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Travelling Thomas: Slave Trade and Missionary Travel in the *Acts of Thomas*

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Abstract: The *Acts of Thomas* is a long, rich, and fascinating narrative about the Apostle Thomas who was forced to travel to India as a missionary. When Thomas hesitates to go, his master Jesus literally sells him as a slave to an Indian merchant. Like other Apocryphal Acts, the *Acts of Thomas* revolves around the apostolic figure battling both human and demonic adversaries. Celibacy is central, although familiar narrative elements from ancient romances and novels are also present. On his way, Thomas sings, prays, teaches, heals, converts, and baptizes. His travel follows open trade routes in the ancient world, by land and by sea. He participates in various social events like parties, weddings, and family celebrations. His own status as a foreign slave/apostle, with a strange religion, is negotiated and contested: Sometimes he is treated like a foreign slave, suffering violence and harassment. On other occasions, his exotic strangeness in language and religion gives him access to royal palaces and influential men and women. By examining the role played by slavery in initiating this travel, as well as various intersections of religion and gender in the overall narrative, this article explores the *Acts of Thomas* to draw a more nuanced picture of travel in the ancient world.

Keywords: *Acts of Thomas*; travel; slavery; intersectionality

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1. Introduction

For those interested in travel and religion in the ancient world, the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* presents a unique resource. It is a long, rich, and fascinating narrative about the Apostle Thomas who travels—against his own will—on an evangelical mission to India. When he originally hesitates to go, Jesus, his master, sells him as a slave to an Indian merchant. Their travel follows the open trade routes of the ancient world, by land and by sea, and the descriptions of exotic or remote lands are the stuff of novelistic literature (McGrath 2008, p. 307; Muñoz Gallarte and Narro 2021, p. 228). On his way, Thomas sings, prays, teaches, heals, converts, and baptizes. He participates in various social events like parties, weddings, and family celebrations. His own status as a slave/apostle, with a strange religion, is negotiated and contested: Sometimes he is treated like a foreign slave, suffering violence, humiliation, and harassment. On other occasions, his exotic strangeness in language and religion gives him access to royal palaces and influential women and men.[1] During his travels, Thomas engages and interacts with a whole set of people and groups, although seldom in discussions or contexts where he learns something from the locals.

As a travel narrative, this story offers insights about who could travel in the ancient world and why. Thomas is a missionary and an apostle, the true hero of the story, but he travels as a slave since his Lord and Master needed him to go to India. The story helps us understand how human mobility was perceived and imagined, including its agents, motives, and outcomes. These are all central concerns for the overall research project at Aarhus University, "An Intersectional Analysis of Ancient Jewish Travel Narratives".[2] The project defines travel (and mobility) as "the often temporary move of a person from her or his home to another location". Indeed, Thomas moves from his home to several other locations, and, as we shall see, it is probably only his bones that make it home after this long journey.

By examining the role played by slavery for initiating this travel, as well as various intersections of religion, social status, and gender in the overall narrative, this paper explores the *Acts of Thomas* to draw a more nuanced picture of travel in the ancient world. While some earlier studies have focused on the role of slavery in this narrative, both as a metaphor and as an economic and political system, and others again have highlighted the travel aspect of the story, I will combine intersectionality and travel perspectives and ask what role status, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality play in Thomas' travel.

2. Travel and Experience

What is striking with *the Acts of Thomas* from the perspective of travel and mobility, is that different categories of travel seem to overlap. Not only is Thomas a piece of property, an object of ancient slave trade who is sold and forced to travel; he is simultaneously on a glorious mission to convert Indians and other peoples along the way. On top of that, he is on several occasions engaged in divine and apocalyptic travels, moving about within dreams or visions, and even blurring the lines between heaven and earth, wakefulness and slumber, consciousness and unconsciousness. As he is crossing ocean and land, he is also crossing between the human world and the spiritual world, and between a body that is owned and violated and a body that is a strong and free male apostle. From place to place and scene to scene, he is transformed and changed, and he appears in new shapes. He moves quickly and easily, from city to city, from being a slave to being an apostle. This is time travel and place travel, and so much more: he is going east but also up and down, in and out, back and forth, but still to draw a map of his travel, even a fictitious one, is almost impossible. As Muñoz Gallarte and Narro observe about the *Acts of Thomas*: "[it] is extremely vague in terms of geographical, historical, and ethnical descriptions" (Muñoz Gallarte and Narro 2021, p. 227). Still, he is described as a traveller as so many other characters; as argued by Uusimäki, "[i]t has been observed that Hellenistic narratives are rich in references to travel" (Uusimäki 2023, p. 476). The far away land of India, the aim of Thomas' travel, was a place surrounded with fantasies and exotic imagination at the time, as argued by Reger: "Roman curiosity about India was especially strong" (Reger 2007, p. 257, cf. 260).

In a recent volume on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim travel experiences in the ancient world, Pieter B. Hartog and Susanne Luther discuss how earlier travel studies have focused on the elites and on professional travel. They suggest we also look for the role of other travellers and apply "socio-historical models in the study of ancient travel" (Hartog and Luther 2023, p. 8). Thomas represents a complex case here: He is both professional, as a missionary, belonging to the apostolic elite, but at the same time, he is a slave. His socio-historical position is constantly negotiated and difficult to categorize (Leonhard 2015, p. 237).

Hartog and Luther also emphasise the role of experience. They argue that, in previous research, the focus has been on either the practicalities or the materialities of travel, often highlighting literary and narratological depictions of travel and space, travel routes, where travellers stayed for the night, and travel management in general (Hartog and Luther 2023, p. 4). To this, they want to add "the experiences of the traveller and how these are managed by, and serve the purpose of, the author of literary travel accounts" (Hartog and Luther 2023, p. 5). They highlight topics like travel and uncertainty, danger, worship, wisdom, knowledge and consultation (Hartog and Luther 2023, pp. 6–7).

How do we get access to experiences in historical sources? As several scholars have argued, when it comes to the *Acts of Thomas*, "the level of historicity… is very low" (Muñoz Gallarte and Narro 2021, p. 234). What we are searching for is rather how the text's descriptions could resonate with the experiences of real people. Rather than reading the text as a first-hand source to someone's experiences, we need to take into account the rhetorical techniques of the genre and the story. One important task is to ask questions and theorize the gaps. A slave forced to travel probably experienced violence and humiliation, like Thomas did. Probably, a whole set of mixed emotions were connected to travel; when

Thomas says he will not go to India, it might be that travel was associated with anxiety.[3] The fact that he was a foreigner and a slave gave him less protection and put him in great danger. But as an apostle, he could have had agency and power, he could heal, preach, and be admired. In the following, I will suggest some theories that can serve as tools with which to think more deeply about embodiment and relationships. How would the socio-historical profile of Thomas resemble a traveller in the ancient world? How would the people he met along his way have influenced him and his travel?

3. Intersectionality

In ancient sources concerned with travel, multiple 'categories of difference' are employed to describe various characters. Mobility, however, also affects and shapes these categories, by causing negotiations, definitions, or recreation of identities.[4] In order to address these complexities, I will employ theories of intersectionality.[5]

The core idea of intersectionality is that various categories, such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, ability, etc. mutually construct but also destabilize each other (Crenshaw 1989; Gunnarsson 2017; See also Nash 2008; McCall 2005). They cannot be studied in isolation or as separate or parallel systems of classification (Cho et al. 2013; Cooper 2015). Gender is not stable when it intersects with status: a man is not a man if he happens to be a slave. Self-control and strength were vital to male identity construction, a possible challenge for the male slave (Glancy 2003).

Slavery in the ancient world was intersectional, as several scholars have observed (Glancy 2002; Brooten 2015). Slaves could be owned by elite families or by poor people. Some had skills and training, education, and various types of resources. Slavery differs from time to time and place to place. Factors like gender, age, reproductive ability, capital, and health obviously played a role (Kartzow 2010). This needs to be taken into account when Thomas is presented as a slave. He was a special slave indeed. He was a man and had skills and powerful owners. But he also suffered the conventional treatment of slaves, like violence and exclusion.

To understand and interpret the social environment of ancient texts, we need to look at the way that categories and classification systems overlap and intersect. Theories of intersectionality have been successfully employed to rethink the complexity of hierarchy, identity, and interrelatedness in ancient texts (Schüssler Fiorenza 2009; Smith and Choi 2020; See also Yee 2020). Intersectionality offers a nuanced and detailed heuristic tool, helping us to grasp the complex social web in which travel texts operate. It can also help us identify structures of injustice in our contemporary world.

4. The Acts of Thomas

I will now present a scholarly context for the *Acts of Thomas*, before discussing some selected scenes and events where "intersectional approaches to travel" can be usefully employed.

Berglund has observed how, from the second to the fifth centuries, we find "an abundance of mostly fictional stories describing how prominent early Christians travel the world, heal the sick, raise the dead, and convert a large number of people to Christianity" (Berglund 2023, pp. 8–9). The *Acts of Thomas* belongs to this genre and was hugely popular among early Christians (Muñoz Gallarte and Narro 2021, p. 226). Like other Apocryphal Acts, it features the apostolic figure battling both human and demonic adversaries (Gruen 2013, p. 219; Attridge 1997). The protagonist and Christian leader Judas Thomas navigates a landscape inhabited by both historical and fictional elements.[6] Thomas is sometimes called the twin brother of the Lord Jesus, and sometimes confused with Jesus himself.[7] He baptizes important persons from the Indian society. His own status as a foreign slave/apostle, who carries around his own price, is sometimes negotiated and contested. While slavery is a rarely a discussed topic in other Apocryphal Acts, it seems to pop up everywhere in the Acts of Thomas (Oliver 2023; See also Kartzow 2018, p. 125). As an

apostle from afar he is a stranger and an outsider, but in this role, he "brings about a social and religious transformation" (Rose 2016, p. 163).

The genre of this text is hard to classify, but the category "legendary travel narrative" can cover many scholars' views, as Muñoz Gallarte and Narro argue: "[T]he description of exotic or remote lands follows the classical technique of novelistic literature: the use of common *topoi* to refer to imaginary communities or places, albeit on the basis of historical traces" (Muñoz Gallarte and Narro 2021, p. 228). The text's time and place of composition have been debated: some have suggested that it is a mid-third-century work originating in Syriac Christianity and later translated into Greek (Cosgrove 2015, p. 273; Attridge 1997; Poirier 1997, p. 298). In recent years, several studies have discussed the relationship between the Greek and the Syriac versions, disagreeing on which is the original version, and have also investigated in detail the many variations between the Greek and Syriac manuscripts, respectively (See Gárriga 2023; Narro and Gallarte 2022; Muñoz Gallarte and Narro 2021).

Several interesting intertextual references can be identified in the story. An obvious echo is how the portrait of Thomas resembles that of Joseph in the Hebrew Bible, who travelled to Egypt and became a slave but also so much more. The *Acts of Thomas* also builds upon and employs the New Testament as a reference work (Attridge 1997, p. 87), where the disciple Thomas, according to the Gospel of John, is the one who needs to see before he can believe (John 20:24–31). After the Pentecost event described in the New Testament Acts of the Apostles 1–2, the *Acts of Thomas* begins with the disciples gathered together, dividing the world into regions, and deciding who should go where to preach "in the place to which his Lord sent him" (1). India falls to Thomas, but he is not willing to go. He argues he is too weak, and asks how he, as a Hebrew, can teach the Indians. The Lord appears to him in a vision at night and tells him not to fear. Thomas answers that the Lord can send him anywhere, "only to India I will not go". The story continues by finding a solution to Thomas' hesitance, when he is sold by Jesus into slavery, thus enduring what Jennifer Glancy calls "the spiritual costs of corporal slavery" since "the metaphorical enslavement of the apostle has corporal consequences" (Glancy 2012, p. 4).

What kind of potential experiences could be key factors in conceptualizing this traveling slave? Following Cosgrove, we can imagine that the story had "a variety of readers" (listeners) with different levels of sophistication and knowledge (Cosgrove 2015, p. 257). Of the numerous intersectional elements of travel in the *Acts of Thomas*, this study focuses specifically on how Thomas is presented as a slave experiencing forced travel. Although a loyal apostle, he nevertheless had to travel against his will, just as slaves could be sold or sent away, without any opportunity to protest or prevent a forced departure from their place or origin or dwelling. In what follows, I have chosen to highlight five different scenes as case studies, with a particular focus on the first and last sections of the narrative, looking at both the characters involved and the intersectional relationship between them.

4.1. Fooled and Sold

After two attempts to reject the plan of going to India, first during the meeting with the other disciples and then after having been confronted by Jesus in a vision (1), the scene next moves into a new space: The slave marked (2).[8] Jesus appears, no longer in a vision, but in real life, walking around in the city. Habban, a certain merchant from India working for king Gugnaphar, is in need of a skilled carpenter. "And our Lord saw him walking in the street, and said to him: 'You wish to buy a carpenter?'"

When the question is confirmed, Jesus says he has a slave, a carpenter, whom he will sell to him. Showing him Thomas at a distance, he negotiates the price and writes a bill of sale:

> I, Jesus, the son of Joseph the carpenter, from the village of Bethlehem, which is in Judea, acknowledge that I have sold my slave Judas Thomas to Habban, the merchant of king Gudnaphar.

Thomas, who meanwhile has apparently walked over to Jesus and the merchants, is now taken by Jesus and given to Habban. "Is this your master?" Habban asks Thomas, whereupon Thomas confirms. "He has sold you to me outright," Habban says. The text continues: "And Judas was silent". Is he silent here only to mark acceptance of the fact that Jesus is his Master, both metaphorically and physically, or may we also consider an intersectional approach, taking into account the power of slavery itself?

Scholars have pointed out that it was illegal to sell free persons into slavery, and therefore, the buyer had to ask Thomas whether he was a slave (Glancy 2012, pp. 6–7; Klijn 2003, p. 22). The question Habban asks Thomas may look like an invitation for the apostle to confirm and confess. To speak out loud and say that the Lord is my master sounds like witnessing. Thomas, however, seems not to be aware of the actual context for the question: What Thomas presumes he is doing, to confess who is his Lord and Master, is given a very different meaning, within a legal, economic context. His words are interpreted as an acceptance for Habban to take him as a slave to India.[9] Thomas is thus fooled. Here, I would argue, the distinction between slave as a metaphorical title and social reality collapses, with huge consequences for Thomas (Kartzow 2018, chap. 6). The image drawn of Jesus here and his relationships to slaves and the disciples appear to contrast with what we find in the canonical Gospels. According to John 13 and 15, for example, the ideal is to be a servant/slave (through the foot washing), and Jesus does no longer call his disciples slaves but friends (John 15:15).

This image of Thomas as a slave, naïve, foolish, and strange, occurs also elsewhere in the narrative, underlining the ambiguity of the figure of the apostle Thomas (Perkins 2002, p. 128).

4.2. Travelling as a Slave

Although Thomas has tried twice to avoid the journey, he has to go to India. Jesus handles the practical, juridical, and economic duties of a slaveholder before sending him off. Jesus does not listen to the wishes of his slave, and Thomas turns silent. The motivation for travel is the wish of his "owner" Jesus, and Thomas must do as he is told. Probably, a variety of feelings and emotions are meant to be evoked by the narrative plot in this scene.[10]

Thomas starts his new life as a slave early the next morning; after praying to the Lord and confirming, he will do his will. Thomas meets his new master "without carrying anything with him", (3), except his own price, as if being a slave himself meant he was a part of an owner's property.[11] Although we might expect that a skilled slave like Thomas would have carried some tools he might require in his capacity as carpenter, he travels with empty hands, like so many other slaves. Habban asks about his new slaves' skills, to confirm he has gotten what he has paid for. The story goes on to describe how they sail off from Jerusalem, a city *not* by the coast, to India, stopping on their way in Sandaruk/Andrapolis, a city that is difficult to place on a map (Muñoz Gallarte and Narro 2021, p. 228). They are in transition, on their way, but not yet arrived. In that city, the king is celebrating a wedding for his only daughter, with a broad invitation, also extending to slaves (4). Accordingly, Thomas is included in the invitation, and as the story continues to unfold, we find further confirmation that he is truly considered a slave, coming from a land far away.

4.3. A Party of Slaves

Habban suggests they go to the feast; otherwise, they will be spoken ill of, since they are strangers (4). Just like Jesus in the Gospel of John, Thomas starts his public ministry on his missionary travel at a wedding, where he preaches and performs miracles (6ff).[12] According to Kasper Bro Larsen, the debut scene in the gospels follows ancient conventions from biographies, where the hero enters the scene (Larsen 2022). At this wedding, Thomas has his debut as a public speaker. Nevertheless, he is also marked as a slave: Although Habban and Thomas go together, they enter different spaces, perhaps due to their differences in social class (Reger 2007, p. 263): They recline in different places, probably sepa-

rate places for slaves and free (Klijn 2003, p. 26). When Thomas sits down, those gathered around look upon him as a stranger, but this does not happen to Habban. Sitting down with people from his new social class of slaves, Thomas appears different, since he has come from another land and has just arrived by ship with his master. Yet neither Habban nor Thomas was from Sandaruk/Andrapolis, and it stands to reason that they would both have been seen as strangers. Why was Habban's foreign status ignored? Perhaps the privilege afforded the slave-owner, sitting with other free men, evokes a status that eclipses his foreignness.[13] Or perhaps Thomas' role as an apostle for an unknown God from far away, his dress, language, or general appearance strengthen his strangeness? This striking mix of intersections made Thomas more foreign than his owner Habban.

The burden of being a stranger seems to weigh more heavily on slaves, probably also reflecting broader aspects of social experiences for slaves in the ancient world (Rose 2016, p. 169). A slave engaged with new cultures as he or she was sold to other owners from afar. Thomas' original worries about being a Hebrew on an apostolic mission to India have come true, but in unexpected ways. It is now not only ethnicity and language that sets him apart, but also social status: He is now a slave, an owned body sitting in the slaves' corner, being looked upon as a stranger. He is indeed an alien, from a different country, with a strange language, enslaved to a foreign master, sent on a mission against his will.

4.4. The Hebrew Flute Girl

It is, however, when Thomas is sitting down with the others, but not eating, that he seems to overcome his role as a sold, enslaved body. He starts talking about God who is "better than food and drink", and he praises God and starts singing in Hebrew (5) (Cosgrove 2015, p. 258). Waking up the ascetic apostle in himself, he is still seen as a slave and a stranger by others: A flute girl, perhaps a prostitute, who also turns out to be Hebrew, comes in (5 and 8ff) (McGrath 2008, p. 303).[14] They are strangers from the same country, both linguistically and ethnically different. She functions as his translator, since she knows both the local language and their shared mother tongue (Reger 2007, p. 263).

This scene is significant, as several scholars have pointed out. For Cosgrove, this girl represents the female part in the ancient romance. She is obviously attracted to Thomas, while he pays no attention to her (Cosgrove 2015, p. 259). She finds him more beautiful than all other men and tries to get his attention. She loves him as one belonging to her own race (8)—he is immune to her passions. It is hard to tell whether she reacts to Thomas as a man, a Hebrew, a carpenter, an apostle, or a mixture of several intersecting categories. Ideals related to asceticism, gender, and class obviously play a role here: although the reader may wish for a romance to bloom, for several reasons, this relationship cannot come to pass. First of all, erotic passion is out of question for the ascetic apostle Thomas; although the flute girl's weak female gender allows her to fall in love, masculine Thomas can remain calm. Finally, although Thomas is a slave, and so is she; in this story, the women with whom Thomas the apostle is concerned with are all upper class.

Nevertheless, they are both said to be Hebrews, and they share a strange homeland and a strange language (Cosgrove 2015, p. 259). This could have created a special connection between the two, but it does not.[15] Slave sex within ethnic boundaries would go against most parameters for proper behaviour for a slave of the Lord in these acts. His original reason for rejecting the mission to India was that he was a Hebrew. Now, he meets one of his own kind, but he is not tempted by her. He is not like other slaves, or men, who cannot control their lusts. Two strangers did not mean home away from home in this narrative, and it is rather a chance for the male to reject the female.

Thomas is not like other Hebrews, apparently. He is primarily a slave of the Lord Jesus, not a Hebrew, not a weak man who is overturned by homesickness. And, as an ascetic slave of Jesus, his mission is to reach out to another race, to the Indians. Thomas' mission at this feast and on the rest of his journey has no room for behaving like a lusty slave, even if it connects him to someone of the same ethnic roots and language. While other ancient novels have the tendency to let a man–woman relation start with romantic love, then dramatic

separation, only at the end to be passionately united, Thomas's narrative arch is different: the slave girl is rejected, and for the rest of the story, Thomas approaches wealthy wives who leave their husbands, not because of any promise of romance with the apostle, but because he preaches the word of God (Rose 2016, p. 170). They convert and follow him, often taking their female slaves along.[16] The ascetic slave of God is not going East to get laid, like other travellers, and he is not there to meet the love of his life, like other ancient protagonists.

Along intersectional parameters, the combination of social status and ethnicity creates a hierarchy in which the slaves' Hebrew background is downplayed. In the canonical Acts of the Apostles, it is often Jews in the diaspora who are approached first by the apostles. Here, far away in India, and probably a couple of centuries later, we see an echo of this (Reger 2007, p. 259). Nevertheless, since the unnamed flute girl is also a low status character in respect to both class and gender, her Jewishness merely becomes significant in her ability to understand the local language and be Thomas' translator.

During the wedding banquet, we learn that Thomas does not lift his face for a long time, as a signal of disinterest in the Hebrew slave girl. One of the cupbearers comes, raises his hand, and smites Thomas on his cheek. Violence towards slaves seems to be acceptable, even on a foreign slave body, far away from home. Although treated according to ethnic and social standards, it is as an apostle, not a slave, that Thomas answers: "My Lord will forgive you this in the world to come…" (6), reminding us of Jesus on the cross, who asks for forgiveness for the robbers hanging there with him, mocking him (Luke 23:39–43). While Thomas can reject slave sex, he cannot avoid violence: it is in this scene of his travel when Thomas' body is confirmed as an un-male slave body, that he has his debut: he experiences physical violence, the ultimate sign marking who is free and who is enslaved, and simultaneously he starts demonstrating his apostleship (Glancy 2002).

4.5. Death, Bones, and Dust

As mentioned in the introduction, the *Acts of Thomas* is a long, rich, and fascinating narrative about a complicated journey. There is much to be explored in the story, and the interest for this text is indeed growing: It has gained more scholarly attention in recent years, in particular due to its complex history of manuscript transmission, but also due to its themes of slavery.[17] To read it with a special focus on travel, however, may open up new perspectives. The last scene I will highlight is where the travel ends.

Just when he has reached the end of his days, Thomas prays (168) before the soldiers come and strike him to death, again just like Jesus in the Gospels. But the travel does not really end here: After some time passes, the king, in need of healing, visits Thomas' grave to find his bones, but discovers that one of the brothers, the companions to Thomas, has secretly taken the apostle's bones to the West (to Mesopotamia) (170). The king takes some of the dust from the place where the bones had been, and he is magically healed.

It seems as if enslavement, with its denial of agency and control over one's own body and mobility, continues into and after Thomas' death. The soldiers violate his body before he is killed, and the king does not respect his grave. While taking his bones they enter the sacred space of the dead. Thomas' dead body is touched, they move his remains where, when, and how they want, and use his remains for whatever aims they want. The parallels in access to and control over Thomas' enslaved body (in life and death; by followers of Jesus and others) ultimately raises the question: how is being the slave of a divine ruler different from being the slave of a mortal king? This story strongly suggests that they are the same, and that the "metaphor" of enslavement to Jesus is not, in actuality, a metaphor. On the contrary, it is a socio-economic reality. The apostle's story is one in which the reader learns that enslavement to the "right" master is what matters, but enslavement is throughout the story an inevitability (Kartzow 2018, chap. 6).

After Thomas' death, his bones apparently travel to the West, closer to home, while some of his power and spirit remained in India: the dust from his grave continues to give healing. The hero has left, on two levels: he has left this life to be united with his Master

Jesus, and his bones have left his grave. But, as the healing dust illustrates, he did also stay: his legacy, the impact of his apostolic mission, did not leave India. It is as if he existed on three levels: as a body, as bones, and as dust. While he as an apostle and a slave travelled far to the East, his bones eventually went West. And his dust lived on in India.

5. Conclusions

I will end by returning to the beginning: Have we discovered any answers to the main questions of the overall intersectional travel project: Who travelled in the ancient world and why? How was human mobility perceived and/or imagined?[18]. And also have we come any closer to "the experiences of the traveler"?

The *Acts of Thomas* illustrates how travel and mobility necessitated negotiations and adjustments, and how strangeness was constructed along several intersecting parameters, both conditional and contextual. Thomas is a complex traveling character, indeed, as he travels over land and sea, from earth to heaven, from East to West and back. Social status and class intersect with ethnicity, gender, and sexuality to construct him.

From the moment Thomas is sold into slavery, others seem to benefit from his traveling body and what is left of it. After Jesus has enslaved him against his will and sent him off, people use his body as they wish, with some significant limits: living and dying as a slave, he suffers violence and humiliation. When he dies, his bones are carried away and his dust is used for healing. He is traveling in time and space, but also between different substances—flesh, bones, dust—and in different spheres: Earth, heaven, and beyond.

Thomas, as it were, is also an active agent as a traveller: when he rejects the Hebrew flute girl who is obviously attracted to him, it is demonstrated that neither his ethnic background nor his slave status set boundaries for his apostleship. Thomas is on a mission to India, a foreign and exotic country, not limiting himself to ethnic interactions with a girl from back home. Neither is he a slave of lust, he is a slave of the Lord. He is not a typical man who becomes homesick when he hears his own language and falls into the arms of a female seducer. Since the story promotes celibacy, he is not led into temptation. Masculinity here is not only confirmed in sexual control over women, but also sexual control over himself. He is indeed a slave of a certain status: he has carpenter skills and rhetorical skills. He is hired to build an important building and trusted by elite people, mostly women.

Thomas enters the scene as a public speaker during his travels, even while he rejects the flute girl and experiences physical violence. He is a slave and is treated accordingly, he is humiliated and shamed, but he controls his own passions when it comes to sexuality. The women he sets out to reach are the prominent slaveholders and wives of the foreign country of India, not female slaves from back home. Here, there is no sense of class solidarity: travelling far away does not create bounds between countrymen and women who are slaves. Accordingly, the slave Thomas does not oppose slavery as an institution, except when it threatens apostolic ideals.

Ascetism on this travel could be combined with some aspects of slavery but not all. While violence and humiliation could pass and even increase the status of the slave of the Lord, sex was unacceptable. This follows the rhetoric of the apostolic acts, where sex was prohibited, but goes against the conventional expectations of slaves, both male and female: as an enslaved body traveling to a foreign country, a slave had no guarantee against sexual violence or penetration. In the *Acts of Thomas*, however, the apostle was a slave in some aspects but not all. In real life, traveling slaves probably lacked such protection and would have had different experiences.

Is this story representative of ancient travel? Back to the perspective of experience: Would some elements of this description be typical for male or female slaves who travelled in the ancient world? Or of people of some kind of profession, like missionaries? Or flute players? Although the *Acts of Thomas* is vague when it comes to geography and history, it still reveals how people could imagine mobility in the ancient world, not only for the elite but also for those in slavery. Thomas was sent far away as a slave on a mission; the flute girl was probably sold and sent away to entertain. Imprecise and open categories

like far away, east and west, over the ocean, on the other side of the coast, function more as topographic fictions than as concrete places on a map. Slaves from afar were met with suspicion and exotification, they were welcomed or rejected, they were violated but also embraced (when they were useful). Thomas did, after all, do some carpentry and build some houses on his way. Intersectionality assists in drawing out the nuances of this story, and how the experience of travel could influence or even amplify perceptions of status, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. The *Acts of Thomas* gives us some unique insights into ancient travel, or at least how some people imagined that such travels could happen.

This story, as we know, has a special status among Christians in India today. It is seen as a precious and robust narrative about a man who travelled on a mission, to spread the word of God. Thomas' ambiguous status as a slave and an apostle may appeal to new generations, in a world where power and influence are increasingly distributed by intersectional parameters of injustice.

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Notes

1 For a broader discussion of The Acts of Thomas, see Chapter 6 in Marianne Bjelland Kartzow (2018).

2 See the project description of "An Intersectional Analysis of Ancient Jewish Travel Narratives" at Project (au.dk).

3 For a study of other literary sources connected to this, see (Uusimäki 2023, p. 476).

4 See the project adescription of "An Intersectional Analysis of Ancient Jewish Travel Narratives" at Project (au.dk).

5 Intersectionality has been a useful tool for the study of the New Testament and other early Christian texts for a long time: see (Kartzow 2010).

6 This has been observed by several scholars, e.g., Muñoz Gallarte and Narro (2021), "Some Notes on *Andrápolis*" and McGrath (2008), "History and Fiction". McGrath has discussed what relationship this story may have had to historical events, such as the church history of India, and argues that it is a "fictional story that took its starting point in actual events" (p. 303). For a survey of the history of research of the *Acts of Thomas*, see (Paul-Hubert Poirier 1997, pp. 296–300). See also the introduction in (Klijn 2003, pp. 1–15).

7 This is called "the model of divine twinship", see (Poirier 1997, p. 298). See also (Reger 2007, p. 267).

8 (Gruen 2013, p. 220). As he sees it, "[n]arrative place is not simply a location for the story to unfold or a memory that is passed into the text. Instead, it is an actor in the myth itself, bearing witness to the values and internal cultural logic that is also elucidate by the plot".

9 In the Greek version, the sale of Thomas and Haddan's interrogation relies upon Haddan's use of δεσπότης, but Thomas' use of κύριός. [(2:15--18) καὶ ἰδὼν αὐτὸν ὁ Ἀββάνης εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτόν· Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ δεσπότης σου; Καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ ἀπόστολος εἶπεν· Ναί, κύριός μού ἐστιν. Ὃ δέ φησιν· Ἠγόρασά σε παρ' αὐτοῦ. Καὶ ὁ ἀπόστολος ἡσύχαζεν.].

10 Note that Thomas is also presented as a silent slave towards the end of Acts, when confronted with torture (p. 106).

11 Note that Thomas' 'price' is τίμημα, which connotes honour, esteem in addition to economic worth. This might complicate the scene through word play, as in the case of δεσπότης/κύριός (see above).

12 Crf. The wedding in Cana, John 2. See (Klijn 2003).

13 McGrath makes a point of strangeness and ideas about skin color at the time in India, REWORD THIS SENTENCE? I do not quite understand what you are saying here. see (McGrath 2008, p. 305).

14 (Glancy 2012, p. 8). McGrath connects the fact that they both are Hebrews to a potential historical event, when "Jewish refugees from the Jewish wars settled on the Malabar coast in the late first century CE", see (McGrath 2008, p. 303). Note that this passage is not discussed when "the image of women" is scrutinized in the article Maria Dell'Isola (2023).

15 As Reger argues, "[e]thnicity (is) a marker of belonging" (Reger 2007, p. 260).

16 (Oliver 2023). Whether these slaves also were convinced about Thomas teaching is discussed by Christy Cobb (2023).

17 (Cobb 2023; Oliver 2023). The *Gospel of Thomas* was featured in the SBL Annual Meeting November 2023 in the program unit on Ancient Fiction.

18 See the project adescription of "An Intersectional Analysis of Ancient Jewish Travel Narratives" at Project (au.dk).

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