship elsewhere. They did not ignorantly arrive at the doctrines they held, but founded their faith first on the fact of its transmission direct from the apostles, and, secondly, on prayer and devout study. "This union of the Church of India with that of Mesopotamia and Persia is rendered more evident by another scholar of the school of Edessa, Mana, bishop of Riwardashir, who wrote in Persian (i.e., Pahlavi) religious discourses, canticles, and hymns, and translated from Greek into Syriac the works of Diodorus and Theodore of Mopsuestia and sent them all to India."24

The Assyrian Christians were not only scholars, translators, and clergymen, but they were also travelers. Cosmas, who resided near Babylon, widely read for his explorations in the first half of the sixth century, sailed the Indian Seas so frequently that he has been called Indicoplustes (India traveler). Cosmas was personally in touch with the patriarch of the Assyrian Church. In his famous

passages revealing how far-flung was the Church of the East, of which he was a member, he says that there was an infinite number of churches with their clergy and a vast number of Christian people among the Bactrians, Huns, Persians, Greeks, Elamites, and the rest of the Indians.<sup>25</sup>

In relating his explorations in Ceylon, Cosmas tells that the island has a church of Persian Christians settled there with a presbyter appointed from Persia and a deacon well furnished with all necessary articles for public worship. Commenting on these facts, Mingana writes: "The above quotations from Cosmas prove not only the existence of numerous Christian communities among many central Asian people, in India, and in the surrounding districts, but also the subordination of all of them to the Nestorian patriarchate of Seleucia and Ctesiphon."<sup>26</sup>

What Cosmas wrote about the island of Socotra in the Indian Ocean, lying directly in the path of sea travel from Egypt to southern India, is significant. He said that all the inhabitants were Assyrian Christians. What his successor in travels, the famous Italian voyager Marco Polo, who belonged to the papal church, wrote concerning Socotra in 1295 - long enough after Cosmas to see the headquarters of the church removed from Seleucia to Bagdad - is also revealing:

Their religion is Christianity, and they are duly baptized, and are under the government, as well temporal as spiritual, of an archbishop, who is not in subjection to the pope of Rome, but to a patriarch who resides in the city of Baghdad, by whom he is appointed. Or sometimes he is elected by the people themselves, and their choice is confirmed.<sup>27</sup>

Of the same place Nicolo de Conti, another renowned traveler, wrote about 1440: "This island produces Socotrine aloes, is six hundred miles in circumference, and is for the most part inhabited by Nestorian Christians."<sup>28</sup>

About the year 774 reinforcements arrived from the West. This event evidently raised the standing of the Malabar Christians in the eyes of the reigning king. He issued one of those copperplate charters, so familiar in the history of India, to Iravi Corttan, evidently the head of the Christian community. This recognized him as a sovereign merchant of the kingdom of Kerala, and evidently promoted the Christians considerably above the level of their pagan surroundings.<sup>29</sup>

About fifty years after the contingent of 774 had arrived, in the providence of God more reinforcements came. They evidently were an overflow of the Christians in Persia who by this time had grown to be a large proportion of the population there. They declined to settle down selfishly in the midst of their homeland affluence. A contingent of outstanding men with their families left for Travancore. Though Mohammedanism by this time had become all-powerful in Iran, it had not yet made a dent on the greater part of India. Led by the prayer of faith, two prominent leaders in the Church of the East conducted this Christian colony to the kingdom of Kerala.<sup>30</sup>

The date of these new arrivals was 822. They were received with honors, and a future status of power and privileges was accorded them in a charter of five copperplates.<sup>31</sup> Into a kingdom of India, then, still sufficiently strong to repel foreign invaders, came the new Christian recruits. The privileges granted them at the time on the copperplates politically raised the native church to a position of independence in their pagan surroundings; socially placed them next to the Brahmans; and spiritually gave them freedom in religious life. All this reveals the strength of the church on the Malabar Coast in the ninth century.

Concerning their status seven centuries later, William W. Hunter writes: "The Portuguese found them firmly organized under their spiritual leaders, bishops, archdeacons, and priests, who acted as their representatives in dealing with the Indian princes. For long they had Christian kings, and at a later period chiefs, of their own."<sup>32</sup> Spreading all over the land, they possessed an organization simple and workable as well as strong. Every community that was under a supreme spiritual director endeavored to maintain a college of advanced grades. From these institutions of learning graduates went to the scholarly theological seminaries in Assyria.

The Portuguese arrived in 1500. The Jesuits soon followed. Care was taken to burn all the records of these "heretical" communities; otherwise, more details of the date and place could be given.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, enough has come down from the secular and church historians to give a real picture of their activities. There are also the observations made by the European and Moslem travelers.<sup>34</sup> Marco Polo related that there were six great kings and kingdoms in the heart of India, three of which were Christian, the other three being Mohammedan. "The greatest of all the six," he said, "is a Christian."<sup>35</sup>

The Church in the Wilderness in India continued to grow throughout the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. After that it entered into its fatal struggle with the Jesuits. Mingana presents the important testimony of Marignolli, who in his *Recollections of Eastern Travel*, speaks of Indian Christians as being the masters of the steelyards and the proprietors of the spices of south India.<sup>36</sup> Nicolo de Conti, another traveler in India in the same century, tells us that the Nestorians "were scattered over all India in like manner as are the Jews among us."<sup>37</sup> As indicative of the carefulness of the life they lived, Conti further reports that though they are spread all over India, they are the only exceptions in the matter of polygamy. He recounts that he met a man from north India who told him that there was a kingdom twenty days' journey distant from Cathay (north China) where the king and all the inhabitants were Nestorians, and that he had come to India to find out about these same Christians. Conti observes that the churches of the Christians in this kingdom which he had described were larger and more powerful than those in India.<sup>38</sup>

Louis of Varthema has written a most interesting book on his itinerary in southern Asia in the fifteenth century. He tells of the St. Thomas Christians which he met on the Malabar Coast in 1505, and also describes the reputed tomb of St. Thomas, a short distance from Madras on the Coromandel Coast.<sup>39</sup> He recounts a curious story of the merchants of the St. Thomas Christians whom he met in Bengal, as follows:

They said that they were from a city called Sarnau (in Siam) and had brought for sale silken stuffs, and aloes wood, and benzoin, and musk. Which Christians said that in their country there were many lords also Christians, but they are subject to the great khan (of) Cathai (China). As to the dress of these Christians, they were clothed in a kebec (jerkin) made with folds, and the sleeves were quilted with cotton. And on their heads they wore a cap a palm and a half long, made of red cloth. These same men are as white as we are, and confess they are Christians.... We departed thence with the said Christians, and went towards a city which is called Pego (in Burma), distant from Banghella (Bengal) about a thousand miles. On which voyage we passed a gulf (of Martaban) towards the south, and so arrived at the city of Pego.<sup>40</sup>

Varthema was of the papal faith, and he recognized that the religion of the region of Pego was different. He says that the king "has with him more than a thousand Christians of the country which

has been above mentioned to you, that is, Nestorians from Sarnau."<sup>41</sup> He and his traveling companions struck a bargain with the Christians that they should act as guides while they visited the islands of Sumatra, Java, Borneo, and Maluko. It is characteristic of this outstanding missionary church that its members were not content with having planted the seeds of their faith in Persia, India, and China, but that they also extended their work down the Malacca Strait over into Sumatra, Java, Borneo, and the Spice Islands. It is written that the catholicos, Elijah V, in 1503 ordained three metropolitans and sent one to India, one to China, and one to Java.

These churches held fast through the years to the simple faith which no doubt came down to them from the apostle Thomas. Having won great victories over heathenism, they were now to sustain their greatest trial as the Jesuits began arriving in the sixteenth century.