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The Ascetic Subculture of the Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin

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Abstract

In a fourth- or fifth-century narrative known as the *Acts of Thomas and his Wonderworking Skin,* Jesus sells the apostle Thomas as a slave to the governor of India. When the governor's wife converts to Christianity, dumps all her earthly riches outside her front door, and turns celibate, the governor has the apostle tortured and his skin flayed off, but Thomas survives, and uses his peeled-off skin to raise the dead. This paper uses Kathryn Tanner's concept of culture to compare the ideals advocated by this story – servitude to Christ, voluntary poverty, sexual abstinence, readiness to suffer, and zeal for evangelization – to ideals expressed in first-century Christian literature. The subculture expressed by the narrative is found to consist entirely of ideals also expressed in the New Testament, which are updated, recontextualized, and radicalized in order to reach an audience of fourth- or fifth-century Christians.

Keywords

apocryphal acts – celibacy – encratism – mission – poverty – slavery

1. An Apocryphal Story about the Apostle Thomas

From the second to fifth centuries, there is 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.[1] In one of the later *exempla* of this genre, the *Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin*,[2] the apostle Thomas is commissioned by Jesus to go preach his gospel in India. The reluctant Thomas is initially accompanied by Peter and Matthew, but once arrived, Jesus sells Thomas as a slave to an agent of the Indian king Condiphorus,[3] and the other apostles leave the story (1.1–2.31).[4] Claiming to be able to build royal palaces, manufacture agricultural equipment, and heal every kind of illness, Thomas is assigned

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[1] An accessible introduction to this literature is Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction* (Waco: Baylor, 2008).

[2] For introductions to this story, see Aurelio de Santos Otero, "Later Acts of Apostles," in *New Testament Apocrypha,* Vol. 2: *Writings Related to the Apostles; Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher; trans. R. McLachlan Wilson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 426–82, here 457–58; Janet E. Spittler, "Suffering Thomas: Doubt, Pain, and Punishment in the Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin," in *The Narrative Self in Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Judith Perkins*, ed. Janet E. Spittler, WAWSup 15 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 211–28; Jonathan D. Holste, "Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin," *E-Clavis: Christian Apocrypha* (2019), https://www.nasscal.com/e-clavis-christian-apocrypha/acts-of-thomas-and-his-wonderworking-skin; Jonathan D. Holste and Janet E. Spittler, "The Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin: A Translation and Introduction," in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, ed. Tony Burke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 316–39.

[3] As noted by James McGrath, "History and Fiction in the Acts of Thomas: The State of the Question," *JSP* 17.4 (2008): 297–311, here 299–302,. the king featuring in both *Acts Thom.* and *Acts Thom. Skin* matches the historical king Gondophares (ca. 19–46 CE), ruler of a Parthian province on the Indian subcontinent who declared himself independent and minted his own coins.

[4] References to *Acts Thom. Skin* are given with chapter and verse numbers following Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 326–39.

to the governor Leucius, given one hundred pounds of gold, and commissioned to erect a palace (2.32–3.11). While Leucius spends three years on a military campaign, Thomas distributes the gold among the poor, converts Leucius's wife Arsenoë to Christianity, baptizes her and all of her household, and heals every illness in the city (3.12–4.40).

Returning home to find his wife in dirty clothing (ῥύπαρα), sexually unavailable, and speaking about Christ, Leucius is absolutely enraged. When Thomas explains that he has built "palaces" of repenting souls, made "ploughs" out of God's word, and applied the medical power of God's holy mysteries, Leucius has Thomas flayed alive, and salt and vinegar sprayed onto his skinless body (5.1–6.8). Thomas cries out in agony, but Jesus comforts him and tells him to go preach in the city of Kentēra (6.9–26).[5] Encouraged, Thomas uses his flayed-off skin to resurrect Arsenoë – who has thrown herself off a roof in anger over her husband's behavior – from the dead. The miracle leads to Leucius's conversion, and within the hour, he is baptized and installed as priest in the local Christian community (6.27–35).

Bringing his skin, Thomas travels to Kentēra, where he encounters a grief-stricken old man. Christ has appeared to the eldest of his six sons the night before the son's wedding, and told him to forgo marriage to serve as his earthly representative. At this news, the father of the bride was so enraged that he had the unwilling groom and his five brothers killed. Thomas lays down his flayed-off skin on their grave – and all six sons are raised, together with nine others who happened to be buried in the same spot (6.36–7.37). This miracle attracts the attention of the local Gentile priest, who confronts the foreign preacher. Thomas responds by having an angel suspend the priest in mid-air until he converts to Christianity. The city temple is made a church, and the priest its bishop. Thomas stays three years teaching in Kentēra before Christ appears to him, puts his skin back on, and takes him flying on a cloud to meet the other apostles (8.1–9.6).

[5] Spittler, "Suffering Thomas," 217–18,. notes that *Acts Thom. Skin* and *Acts Andr. Matt.* 28 are highly unusual in ancient Greek martyrdom accounts in allowing the protagonist to show emotion over being tortured. In Syriac martyr texts, such emotions are more common.

Despite the transitions from three apostles to one, and from one Indian city to another, the *Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin* is a coherent and continuous narrative.[6] The plot resembles that of the older and longer *Acts of Thomas,* where Thomas flatly refuses to depart for India until Jesus sells him to an Indian merchant (*Acts Thom.* 1–2). In that story, Thomas is saved from agony when the king's brother Gad dies the night before Thomas is to be flayed and burned alive. In the afterlife, Gad notices a fabulous temple built by Thomas for his brother, and convinces the angels to bring him back to life to buy it from him. When Gad explains the situation, the apostle is pardoned, and the whole royal family convert (*Acts Thom.* 21.2–24.8). The younger narrative, which reshapes this older story to pursue its own agenda,[7] is thought to originate in fourth- or fifth-century Egypt.[8] It is extant in eight Greek manuscripts,[9] in

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[6] The departure of Peter and Matthew is foreshadowed by Jesus (1.5) and marked by a farewell kiss (2.31). Thomas's departure to Kentēra (6.36) carries out Jesus's prior instruction (5.25), and continuity between the two locales is ensured by the presence of Thomas and his flayed-off skin (5.34; 6.36, 7.34–36).

[7] De Santos Otero, "Later Acts of Apostles," 457,. designates it an "independent imitation" of *Acts Thom.* 1–2.

[8] Spittler, "Suffering Thomas," 212–13, 217; Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 320–21.

[9] The manuscripts are (A) Milan, Bibliotheca Ambrosiana F 144 sup (Martini–Bassi 377), fols. 25^{v}–30^{v}, http://213.21.172.25/0b02da828009aa17 (10th/11th-century menologium); (C) Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Chig. R. VI. 39, fols. 106^{v}–115^{r}, https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Chig.R.VI.39 (12th-century menologium); (Mn) Messina, Biblioteca Universitaria, San Salvatoris 30 (Delahaye 30), fols. 63^{v}–70^{v} (1307 menologium for September); (N) Rome, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Vittorio Emanuele II gr. 20 (S. A. Valle 61), fols. 36^{r}–56^{v} (15th-century menologium); Andros, Monē Hagias (Zōodochou Pēgēs), gr. 046 (65), fols. 123^{v}–140 (15th century); Tyrnavos, Dēmotikē Bibliothēkē, 19, fols. 93^{r}–107^{v} (15/16th century); Athens, Ethnikē Bibliothēkē tēs Hellados, gr. 286, 1518, fols. 2–14^{v} (1518); (M) London, British Museum Add. 10073, fols. 128^{r}–142^{v}, 147^{r}–153^{v}; https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_10073 (16th-century menologium with additional texts). M and Mn both incorporate three episodes from the older and longer *Acts of Thomas.* The first modern edition, Montague R. James, *Apocrypha Anecdota 2*, TS 5.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), 27–45,. uses only M. The second, Donato Tamilia, "Acta Thomae apocrypha," *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei: Classe di scienze morali, storiche*

translations to Arabic, Church Slavonic, and Ethiopic, and in a few fragments of Coptic.[10] The Greek version has recently been translated into English.[11]

Christian narrative literature tends to reflect the theological diversity of its time, and while second-century apocryphal acts are frequently associated with alternative Christian views that were eventually silenced by the emerging orthodoxy,[12] later apostle stories are considerably more orthodox. It is therefore far from given that "gnosticism" or "encratism" are relevant categories for this narrative, and – as argued by Yves Tissot – depictions of sexless marriages should not be enough to brush off a whole literary genre as "vehemently encratite."[13] In addition, the collections we have today, which typically follow a single apostle from his commission by Christ to his martyrdom, may not be the original context of the constituent stories. Glenn E. Snyder successfully analyzes four sections of the *Acts of Paul* as four independent stories

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e filologiche 5.12 (1903): 387–408,. is based on manuscripts C, N, and M. Angusto Mancini, "Per la critica degli *Acta apocrypha Thomae*," *Atti della Reale Accademia della scienze di Torino* 39 (1904): 743–58 adds analysis of Mn. A new edition based on all available Greek manuscripts is a desideratum. Cf. Holste, "Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin," 3.1.5; Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 318.

[10] Holste, "Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin," 3.1.1–4.

[11] Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 326–39.

[12] Cf., e.g., the study of the *Acts of John* as gnostic scripture in Pieter J. Lalleman, *The Acts of John: A Two-Stage Initiation into Johannine Gnosticism*, Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 4 (Leuven: Peeters, 1998),. and the use of the *Acts of Thomas* as a repository of nonstandard liturgical practices in Susan E. Myers, *Spirit Epicleses in the* Acts of Thomas, WUNT II 281 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, "Taufe und Taufeucharistie," in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, eds. David Hellholm et al., BZNW 176 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 1483–1530.

[13] Yves Tissot, "Encratism and the Apocryphal Acts," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Apocrypha*, eds. Andrew F. Gregory et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 407–23.

with different theological outlooks,[14] and the present author has previously found two distinct stories within the *Acts of Philip* to advocate related but different "discipleship ideals": faith and purity in one, civility and self-control in the other.[15] Considering these results, the *Acts Thom. Skin* should not be presupposed to have a similar ideological position within early Christian diversity as other apocryphal acts, or as other writings featuring the apostle Thomas.

Furthermore, to position apocryphal narratives ideologically in relation to other early Christian literature, we need a more thorough theoretical framework, within which the full range of early Christian diversity can be modelled. My previous concept of discipleship ideals is promisingly open for any combination of conservative or radical ideals, but my prior definition of them as "traits expected from an ideal Christian disciple,"[16] is too simplistic. To remedy that, this paper utilizes Kathryn Tanner's theory of cultures as overlapping sets of behavioral patterns, continuously renegotiated by internal and external pressures, to construct ideals as aspirational patterns within a given subculture. Such patterns advocated by the *Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin* will be compared to similar ideals expressed in New Testament literature, which they are found to update, mitigate, and recontextualize for a later audience.

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[14] Glenn E. Snyder, *Acts of Paul: The Formation of a Pauline Corpus*, WUNT II/352 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

[15] Carl Johan Berglund, "Discipleship Ideals in the *Acts of Philip*," in *The Apostles Peter, Paul, John, Thomas and Philip with Their Companions in Late Antiquity*, eds. Tobias Nicklas, Janet E. Spittler, and Jan N. Bremmer, Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha 17 (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 314–32.

[16] Berglund, "Discipleship Ideals," 314.

2. Subcultures as Sets of Norms and Ideals

Within modern anthropology, a culture is understood as a set of behavioral patterns including social habits, rituals, beliefs, and values, which are continuously upheld by consensus efforts within a social group.[17] Some of these patterns are consciously articulated and defended, others merely taken for granted until questioned.[18] Positive and negative feedback from others continually guide children, newcomers, and rebels toward the norm, but variant behavior also influences the group culture by contributing social pressure for the consensus to evolve.[19] Situations where all group members agree to follow a certain pattern are rhetorically expected and aimed for, but rarely at hand in practice.[20]

Cultures are neither monolithic,[21] nor uniform,[22] nor stable over time.[23] They need to be continually recreated in social interaction, not only by authority figures, but by all participants of the culture,[24] and constantly change in response to both external pressures and internal strains.[25] Human cultures are complex

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[17] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 25–29.

[18] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 29–32.

[19] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 27–29, 35.

[20] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 56.

[21] The often presumed one-to-one-relationship between ethnicity and culture is not valid for the Roman empire, where educated elites in Syracuse and Antioch shared many behavioral patterns different from those of their rural neighbors. Cf. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 45–47, 53–56.

[22] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 48–49,.warns against conflating the statistical regularity that people, as a rule, act in a certain way with the normative structure that people act according to a rule that prescribes such action.

[23] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 40–42.

[24] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 50–51; Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis,” in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, eds. Delvin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner, AAR Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3–16, here 5–7.

[25] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 51–52.

enough to include a number of alternatives to themselves, and any sufficiently large group may contain a number of distinct subgroups, each upholding its own distinctive subculture that adds to or modifies the common set of patterns.[26]

In Tanner's model, modern Christian ideologies can be viewed as subcultures within Western society. Individual Christians participate simultaneously in their national culture and in the subculture of their Christian community, and interchangeably apply patterns from both cultures whenever appropriate.[27] A Christian subculture achieves its distinctiveness not by strict protection of itself against corruption, but in a continuous relational process with the wider society.[28] The boundaries between groups will always be dynamic locations of incessant negotiation of identity,[29] where different identities are often established not by a certain pattern's presence or absence, but by distinctive ways of applying the same ideal.[30]

This model is also applicable to ancient social groups. As a subculture within Greco-Roman society, the culture expressed by the *Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin* can be expected to share patterns

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[26] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 26–29, 35, 42–47, 58.

[27] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 151–52; Greeve Davaney, "Cultural Analysis," 8.

[28] Hugh Nicholson, "Creative Appropriation and Interreligious Respect: Applying Tanner's Account of Christian Identity to an Interreligious Context," in *The Gift of Theology: The Contribution of Kathryn Tanner*, eds. Rosemary P. Carbine and Hilda P. Koster (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 209–32, here 212–13.

[29] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 104–19. This point is picked up by several scholars, including Michael Nausner, "Homeland as Borderland: Territories of Christian Subjectivity," in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, eds. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 118–32; Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), xiii–xiv.

[30] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 112–13; Jan H. Pranger, "Inculturation as Theology of Culture: Exploring Kathryn Tanner's Contribution to Intercultural Theology," in *The Gift of Theology: The Contribution of Kathryn Tanner*, eds. Rosemary P. Carbine and Hilda P. Koster (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 175–208, here 180–81; Nicholson, "Creative Appropriation," 215–16.

both with its Greco-Roman host culture and with the first-century Christian subculture. As asserted by Dale B. Martin, most early Christians "lived in Greek and Roman cities, spoke Greek, and imbibed Greco-Roman culture, to a great extent, just like their non-Christian neighbors."[31] James Dunn remarks that the ethical issues of First Corinthians "arose precisely because believers shared many of the moral values of the surrounding society."[32] And Judith Perkins maintains that the early second century saw a new awareness of suffering and pain in Greco-Roman culture – initially discernible in self-reflective writings by Fronto (ca. 100–170 CE) and Apuleius (ca. 124–170 CE) – that helped early Christian leaders to raise awareness of the poor, old, and sick in their communities.[33]

Among Tanner's behavioral patterns, we may distinguish between compulsory patterns, where non-conformance threatens the group identity and therefore regularly leads to negative feedback, and more aspirational patterns, where conformance is not strictly expected but leads to a higher status within the group. We may call the first category "norms," and the second "ideals." Norms serve to guard the boundary of the culture and help with discerning whether a person does or not belong to the group, whereas ideals serve to strengthen the "hard core" of the subculture and provide criteria for selection of leaders and role models. In narrative, established role models like the apostles could be used to suggest ideals for others to imitate.

The presence of cultural patterns in fictional stories can readily be inferred from their plots, by watching the behavior of sympathetic characters and observing how various actions are rewarded or

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[31] Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xvi.

[32] James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 690.

[33] Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1–14.

punished within the narrative.[34] It is far more precarious, however, to draw conclusions regarding how patterns were applied in the community in which the narrative originates. Fictional stories are often drastic and uncompromising, leaving nuance and ambiguity aside, and a pattern in the story need not match one regularly applied in historical practice – it might be one the author unsuccessfully tried to establish, or merely wanted to try out.

In the following five sections, five ideals from the *Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin* – servitude to Christ, voluntary poverty, sexual abstinence, readiness to suffer, and zeal for evangelization – will be discerned, exemplified, and compared to ideals expressed in New Testament literature. All five will be found to be taken over from the ancestral subculture's literature and updated for the later context.

3. Servitude to Christ

When Peter, Matthew, and Thomas first arrive in India, Thomas asks Peter how they will be able to evangelize the Indians (2.2–4). Before Peter can answer, they are approached by king Condiphorus's agent, who is seeking a δοῦλος ("slave") to purchase for his royal master. Peter promptly asserts that all three are δοῦλοι ("slaves") of Christ,[35] who will not hesitate to sell one of them:

> We are slaves of a master called Jesus. Sit, therefore, for a little while until our Lord comes, and whichever one of us you want, our Lord will reach an agreement with you (2.9).[36]

[34] This methodology is applied, albeit not discussed, in Berglund, "Discipleship Ideals," 324–332.

[35] When services rendered are in focus, we may translate δοῦλος as "servant," but in the context of buying and selling human beings, the translation "slave" is unavoidable.

[36] Tamilia, "Acta Thomae," 389.5–7; trans. Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 327: Δοῦλοί ἐσμεν δεσπότου λεγομένου Ἰησοῦ· κάθισον οὖν ὀλίγον ἕως ἔλθῃ ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν καὶ ὅντινα θέλεις ἐξ ἡμῶν, συμφωνήσει σοι ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν. A adds οἱ τρεῖς ἑνὸς after ἐσμεν, and leaves out the final ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν.

In short order, Jesus appears, negotiates with the agent, and writes out a contract to sell Thomas for three pounds of silver. He gives this money to Thomas, instructing him to give it to the poor in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus, Peter, and Matthew bid Thomas farewell, and leave him alone with his new owner (2.10–31).

Viewed as a response to Thomas's question, the sale gives him an unobtrusive position from which to reach the local society, and money to give to those in need.[37] His sale as an "actual" slave does not change his status as a metaphorical slave.[38] He is free to go to Kentēra when Jesus tells him so, and he is called δοῦλος τῆς ἁγίας τριάδος ("slave of the Holy Trinity") by Jesus (2.26), δοῦλε τοῦ Χρίστοῦ ("slave of Christ") by Arsenoë's family (6.3), and δοῦλε τοῦ θεοῦ ("slave of God") by the converted Leucius (6.32).[39] Instead of simply transferring the ownership of Thomas from Christ to the Indian king, the sale renews the metaphor, and stresses that a Christian leader should be as subservient to Christ as a slave to his owner.

While slavery is always a horrible oppression,[40] the position of a slave in a high-status ancient household is an ambiguous one. An enslaved personal secretary, overseer, or business manager regularly

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[37] This modifies the older *Acts Thom.* 1–2, where Thomas is tricked to confirm his slave-status and forced to go to India. Cf. Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 96–98; Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse: Double Trouble Embodied*, Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 14, 125–28.

[38] *Pace* Chris L. de Wet, *The Unbound God: Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2018), 9–22,. who argues that expressions of divine slavery are not metaphors.

[39] Similarly, the protagonist of *Acts Thom.* is called slave of the holy God (*Acts Thom.* 42) and introduces himself as a slave to the Lord of heaven and earth (*Acts Thom.* 163). Kartzow, *Slave Metaphor*, 126, 140–141 (cf. 130–138, 159–160),. argues that *Acts Thom.* intently breaks down the boundary between Thomas's "real" and metaphorical slavery.

[40] Cf. Kartzow, *Slave Metaphor*, 3–4, 146.

exercised a considerable portion of his owner's authority whenever he dealt with lower slaves and outsiders, while remaining subservient to his owner's every wish.[41] Judging from the letter of Philemon, Paul is well aware of the precarious situation of a slave, but he still introduces himself as Christ's slave in Rom 1:1, Gal 1:10, and Phil 1:1, thereby setting an example that was followed by the writers of Tit 1:1, 2 Pet 1:1, Jas 1:1, and Jude 1:1. Mark goes even further by arguing that anyone with ambition to lead the Christian community should aim to be everybody's slave (πάντων δοῦλος; Mark 10:44).[42] Luke expands the slavery metaphor to Mary, who is made to declare herself δούλη κυρίου ("the Lord's slave"),[43] but also compromises the sub-servient connotations of the metaphor by declaring the apostles to be οἰκονόμοι (Luke 12:41–46), i.e., trusted slaves in charge of other slaves.[44] John 15:15 may be polemizing against a subservient Christian leadership ideal when he insists that Jesus no longer calls his disciples slaves, but φίλοι ("friends").[45]

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[41] Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, 17, 22, 28. Columella (4–70 CE), *De re rustica* 1.8.13 (LCL 361: 90), insists that even an enslaved business manager should be prohibited from pursuing any side interests, and exist solely to serve his master. Actual practice probably varied.

[42] Paul may use the same idea in 1 Cor 9:19, where he claims to have enslaved himself to everybody in order to gain more people. Cf. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, xxii, 117–135.

[43] Luke 1:38, cf. 1:48. Traditional translations of this passage tend to overlook the metaphorical ambiguities by downplaying the slavery connotation of δούλη. Cf. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 16; Kartzow, *Slave Metaphor*, 48–49.

[44] Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, 53.

[45] Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, 53–54; Kartzow, *Slave Metaphor*, 73–79. The usage here could also be an unrelated metaphor, cf. Gal 3:26–4:7.

If this "core metaphor of early Christian discourse,"[46] eventually evolved from this mixture of subservience and domination into a title of pure authority,[47] the storyteller behind Thomas's Indian slavery may have felt a need to renew it.[48] Unless the story originates among Christians who sold each other into slavery as a missionary strategy, which is highly unlikely, Jesus's sale of Thomas revivifies the title's connotations to the subservient position of an actual enslaved person. Thereby, the story restates, with an edge toward contemporary Christian leaders, a first-century Christian principle: as slaves of Christ, Christian leaders should exist to serve their master.

4. Voluntary Poverty

When Arsenoë and her household convert to Christianity, they all promptly demonstrate another behavioral pattern connected to their new Christian identity: distributing their wealth among the poor (πένητες):

> And after she heard these things from Thomas, Arsenoë believed with all her household. Having entered her house and closed the door, she took off her robe and carried out as much gold and silver and clothing as she had acquired in her life and left them aside, in front of it. […] And he baptized her with her whole household in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And many others from the city were baptized with them. After their baptism, they gave their belongings to the poor (4.22–23, 33–34).[49]

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[46] Kartzow, *Slave Metaphor*, 5; cf. 37, 147, 154. Some NT passages extend the metaphor to all believers. Paul insists in 1 Cor 7:22–23, that his freeborn readers have been bought for a price (τιμῆς ἠγοράσθητε) and therefore are Christ's slaves, and 1 Pet 2:16 encourages the readers to be God's slaves. Cf. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, 63–68; Kartzow, *Slave Metaphor*, 4–7.

[47] Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, 51–55; Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 96–97.

[48] Cf. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 97: "By expanding a metaphor into a narrative, the *Acts of Thomas* exposes the debt of Christian theological language to ancient social realities."

[49] Tamilia, "Acta Thomae," 395.11–15; trans. Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 330–31: Ἀκούσασα δὲ ταῦτα ἡ Ἀρσενόη παρὰ Θωμᾶ ἐπίστευσε σὺν παντὶ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτῆς. καὶ εἰσελθοῦσα ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτῆς καὶ κλείσασα

The efficiency by which Arsenoë and other converts dispose of their personal valuables establishes voluntary poverty as a prominent cultural pattern for every believer with ὑπάρχοντα ("belongings" or, perhaps better, "resources") to spare. The mentioned clothing and precious metals – coins or jewelry – reflect the valuables immediately accessible to an elite woman,[50] but also depict a relinquishment that would be immediately visible to any observer. By dressing in ῥύπαρα ("shabby clothes"; 5.3),[51] Arsenoë visually erases the distinction between herself and the less fortunate, a distinction ordinarily considered all-important.[52]

Greco-Roman literature generally knows no sizeable category of working professionals with a significant economic surplus, but consistently depict a two-way distinction between the landed elite and the poor multitude of workers and beggars, who lived at – or even below – subsistence level. In reality,

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τὴν θύραν ἀπεδύσατο τὴν στολὴν αὐτῆς καὶ ἐξήνεγκεν ὅσα ἐκτήσατο ἐν τῇ ζωῇ χρυσίου καὶ ἀργυρίου καὶ ἱματισμοῦ καὶ ἀφῆκεν αὐτὰ κατ' ἰδίαν ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῆς [...] Καὶ ἐβάπτισεν αὐτὴν σὺν ὅλῳ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτῆς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ ἐκ τῆς πόλεως ἐβαπτίσθησαν μετ' αὐτῶν. μετὰ δὲ τὸ βαπτισθῆναι αὐτοὺς ἔδωκαν τὰ ὑπάρχοντα αὐτῶν τοῖς πένησιν. A has παρὰ τοῦ ἀποστολου τὸν Χριστοῦ instead of παρὰ Θωμᾶ; omits καὶ εἰσελθοῦσα ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτῆς; adds αὐτῆς after θύραν, adds μετὰ ταῦτα before ἐβάπτισεν αὐτὴν; has βαπτισθέντων δεὶ αὐτῶν instead of μετὰ δὲ τὸ βαπτισθῆναι αὐτοὺς; omits ἄλλοι ("others"); and has πτωχοῖς ("beggars") instead of πένησιν ("working poor"). M has Arsenoë place her valuables before Thomas instead of outside the door; cf. Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 330 n. f.

[50] Faith P. Morgan, *Dress and Personal Appearance in Late Antiquity: The Clothing of the Middle and Lower Classes* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 32, 80–85,. demonstrates that clothing held considerable value in the ancient world. Even without ornate fabrics, jewels, or colors, they were worn a long time, mended, inherited, and used as payments of debts.

[51] A has ῥυπασὰν καὶ μὴ φοροῦσαν τὰ κοσμήδια ("dirty and not wearing her adornments") rather than the ῥυπασὰν φοροῦσαν καὶ μὴ φοροῦσαν τὰ κοσμήδια ("wearing dirty clothes and not wearing her adornments"). Tamilia, "Acta Thomae," 396.12–13.

[52] Although the distinction between free and slave was not always visible in clothing, the chasm between rich and poor certainly was, and many former slaves proudly wore a *pilleus* to mark their freedom. See Morgan, *Dress*, 24–25, 144.

individuals who ran a profitable business or were gifted a sizeable property by their patrons certainly existed. Recent estimates put the elite at about 3 percent, those with a surplus at 15–25 percent, those near subsistence level at 60–70 percent, and those below subsistence at 10–20 percent.[53] Using a distinction established by Aristophanes (ca. 446–386 BCE), we may call the two latter groups πένητες ("poor") and πτωχοί ("destitute").[54] The binary worldview is nevertheless an important background to early Christian exhortations to generosity, and explains why, for instance, ancient authors never discuss whether a radical poverty ideal permits retaining tools or other means for maintaining an income: You either had a huge surplus of ὑπάρχοντα to distribute, or you were already part of the poor masses of πένητες and πτωχοί who were supposed to receive it.

The cultural pattern of voluntary poverty is decidedly countercultural in a world where any organized generosity was optimized for maximizing the giver's honor, and therefore tended to prioritize honored

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[53] Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 40–59; Rhee, *Loving the Poor*, 1–26; Jinyu Liu, "Urban Poverty in the Roman Empire: Material Conditions," in *Paul and Economics: A Handbook*, eds. Thomas R. Blanton and Raymond Pickett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 23–56, here 24–27; Timothy A. Brookins, "Economic Profiling of Early Christian Communities," in *Paul and Economics: A Handbook*, eds. Thomas R. Blanton and Raymond Pickett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 57–88, here 66–82, esp. 81.

[54] Aristophanes, *Plutus* 552–54 (LCL 180: 506); cf. Robin Osborne, "Introduction: Roman Poverty in Context," in *Poverty in the Roman World*, eds. Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–20, here 11.

citizens before those in actual need.[55] Nevertheless, it is well established in first-century Christianity,[56] as exhibited by the Baptist's demand that anyone with two χιτῶνες ("tunics") should give one away (Luke 3:11). When the twelve apostles are first sent out to preach, heal, and exorcize, they are prohibited from bringing anything more than a ῥάβδος ("staff"), a χιτῶν ("tunic"), and a pair of σανδάλια ("sandals") – no provisions, no bag for gifts, and certainly no money.[57] That the pattern is not limited to itinerant preachers is clarified when Jesus instructs a young man who wants to acquire eternal life to go, sell what he owns, and give it to the πτωχοί.[58] The ideal is turned into narrative reality when Luke describes women supporting the disciples (Luke 8:1–3), reports Zacchaeus's promise to give half of his possessions to the πτωχοί (Luke 19:8), and narrates how Barnabas, Ananias, Sapphira, and other believers sell their properties to have the community redistribute their wealth (Acts 2:44–45, 4:34–5:2). The same radical ideal is upheld when James declares that a wealthy visitor should not be honored above a πτωχός dressed in ῥύπαρα ἐσθῆτι ("shaggy clothes"; Jas 2:1–9), and envisions how the brightly clothed rich will fade into the pale general populace like flowers shedding their petals disappear into the grass (Jas 1:9–11).[59] Paul's many mentions of the collection to the poor of Jerusalem may be a way of recontextualizing the ideal in the less destitute Christian

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[55] Peter R. L. Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2002), 1–7; Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 74–87; William Horst and Brian J. Robinson, "*This* Person Is an Imitator of God: Wealth, *Philanthropia*, and the Addressee of *Ad Diognetum*," *JECS* 29.3 (2021): 309–39, here 312–18.

[56] Peter H. Davids, "The Test of Wealth in James and Paul," in *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity*, eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, NovTSup 115 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 355–84, here 355–56,. argues that the pattern goes back at least to Q.

[57] Mark 6:7–9; cf. Matt 10:9–10; Luke 9:1–3.

[58] Mark 10:17–22; cf. Matt 19:16–22; Luke 18:18–23.

[59] Cf. Rhee, *Loving the Poor*, 32–40. Davids, "The Test of Wealth," 359–62, 374–79.

communities to which he wrote.[60] In the second century, several Christian authors present generosity as a central Christian trait, and the non-Christian author Lucian of Samosata (ca. 120–180 CE) is astonished at how eagerly the Christians give away their resources.[61]

But there is one important difference between the *Acts Thom. Skin* and the earlier literature. In the New Testament, it is the poor πένητες who are encouraged to share their limited resources with the truly destitute πτωχοί, but in Arsenoë's case, the giver is wealthy enough that the πένητες can be included among the recipients. Thus, the poverty ideal is deradicalized from John the Baptist's level of one tunic per person and reconsidered for a Christian community with considerably more possessions. Arsenoë's generosity expresses the same ideal as the Baptist's preaching, only upscaled from a group of πένητες and πτωχοί to a community that includes the wealthy: there should be no significant economic differences among Christians.

5. Sexual Abstinence

Another radically countercultural pattern that is exhibited by Arsenoë, but not mentioned for her fellow converts, is sexual abstinence. When Leucius returns after three years on the road, eager to resume marital practices with his wife, she flatly refuses:

> Having bathed, he went into his bedchamber and sought his wife Arsenoë. When she came into the chamber, he seized her in order to have sex with her. And Arsenoë groaned with a loud voice and said to him: "My lord, put away from you every care and this-worldly merciless desire, especially on the Sabbath, since it is for our God and Savior the king Jesus Christ. If you consecrate yourself on the

[60] Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 298–315,. argues that Paul, among many other early Christians, viewed care for the poor as a central characteristic of Christian believers. Cf. Davids, "The Test of Wealth," 362–70, 379–84.

[61] Lucian, *De morte Peregrini* 13 (LCL 302: 14). See Longenecker, *Remember the Poor*, 60–62; Horst and Robinson, "Imitator," 332–33, 338–39.

> Sabbath, since it is for God, you will always be perfectly holy." Enraged, Leucius said to her with anger: "Where did these words come from?" (5.6–11)[62]

While a romantically attuned reader might read this scene as tacit acknowledgment that Arsenoë has shifted her erotic attachment from Leucius to Thomas, and find this suspicion confirmed when Arsenoë jumps to her death after hearing of Thomas's flaying (6.1), there is no such undertext in this narrative. The scene merely dramatizes the scene when Leucius realizes that his wife has embraced the cultural pattern that especially devoted followers of Christ should refrain from all sexual activities, including those within marriage.[63] Such a pattern is known from other apocryphal acts,[64] and otherwise associated with the Essene and Qumran movement(s). Philo (ca. 20–50 CE), Josephus (ca. 37–100 CE), and Pliny the Elder (ca. 23–79

[62] Tamilia, "Acta Thomae," 396.18–397.2; trans. Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 332: Λουσάμενος εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν κοιτῶνα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐζήτησε τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ Ἀρσενόην. καὶ ἐλθοῦσα ἐν τῷ ταμιείῳ ἐκράτησεν αὐτὴν τοῦ συγγενέσθαι μετ' αὐτῆς. καὶ στενάξας φωνῇ μεγάλῃ, εἶπε πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡ Ἀρσενόη· "Κύριέ μου, ἀπόῤῥιψον ἀπὸ σοῦ πᾶσαν τὴν μέριμναν καὶ τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου τὴν μὴ ἔχουσαν ἐλεημοσύνην μάλιστα ἐν σαββάτῳ, ὅπου ἐστὶ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν τοῦ βασιλέως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. ἐὰν δὲ ἁγνίσῃ ἐν σαββάτῳ, ὅπου ἐστὶ <αὐ>τοῦ, τέλειος ἁγνὸς ἔσῃ πάντοτε." Μανιαθεὶς δὲ ὁ Λεύκιος εἶπε πρὸς αὐτὴν μετὰ θυμοῦ· "Πόθεν οἱ λόγοι οὗτοι;" A has minor differences, such as δέσποτα rather than κύριέ μου and ἀπεκρίθη rather than εἶπε.

[63] Some manuscripts prepare for the scene by having Arsenoë taking a vow of chastity at her conversion.

[64] See e.g. *Acts Phil.* 1.2, where a Galilean widow spontaneously associates the Christian faith with abstinence from sex and meat. Cf. Berglund, "Discipleship Ideals," 319–29.

CE) all agree that some Essenes abstain from marriage,[65] and the Damascus Document (esp. CD 7:4–8) indicates that some in the Qumran community renounced marriage, while others married.[66]

The specification μάλιστα ἐν σαββάτῳ ("especially on the Sabbath") is more surprising, since most apocryphal acts exhibit no interest in Sabbath observance, and since ancient Jews generally had no rule against sex on the Sabbath – the exceptions being Jub. 50.8, which prohibits it as defiling the Sabbath, and some similar prohibitions in the Qumran literature, which probably depend on Jubilees.[67] Judging from Arsenoë's argument that those who consecrates themselves on the Sabbath are always perfectly holy, the story might indicate a variable custom, where some Christians practiced sexual abstinence one day per week, perhaps in preparation for the Sunday Eucharist, while others abstained for longer periods or permanently.

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[65] Philo, *Hypothetica, apud* Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 11.14–18 (LCL 363: 442); Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 2.8.2–13 §§119–61 (LCL 203: 368–84); Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 5.17.4 §73 (LCL 352: 276). Cf. William R. G. Loader, *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Sectarian and Related Literature at Qumran* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 369–73.

[66] Elisha Qimron, "Celibacy in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Two Kinds of Sectarians," in *The Madrid Qumran Congress* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 287–94; Loader, *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality*, 374–76, 381–83, 388–89; Cecilia Wassén, "Women, Worship, Wilderness, and War: Celibacy and the Constructions of Identity in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls*, eds. Joel Baden, Hindy Najman, and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 175 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1361–85.

[67] Loader, *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality*, 365–66; Étan Levine, *Marital Relations in Ancient Judaism*, BZABR 10 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 228; Yonatan S. Miller, "Sabbath-Temple-Eden: Purity Rituals at the Intersection of Sacred Time and Space," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 9.1 (2018): 46–74, here 51–55; Jutta Jokiranta, "Sex and the City: Evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Understanding the Spiritual Meaning of Jerusalem in Three Abrahamic Religions*, Studies on the Children of Abraham 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 73–84.

The ideal of sexual abstinence recurs when Thomas reaches Kentēra, where Jesus is reported to have appeared to a young Gentile[68] on the night before his wedding to proclaim:

> I say to you, young man, do not listen to your father and take a wife, and should you die I will raise you. Rather, keep yourself chaste, so that you might become a deputy to me on earth, and be head over my church. For look, Thomas my apostle is coming into this city, and he will teach you the seal of my body and blood – that I am God and I put on human nature on account of you (7.10–19).[69]

This passage is far more approachable as an introduction to the ideal of sexual renunciation. Jesus calls the presumptive bridegroom not only to convert to Christianity but to forgo his marriage and keep himself chaste, in order to also become Christ's διάδοχος ("successor" or "deputy") on earth, and the κεφαλή ("head") of his community in Kentēra. The groom cancels the wedding (7.6) and accepts Jesus as his δεσπότης ("master")[70] in anticipation for Thomas to arrive, teach him, and give him the σφράγις ("seal") of conversion.[71]

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[68] The groom's father first thinks that his son has been visited by a local Greco-Roman god (7.22).

[69] Tamilia, "Acta Thomae," 403.1–15; trans. Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 336: Σοὶ λέγω, νεανία· νὴ ἀκούσης τοῦ πατρός σου καὶ λάβης γυναῖκα· ἀποθανῇ δέ, καὶ ἀναστήσω σε· ἀλλὰ φύλαξόν σε ἁγνόν, ἵνα γενήσῃ μοι διάδοχος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, καὶ γενοῦ κεφαλὴ ἐπάνω τῆς ἐκκλησίας μου. ἰδοὺ γὰρ Θωμᾶς ὁ ἀπόστολός μου ἔρχεται εἰς τὴν πόλιν ταύτην καὶ αὐτὸς διδάσκει σε τὴν σφραγῖδα τοῦ σώματος καὶ τοῦ αἵματός μου ὅτι θεός εἰμι καὶ ἐνηνθρώπησα δι' ὑμᾶς. Holste's and Spittler's translation of διάδοχος as "follower" has been amended to "deputy" here. A has κορυφή ("head") rather than the synonym κεφαλή, and follows Mn's reading καὶ μιάνης τὸ σῶμα σου ("and defile your body") instead of the rather awkwardly placed ἀποθανῇ δέ, καὶ ἀναστήσω σε ("and should you die I will raise you"). Cf. Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 336 n. b.

[70] *Acts. Thom. Skin* 7.20. The term can be used of both political rulers and slave-owners, and thus subtly reminds the reader that a Christian leader should be Christ's slave.

[71] The term σφράγις ("seal") is an established early Christian term for an initiation rite (anointing, baptism, and Eucharist), frequently used in *Acts Thom.* See Karl Olav Sandnes, "Seal and Baptism in Early Christianity," in *Ablution,*

Both of these scenes concern the sexual abstinence of a local Christian leader. The groom is explicitly called to lead a congregation, and Arsenoë's position as *mater familias* puts her, in her husband's absence, in control of her household and therefore also of the Christian community that is established when the whole household is baptized (4.33, quoted above). Since only people with authority are described as sexually abstinent, the pattern is here established only for Christian leaders.

Sexual abstinence is a well-established cultural patterns among first-century Christian leaders. Despite a strong norm that all Jews should marry and procreate (cf. Gen 1.28), John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul were all unmarried.[72] The Matthean Jesus suggests that the Jewish procreation ideal is not for everyone (Matt 19:11–12),[73] and asserts that marriage will have no place after the resurrection (Matt 22:30). Luke seems to endorse leaving a spouse behind for the sake of the kingdom, since he adds γυναῖκα ("wife") to his list of abstentions leading to heavenly reward in Luke 18:29 (cf. Mark 10:28–31).[74] Some Corinthian Christians apparently viewed complete sexual abstinence as an ideal lifestyle for men, and Paul recommends any unmarried or widowed readers to stay single, but argues against divorce or prolonged sexual

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Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity, eds. David Hellholm et al., BZNW 176 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 1:1441-1481.

[72] Admittedly, both John and Jesus died while young enough for a first marriage, and Paul could have been a widower; cf. Raymond F. Collins, *Accompanied by a Believing Wife: Ministry and Celibacy in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2013), 126–35. The complete silence about any spouses of the disciples, other than Peter, makes it impossible to say whether they were married, permanently celibate, or not yet married at the time narrated in the gospels. *Pace* Collins, *Accompanied*, 87, 109–10.

[73] I cannot agree with Stefan Heid, *Zölibat in der frühen Kirche: Die Anfänge einer Enthaltsamkeitspflicht für Kleriker in Ost und West*, 3rd ed. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2003), 21–29,. that this passage is a general idealization of celibacy.

[74] Cf. also Collins, *Accompanied*, 70–110.

abstinence within marriage (1 Cor 7:1–16).[75] The author of *Acts Thom. Skin* could therefore potentially use Paul to argue that an unmarried man heading for church leadership should forgo marriage, but not to claim that an already married leader should be sexually abstinent.

In the fourth century, sometime between 325 and 381, a dozen bishops assembled in Gangra to condemn the idea of sexual abstinence within marriage. Their extant synodal letter anathemizes those who prohibit women from sleeping with their husbands, abhor marriage, treat the married arrogantly, or abandon their children or parents, as well as women who cut off their hair, dress as males, or abandon their husbands to pursue asceticism.[76] The need for such condemnations demonstrates that all of these customs were practiced among fourth-century Christians – including, presumably, among the nineteen bishops who gathered in Elvira, Spain, earlier in the fourth century, to declare that all bishops, priests, and deacons must keep apart from their wives and avoid fathering children.[77] Later in the century, Jerome of Stridon (ca. 347–420 CE) states that bishops, priests, and deacons should be either virgins or widowers,[78] and a Roman bishop – either Siricius (384–399 CE) or his predecessor Damasius (366–384 CE) – declares that no priest can perform his duties unless he practices sexual abstinence.[79]

In this area, Christian subculture has apparently been complex enough to contain two or more alternative patterns in some tension with one another for several centuries. The ideal of sexual renunciation

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[75] Dunn, *Theology*, 692–98.

[76] Cf. Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.14 (PG 67:1068–81); "The Council of Gangra" in *NPNF*^{2} 14:87–101.

[77] Canon 33 from the Synod of Elvira; Engbert J. Jonkers, *Acta et symbola conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habitae sunt*, Textus minores in usum academicum 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 12–13. Cf. Heid, *Zölibat*, 99–103.

[78] Jerome, *Ep.* 49.21; Isidor Hilberg, *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, CSEL 54 (Leipzig: Freytag, 1910), 386–87. Cf. Heid, *Zölibat*, 135–38.

[79] *Ad Gallos episcopos* 5–6; Yves-Marie Duval, *La décrétale Ad Gallos episcopos: Son texte et son auteur: Texte critique, traduction française et commentaire*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 73 (Boston: Brill, 2005), 30–34. Cf. Collins, *Accompanied*, 140–41.

advocated by *Acts Thom. Skin* – Christian leaders should avoid getting married, and married Christian leaders should practice sexual abstinence – is not in agreement with the ideals of Paul and the bishops of Gangra, but conforms to the emerging majority view advocated by Jerome and the council at Elvira.

6. Readiness to Suffer

When Leucius threatens to torture Thomas, the apostle does not shy away from the impending suffering, but insists that he has used his master's funds in the best way possible – to spread the Christian gospel. Not even when he is handed over to the leatherworkers to be skinned alive (5.23–30) does he repent or hesitate:

> Then the leather cutters said in distress, "Woe is us! What must we do with this just man, who healed all the sick without payment? If we lay our hands on him, his God will be angry with us and send fire from heaven and destroy us. And again, if we do not flay him, the tyrant our governor will murder us." Then Christ's apostle Thomas said to them, "Brothers, do the thing commanded you by your governor." Then they took and flayed him (5.31–34).[80]

The leatherworkers' indecisiveness as to which of two overwhelmingly strong forces they are to obey – Leucius or God – suggests that Thomas could easily tip the scale with a promise of divine protection, and be set free. Instead, he frankly tells his torturers to proceed. Even when Thomas eventually despairs, after Leucius has salt and vinegar sprayed onto his skinless body, and calls to Christ for help (6.6–10), he asserts that he can endure any torture that his failure to immediately believe in Jesus's resurrection might call for

[80] Tamilia, "Acta Thomae," 398.18–399.1; trans. Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 333: Τότε οἱ ἱμαντοτόμοι λέγουσι λυπούμενοι· "Οὐαὶ ἡμῖν· τί ἔχομεν ποιῆσαι τοῦ δικαίου τούτου ἀνδρὸς τοῦ θεραπεύσαντος πάντας τοὺς ἀσθενεῖς δίχα μισθοῦ; ἐὰν ἐπιβάλωμεν τὰς χεῖρας ἡμῶν ἐπ' αὐτόν, ὀργίζεται ἡμῖν ὁ θεὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀποστέλλει πῦρ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἀναλίσκει ἡμᾶς. καὶ πάλιν ἐὰν οὐ ἐκδερματώσωμεν αὐτὸν, φονεύει ἡμᾶς ὁ τύραννος ἄρχων ἡμῶν." Τότε λέγει ὁ ἀπόστολος τοῦ Χριστοῦ Θωμᾶς πρὸς αὐτούς· "Ἀδελφοί, ποιήσατε τὸ προσταχθὲν ὑμῖν παρὰ τοῦ ἄρχοντος ὑμῶν." Τότε λαβόντες αὐτὸν ἐκδερμάτωσαν. Mn omits Οὐαὶ ἡμῖν ("Woe is us"). A has ἀνάστητε ("get up!") instead of ἀδελφοί ("brothers") and κελευσθέν ("commanded") instead of the synonym προσταχθὲν.

(6.14–17; cf. John 20:25). After Jesus comforts him, he accepts his fate, and uses his flayed-off skin to raise the dead, suffering for others in an extremely literal way.[81] While Thomas's tortures seems extreme, and not altogether realistic, there is no question that the story advocates that a Christian leader must be prepared to suffer for the faith.

This readiness to suffer is also upheld in first-century Christian literature, most famously by Paul, who boasts about his hardships to the Corinthians:

> All the more myself: in far greater labors, far longer in prison, in countless beatings, and many times facing death. From the Jews I have five times received forty-but-one lashes, three times I have been beaten, once stoned, three times shipwrecked – I made it through a day and a night on the open sea. Many times I have been traveling, in danger from rivers, in danger from robbers, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in cities, in danger in the wilderness, in danger at sea, in danger from false brothers and sisters, in fatigue and distress, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, cold and naked – and, apart from all this, I am burdened every day by anxiety for all the churches.[82]

Albeit reluctantly, Paul presents his ability to suffer for Christ as commendable. He has not been flayed, but the lashings, beatings, stoning, and shipwrecks have certainly put him close to death. Elsewhere, he argues that sufferings are expected elements of a Christian life (1 Thess 3:3–4; Rom 8:17; Phil 1:29), a source of joy (Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 12:10; Phil 1:18), and perhaps even preferable to a life in mission (Phil 1:20–25).[83]

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[81] Cf. Spittler, "Suffering Thomas," 225–26.

[82] 2 Cor 11:23–27. This translation is my own.

[83] Cf. the discussion in Peter H. Davids, "Why Do We Suffer? Suffering in James and Paul," in *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity*, eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, NovTSup 115 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 435–66, here 444–51; James A. Kelhoffer, *Persecution, Persuasion and Power: Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration of Legitimacy in the New Testament*, WUNT 270 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 30–65; James A. Kelhoffer, "Suffering as Defense of Paul's Apostolic Authority in Galatians and 2 Corinthians

Similarly, the authors of First Peter and James reiterate (1 Pet 1:6–7; 2:18–21; 4:1–2, 12–16; 5:9–10; Jas 1:2–3; 5:13) that a δοῦλος ("slave") of Christ (1 Pet 2:16; Jas 1:1) should expect and welcome suffering.[84] Mark agrees, and stresses (most explicitly in Mark 8:34–35) that a true follower of Christ should be ready to suffer – even though the twelve fail in this regard,[85] a deficiency that Luke corrects by narrating a number of persecution events in Acts,[86] paving the way for more suffering in later apostle stories. In the second century, the non-Christian authors Tacitus (ca. 56–120 CE), Lucian, and Galen (129–99 CE) also recognize readiness to suffer as a prominent Christian ideal,[87] establishing it as a predominant theme in how early Christians were viewed by outsiders.[88]

Although Thomas's readiness to suffer is far from a new development in early Christian subculture, his eagerness combined with the extreme tortures depicted take the ideal beyond habitual phrases. In an era when Christianity was generally accepted, and actual persecution therefore rarer, the author may have found

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11," in *Conceptions of "Gospel" and Legitimacy in Early Christianity*, WUNT 324 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 187–202.

[84] Cf. Davids, "Why Do We Suffer?," 435–44; and Kelhoffer, *Persecution*, 104–26,. who argues that the author views withstanding persecution as a means of witnessing to the persecutors.

[85] Kelhoffer, *Persecution*, 183–225; James A. Kelhoffer, "Hapless Disciples and Exemplary Minor Characters in the Gospel of Mark: The Exhortation to Cross-Bearing as Both Encouragement and Warning," in *Texts and Traditions: Essays in Honour of J. Keith Elliot*, eds. Peter Doble and Jeffrey Kloha (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 95–136.

[86] Kelhoffer, *Persecution*, 344–51.

[87] Tacitus, *Annales* 15.44 (LCL 322 :282–84); Lucian, *De morte Peregrini* 13 (LCL 302: 14); and a remark from Galen's *Summary of Platonic Dialogues* that is extant in Arabic summaries and quotations – see Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians*, Oxford Classical & Philosophical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 15; Rebecca Flemming, "Galen and the Christians: Texts and Authority in the Second Century AD," in *Christianity in the Second Century: Themes and Developments*, eds. James Carleton Paget and Judith Lieu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 171–87.

[88] Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 18–24.

it necessary to go to such lengths in order to make this first-century Christian ideal fresh in his reader's mind.

7. Zeal for Evangelization

Throughout the story, Thomas aims to preach the gospel and invite people to join the Christian movement. In the introduction (1.3), Jesus commissions him to πορευθῇ κηρῦξαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου ("go preach my gospel"). Arrived in India (2.3), he wonders how he will be able to λυθρώσασθαι ("ransom") the souls of the Indians. Later (4.8), he remarks that he has been sent to the Indians ἵνα ἐπιστρέψωσι προς με αἱ χυψαὶ αὐτῶν ("so that their souls would turn to me"). And finally (6.25), Jesus sends him on to Kentēra to σώσῃς τὰς ψυχὰς αὐτῶν ("save their souls"). The same aim is visible to the reader when he describes his skills as an architect of royal palaces consisting of repented souls, a maker of ploughs made of God's words, and a medical healer by use of τὰ ἅγια μυστήρια τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τῆς γραφῆς ("the holy mysteries of God and the Scriptures") – a veiled reference to the sacraments (2.32–36, 5.20–38).[89]

This aim is also reflected in the way the results of Thomas's work are described. In the first city, Arsenoë and her household are baptized (4.33–34), a number of lame, deaf, lepers, and speech-impaired people are healed (4.37), and – as a consequence of these healings – the whole city becomes Christian:

[89] In the first description, he also claims to be able to build "great ships for the business of sailing, accurate measuring vessels, […] spurs and pricks for digging it [the earth] up, and fine yokes" (2.34). It is clear from the context that these skills are also metaphors for missionary prowess, but specifying their more precise meanings is left as an exercise for the reader.

> And when they saw the miracles that God did through the apostle Thomas, everyone in the city – from the least to the greatest of them – believed, and they were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (4.40).[90]

Similarly, in Kentēra, fifteen people are raised from the dead, the priest of the local temple converts and becomes a bishop, and a large number of people are baptized. The whole plot revolves around Thomas's missionary aim, and the other ideals we have identified either support or are consequences of this overall goal.

The same zeal for reaching people and expanding the movement is a recurrent concern in New Testament literature. Paul, for one, claims to be set apart to proclaim Jesus to the Gentiles (Gal 1:15–16), and aims to establish the ὑπακοὴν πίστεως ("obedience of faith") among all nations (Rom 1:5; cf. 16:26). He praises the Philippians for having participated in this mission from day one (Phil 1:5–6; 4:14–16) and lauds the Thessalonians for reaching all of Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess 1:6–8).[91] The Matthean Jesus sends out his disciples to preach and heal among the Jews (Matt 10:1–23), depicts a future where persecuted Christians preach to the whole world (Matt 24:4–14), and commissions his followers to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18–20).[92] The Gospels of Luke and John are both aimed at convincing newcomers of

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[90] Tamilia, "Acta Thomae," 396.2–5; trans. Holste and Spittler, "Wonderworking Skin," 331: Καὶ ἰδόντες τὰ θαύματα ἃ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τοῦ ἀποστόλου Θωμᾶ ἐπίστευσαν πάντες τῆς πόλεως ἀπὸ μικρῶν ἕως μεγάλων αὐτῶν καὶ ἐβαπτίσθησαν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. A reads Καὶ ἐπίστευσεν εἲς αὐτὸν πᾶσα ἡ πόλις ἀπὸ μικρῶν ἕως μεγάλων διὰ τὰς ἰάσεις τὰς γινομένας παρὰ τοῦ ἀποστόλοῦ τοῦ Χριστοῦ Θωμᾶ ("And the whole city came to believe in him, from the least to the greatest, by the healings that took place through Christ's apostle Thomas").

[91] Scott Hafemann, "The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul," in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, eds. Jostein Ådna and Hans Kvalbein, WUNT 127 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 165–84,. argues that Paul's whole theology is driven by his missionary impetus.

[92] The debate on Matthew's tension between Jewish and Gentile missions seems to move toward the consensus that both categories are included in what the author advocates, whereas Israel loses its initial priority, but is not

the truth of the Christian message (Luke 1:4, John 20:31), and Acts describes how Peter, Philip, Paul, and others gain disciples in Judea, Samaria, Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea, Antioch, and many other places.[93]

The only significant difference here is where the projected conversions are expected to take place. With most of the Roman empire at least nominally Christian, the author of the *Acts Thom. Skin* has his eye on the possibility of gaining new converts not within Greco-Roman civilization, but in far-away locations such as India.

8. Conclusion

This paper has surveyed patterns of ideal behavior depicted in the *Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin*, a Greek Christian narrative believed to originate in fourth- or fifth-century Egypt. Based on Kathryn Tanner's theory of human cultures as overlapping sets of behavioral patterns under constant renegotiation due to external pressures and internal tensions, I have suggested that early Christian stories may be analyzed as constructing subcultures within Greco-Roman society, where the common set of behavioral patterns is supplemented or modified to express an alternative to the majority culture. In stories about the apostles,

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abandoned. See Peter Stuhlmacher, "Matt 28:16–20 and the Course of Mission in the Apostolic and Postapostolic Age," in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, eds. Jostein Ådna and Hans Kvalbein, WUNT 127 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 17–43; Paul Foster, *Community, Law and Mission in Matthew's Gospel*, WUNT 177 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 218–52; Vicky Balabanski, "Mission in Matthew against the Horizon of Matthew 24," *New Testament Studies* 54.2 (2008): 161–75; Bitrus A. Sarma, *Hermeneutics of Mission in Matthew: Israel and the Nations in the Interpretative Framework of Matthew's Gospel* (Carlisle: Langham, 2015), 206; David E. Aune, Reidar Hvalvik, and Jostein Ådna, eds., "The Mission to Israel and the Nations: The Understanding of Mission in the Gospel of Matthew Reconsidered," in *The Church and Its Mission in the New Testament and Early Christianity: Essays in Memory of Hans Kvalbein*, WUNT 404 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 45–61.

[93] Cf. e.g. Christoph W Stenschke, "Mission in the Book of Acts: Mission of the Church," *Scriptura* 103 (2010): 66–78; Stephen J. Strauss, "The Purpose of Acts and the Mission of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169 (2012): 443–64.

aspirational patterns ("ideals"), which can be used to identify potential leaders and role models within the community, may be more prevalent than compulsory patterns ("norms"), which are more useful for establishing whether an individual belongs to the group or not.[94]

By observing the narrated behavior of the apostle and his converts, we have identified five aspirational patterns advocated by this story: (1) servitude to Christ – Christian leaders should exist to serve Christ; (2) voluntary poverty – there should be no significant economic differences within a Christian community; (3) sexual renunciation – Christian leaders should avoid getting married, and married Christian leaders should practice sexual abstinence; (4) readiness to suffer – Christians should be prepared to suffer for their faith; and (5) zeal for evangelization – Christian believers should preach the gospel and invite others to join the movement. All five of these ideals have also been found to be prominent in several strands of New Testament literature, and in multiple cases highlighted by second-century non-Christian authors as typical Christian ideals.

These ideals are not mutually independent. Evangelization is the primary work ascribed by Christ to his δοῦλοι ("slaves"), the lack of significant economic differences is part of the vision of a kingdom of God, and suffering for the faith is a sometimes unavoidable consequence of missionary work. The lack of a spouse and children may also be viewed as beneficial to a slave's duty to work solely for the wishes of his owner, although no such connection is made within the story, where part-time or full-time sexual abstinence is rather described as ἁγνεία ("holiness" or "purity").[95]

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[94] Compared to my earlier study, we have managed to present a solid theoretical framework for the study of aspirational patterns of behavior connected to early Christian role models – a concept that should match my prior discipleship patterns rather well.

[95] Since the ἁγνεία ideal previously identified in Berglund, "Discipleship Ideals," 323, 332,. in *Acts Phil.* 1 also comprises some form of sexual renunciation, future studies may reveal to what extent other ideals expressed in various apocryphal acts match or overlap.

In comparison to their New Testament counterparts, all five ideals present in the *Acts Thom. Skin* have been updated, mitigated, or recontextualized for a later audience. But rather than a general radicalization or deradicalization, different ideals are adapted in different directions. The two ideals of servitude to Christ and readiness to suffer have been considerably radicalized, the dying metaphor of a slave of Christ into a sale of the apostle to an Indian slave-owner and the suffering ideal into eagerness for extreme torture. These adaptations revivify the ideals for an audience whose Christian subculture is less in conflict with the surrounding imperial culture than that of previous Christian generations.

In contrast, the ideal of voluntary poverty has been deradicalized from John the Baptist's demand that anyone with two tunics should share one with the destitute πτωχοί to an ideal where the poor πένητες should expect to receive, rather than give away, as rich land-owners redistribute their wealth to their new Christian siblings. Recontextualized from a Christian community limited to the poor and the even poorer to one which includes all strata of Roman society, this ideal restates the principle that there should be no significant economic differences among Christians.

The ideal of sexual abstinence has been clarified and regularized. The vague notion that the pioneers John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul were all unmarried is turned into a clear expectation of early Christian leaders to remain unmarried or practice sexual abstinence within their marriages. No corresponding expectation regarding regular Christian believers is expressed, but the ideal is clearly a factor in selecting candidates for leadership.

The overarching ideal of the *Acts Thom. Skin,* which the other four support or follow from, is a zeal for evangelization that is also the driving force behind the Matthean Jesus's commission to a worldwide mission, Paul's ceaseless work for the gospel, and the apostle stories within the book of Acts. But compared to the earlier material, where the evangelization takes place within Greco-Roman civilization, the nominally Christian empire has relocated the missionary activities to far-away locations such as India.

The subculture expressed by the *Acts of Thomas and His Wonderworking Skin* is thus found to consist entirely of ideals expressed in the New Testament, updated, mitigated, and recontextualized for a fourth- or fifth-century Christian audience. Far from advocating an alternative Christianity in opposition to the emerging orthodoxy, this narrative reveals some of the constant renegotiation of New Testament ideals that formed the development of early Christian culture through the centuries.

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