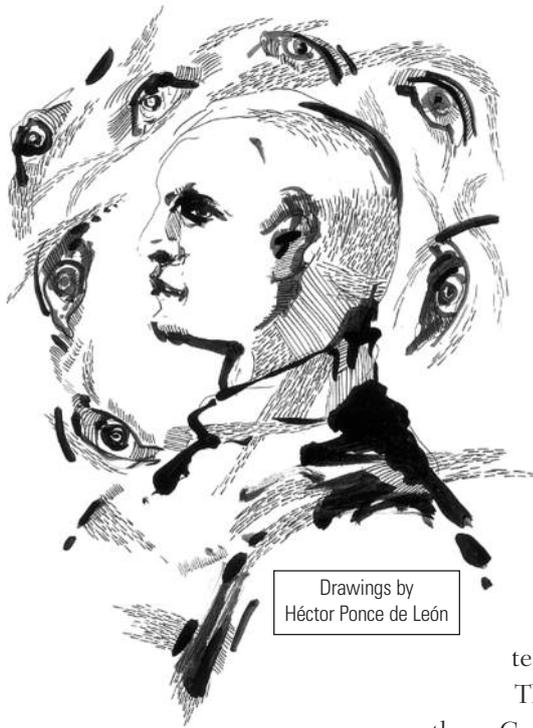


The Life Of Friar Servando

Fragment

By Christopher Domínguez Michael

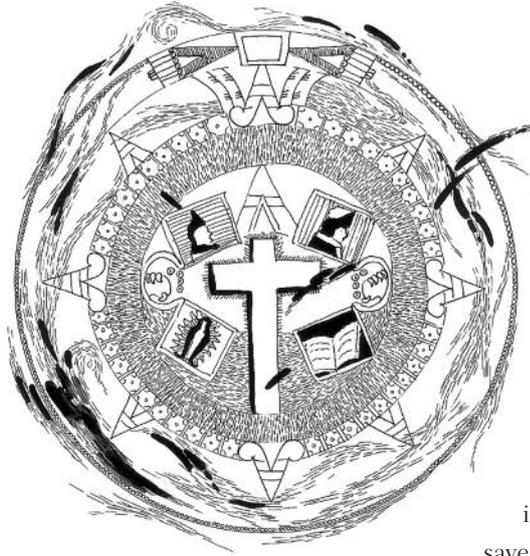


Drawings by
Héctor Ponce de León

Saint Thomas the Apostle was far removed from miracle-working and betrayal. His fame stems from a more worldly quality: doubt. He did not believe in Lazarus's resurrection and vacillated about Jesus's until He subjected him to the test of touch. Thomas's doubt seems a small thing next to Simon Peter's denials. But, thanks to the apocryphal traditions, Thomas is linked with the craft of writing, which the moderns sustained in the art of doubting. Sober in the New Testament, Saint Thomas expresses himself fully in the apocryphal Gnostic Gospels. Stories of Jesus's childhood are attributed to him in which Thomas, called the Israelite, tells the tales of the clay sparrows and of the doctors. A book about the teachings of the Nazarene is also attributed to him.

The hyperbolic, apocryphal Gospels —not all of them Gnostic— were the culture in which a blossoming religiosity grew and, with arms from Hellenism and Judaism, simultaneously popularized and complicated the life, miracles and nature of Jesus Christ. Once the Gospel quartet of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John was established, the heretical or simply legendary narratives sweetened the ears of those who found the canon dry or sparse. In apocryphal literature, Thomas occupies a prominent place not only because his Gospel is the only one completely extant, but because of his exciting powers as an apostle who doubts and bears witness. Another Gospel of Thomas was discovered in the Nag Hamadi Cave in 1945, in Coptic; this Gospel has the particularity of being sapiential and not hagiographic.

The Syrian Tacian, a prominent second-century thinker, lived in Rome and was a student of Saint Justinian. He headed up the Encratites, rejecting marriage and the reproduction of the species, arguing that it reproduced sin, the devil's work, in every being. A succinct spirit, he wrote the so-called *Diatessaron*, a summary of the canonical texts used by the Syrian liturgy until the fifth century, which only adds to Thomas's doubt the question of what he thought about during the eight days he had to wait to believe.



More important—between heresy and proto-orthodoxy—was the work of Valentinus, the first doctor of the Alexandrian Gnosis in the second century, who preached in Rome about the year 155. According to his *Book of Faithful Wisdom* or the *Valentinus Gospel* (refuted by Iranaeus and Tertulian, attributed to Valentinus or to his school), after Jesus’s resurrection, he spent 11 years on Earth teaching the apostles the enigmas that he found in the heavenly spheres. Jesus tells the story of the aeon Sophia, Faithful Wisdom, and how she, swept away by her inordinate desire to know the light in the distance, falls into material chaos. Sophia is saved because, contrary to Thomas, she believed in Jesus before having seen him. Ernst Renan considers that the

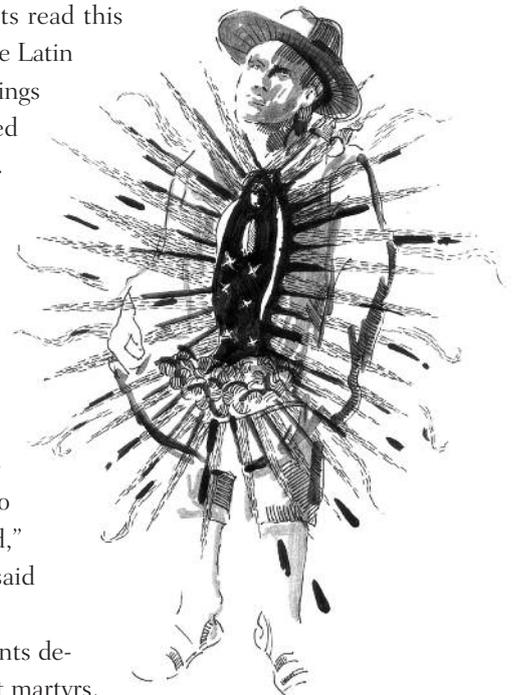
apostles played an “almost ridiculous role” in the Valentinus text, a story as beautiful as it is prolix, just like Gnosticism in general, that illusory, extravagant adolescence of Christianity.

During the sessions, the Christ, who in the three days of his resurrection returned to Galilee to meet with some of his apostles, questions the chosen. Thus, in the Valentinus Gospel, Thomas is called upon to interpret the first mystery and explain the salvation of Faithful Wisdom. Valentinus adds a new detail. To lessen Thomas’s doubtfulness, he says that the apostle was cured by Jesus of a disease, perhaps a broken right arm (XXIII, 26).

Thomas means *abyss* and *duplicate*. The second meaning coincides with a Greek term that was passed on to the New Testament and that is why he is called Didymus, which in Greek means “twin.” Some philologists read this division as a split, given that there is a similarity between the Latin word *Thomas* and the Greek word *thómos*. Different meanings reveal an ingrown image of the apostle because he enjoyed the privilege of penetrating the divine flesh of Jesus Christ. While the rest of the disciples only knew divinity in one fashion, Thomas saw it resuscitated and felt it. He plunged into the wounds. His act of faith was individual and, according to the interpreters of the text, he received double proof of the resurrection of the Lord.

Following the Latin expression of the term *totum means*, which means “he who saw everything,” in *From the Contemplative Life*, Prosperus said that Thomas wanted to see the Lord in his full magnificence. It is also possible to surmise that the noun “Thomas” comes from *theos*, “God,” and *meus*, “mine”, which was precisely what the apostle said when he verified the resurrection.

The Golden Legend is a compilation of stories and events derived from the New Testament and of the lives of the first martyrs.

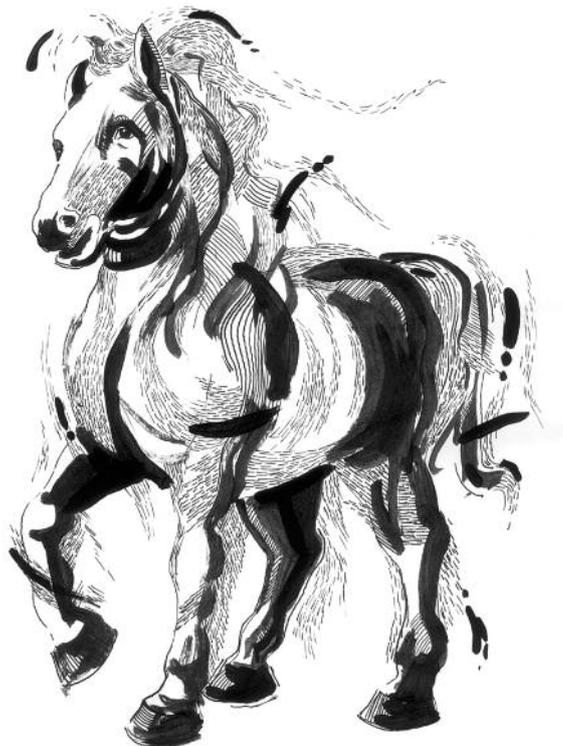


Many stories reputed to be from the Bible actually come from this book, one of the most discretely popular in history. This work by Jacobus da Voragine (c. 1230-1298), the archbishop of Genoa in the thirteenth century, finished turning Thomas into an eccentric, closer to the feats of a miracle worker than to the severe piety of the apostle. While in Cesarea, the Lord appears to tell him that Gundafor, the king of India, seeks an architect, and Thomas, after begging not to be sent to India, ends up going there because he will be recompensed with the palm of martyrdom. The preacher will become famous as violent and impatient for punishing a wine server who buffets him on the head because he is abstemious; Thomas punishes him by making a lion appear and devour him. Finally, a black dog places the hand of the blasphemer at the apostle's feet.

Saint Augustine rejected this view of Thomas, more comical than Manichaeic. He says that these were the preacher's stratagems to sow the fear of God among the inhabitants of India, whom he converted and baptized. With his fame as an architect, he drew a map of a sumptuous palace for Gundafor and, after being rewarded, disappeared. Despite the king's later apostasy, his brother Gad prostrated himself before the apostle. The legend cannot be discarded out of hand because a sovereign by the name of Gondophernes or Guduphara ruled what is now Afghanistan, Baluchistan and the Punjab in the year 46.

In India, Thomas cured the sick with the power of lightening and baptized 9,000 people. Frequently made prisoner, Thomas miraculously escaped from his pursuers and divine providence saved him time and again from ridicule and death. He was also asked to commit idolatry, demanding that he make sacrifices to the Sun. He knelt and asked a demon to destroy the idol, and

it came to pass. When the friars and scholars of the New World swore they had proof of a visit of Thomas to the New World, they ap-



pealed to the saint's reputation as an iconoclast, a hunter of souls and an enemy of human sacrifice.

In the end, a high priest of the pagans pierced the heart of Saint Thomas and killed him.

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The so-called Thomas cycle was very popular because of its apocryphal, Gnostic character. This is no paradox given the popular liking for hermetic texts. In addition, *The Facts of Saint Thomas* fictionalized the Christian message among the growing gentile public, avid for the novel intricacies of the new religion.

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In New Spain, the Dominican Friar Servando Teresa de Mier (1763-1827) must have read this literature, of such bad repute in his time, but which was part of the scant stock of novel-like literature, so to speak, that the theology students and readers at the Royal Pontifical University of Mexico had. Mier, however, did not need the apocryphal nor the Byzantine stories. He was heir to one of the great novels of history, the preaching of Thomas in America, of which he was the last great apologist. An extremely controversial topic in the criollo discussions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was Servando who took it to the end of the viceroyalty: in 1820 he was still contemplating—with growing criticism—the feasibility (more theological and political than historiographic) of that mission. The son of the Santo Domingo monastery, Servando neither could nor wanted to separate his own life from the mythical, poetic or religious force of the message of the Gospel.

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Friar Servando Teresa de Mier believed in the pilgrimage of Saint Thomas the Apostle and, like him, was a doubter, a traveler and a prisoner. With a broken arm, he used his pen as his staff and preached the world over, learning to exorcise demons. **MM**

All fragments taken from: Christopher Domínguez Michael, *Vida de Fray Servando* (Mexico City: ERA, 2004), pp. 19-25.

