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Jewish & Christians Origins in India

By Jim Myers

One legend holds that the Jews first settled in India during the time of **King Solomon**, when there was trade in teak, ivory, spices and peacocks between the Land of Israel and the **Malabar Coast**, where **Cochin** is located. Others put their arrival at the time of the Assyrian exile in 722 BCE., the Babylonian exile in 586 or after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

No reliable evidence exists.

Many contemporary scholars fix the date at some time during the early Middle Ages.

Cochin is a handy name for a cluster of islands and towns sprinkled with shady lagoons, tropical forests and canals winding past houses on stilts.

This is a multicultural land where, in addition to the Jewish sights, one can see Portuguese churches, Dutch architecture, mosques, Hindu temples and a British village green.

It is the bible that contains the first mention of Jews in connection with India. **The Book of Esther**, which dates from the second century BCE, cites decrees enacted by Ahasuerus relating to the Jews dispersed throughout the provinces of

his empire from Hodu to Kush. Hodu is Hebrew for India; Kush is Ethiopia. Talmudic and midrashic literature also mention spices, perfumes, plants, animals, textiles, gems and crockery bearing names of Indian origin or are indigenous to the country.

The earliest documentation of permanent Jewish settlements is on two copper plates now stored in Cochin's main synagogue. Engraved in the ancient Tamil language, they detail the privileges granted a certain Joseph Rabban by Bhaskara Ravi Varma, the fourth-century Hindu ruler of Malabar. According to the inscription, the ruler awarded the Jews the village of **Anjuvannam**, meaning "five castes," as the Jews were believed to be the lords of the five castes of artisans. The plates

also state that Anjuvannam shall remain in the possession of the descendants of these Jews "so long as the world and moon exist."

At the community's peak in the 1940's there were approximately 2,500 Jews in the state of Kerala. Today, few of the country's remaining 5,500 Jews live in Cochin- 22, to be exact-and many predict that the predominantly elderly community will be gone within 25 years.



Christian History

According to Church traditions, Christianity was brought to India by the **Apostle Thomas**, one of the disciples of Jesus. He is also known as Didymus, which means “the Twin.” **Thomas** means “Twin” in Aramaic and **Didymus** means “Twin” in Greek. He is generally known as the **Doubting Thomas** since he refused to believe the resurrection unless he verified it himself. His acts are not found in the *Acts of the Apostles*. But an apocryphal book written around 200 CE called "Acts of Thomas", describes it with embellishments and exaggerations. But archeology and Indian traditions substantiate the basic historic events in this book.

Traditions and Teaching are the oldest extant interpretation of the Holy Teaching of Jesus Christ. Christianity in India is as old as world Christianity. There are 25 million Christians in India which is just below 3% of the total population of the Country. Diversity of Christians is noticeable: Syrian Christians, Knanaya Christians, Goan Christians, Tamil Christians, Anglo-Indians, Naga Christians, etc are the main. They differ in language, social customs and economic prosperity.

History and tradition together provide much materials to believe in the Thomas tradition of founding the Indian Church in 52 CE. In course of time the infant Church that took roots in the **Kerala** soil had registered tremendous growth in the various parts of the Southern State of India. But following the martyrdom of its Apostle Thomas the growth, development and mission of this Church became shrouded in mystery. This state of affairs unfortunately continued when a missionary from Alexandria, **Pantaneus** by name, visited Kerala in 189 CE.

Within the period of fifteen centuries the Syrian church entered into cordial relationships with the Alexandrian church and the Persian Churches. As mentioned above, the Alexandrian connection was marked by the arrival of Pantaneus. But we have no clear picture as to the impact of this connection of the Syrian Church. The Persian connection was quite alive until the end of the

15th century. The two immigrations from Persia under **Thomas of Cana** (345 CE) and **Marwan Sabriso** (825 CE), the visit of **Cosmas Indicopleutus** (522 CE), the existence of Copper Plates, etc. prove the truth of the connection of the Syrian Church with the Persian Church.

The Acts of Thomas

The Acts of Thomas portray Christ as the "Heavenly Redeemer" who frees souls from the material world. This act has been recorded in its entirety—in a Syriac text from the seventh century and a Greek text from the eleventh. The Syriac texts are earlier and likely represent the original language of the work, they appear to have been purged of the unorthodox passages. **Thus the Greek, though often poorly translated, represents the earlier tradition.**

The book tells how the apostles drew lots to divide up the world for their missionary work, and India fell to Thomas. He gains Indian followers by performing exorcisms and resurrections, but is eventually sentenced to death after converting the wives of King Misdaeus and his kinsman Charisius. While in prison, Thomas sings the "Hymn of the Pearl," a poem that gained a great deal of popularity in orthodox circles.

Nestorian Church

Why did some groups, in some places, at various times, say that a man named Judas Thomas, or Thomas Didymus, a close follower of Jesus, founded certain churches? In the case of the Nestorian Church of the East one part of the answer is clear. Quite apart from what may have been sincere doctrinal differences, it served Nestorian interests to claim Thomas rather than Peter as their founder. A break with the churches of the Roman empire made the Nestorian form of Christianity more acceptable to the rulers and peoples east of the Euphrates, in an empire for centuries bitterly hostile to Rome.

SOURCES:

<http://www.indianchristianity.org/jews.html>

<http://reluctant-messenger.com/acts-of-thomas.htm>

<http://members.aol.com/didymus5/ch30.html>