

THOMAS, THE APOSTLE

One of the 12 apostles whose name appears in all four Gospels. The name is a transliteration of an Aramaic word meaning “twin” and appears in the NT as Thomas. Among Greek Christians, there was a tendency to use his Hellenistic name, Didymus (*didumos*, “twin”); this name appears three times in John (Jn 11:16; 20:24; 21:2). There is ample evidence from koine papyri that the name Didymus was well known in the NT era.

Thomas appears in each synoptic list of apostles (Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18, Lk 6:15; cf. Acts 1:13) but plays no further role. His celebrated appearance in the fourth Gospel is interesting. Here Thomas expresses the despair of the final approach to Jerusalem (Jn 11:16) and presses Jesus to explain his words of departure in the upper room (14:5). In the Gospel’s closing scenes is the familiar episode in which Thomas doubts the Lord’s resurrection (20:24) and then is given compelling proof (vv 26–28), after which Thomas called Jesus “my Lord and my God.” Thomas is also named in John’s epilogue (21:2).

Two apocryphal, pseudepigraphical works bear Thomas’s name: the Gospel of Thomas (from Nag Hammadi), which records 114 “secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke” and which Thomas is said to have preserved; and the Acts of Thomas (extant in both Greek and Syriac), which says that Jesus and Thomas were twins (sharing similar appearances and destinies) and that the apostle obtained secret teachings. This apocryphal account even explains Thomas’s fate. Against his wishes, Thomas traveled to India under the command of the Lord. There he was martyred with spears by the hand of an Indian king. He was raised and his empty tomb took on magical properties. Today in St. Thomas, India, Christians assert that they are the spiritual descendants of the apostle.¹

Thomas the Apostle (Θωμᾶς, *Thōmas*). One of the twelve apostles. Doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Biblical References

In the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, Thomas appears only in the lists of the apostles (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). However, John includes additional references to Thomas.

In John 11:16, Thomas showed devotion and courage (Carson, *John*, 410). Jesus wished to return to Bethany of Judaea because his friend, Lazarus, had died (John 11:1–7). Though the disciples were concerned because Jews in Judaea had recently tried to stone Jesus (John 11:8), Thomas replied, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16 ESV).

In John 14:1–4, Jesus told the disciples that He would prepare a place for them in heaven, and He added that they knew the way to get there. Thomas asked, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (John 14:5 ESV). Jesus answered, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6 ESV).

The most famous episode involving Thomas (from which he gets the name “Doubting Thomas”) occurred when he did not believe the other disciples’ report that Jesus had risen from the dead (John 20:24–29). He replied, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, [*Tyndale Bible Dictionary*](#), Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1255–1256.

place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:25 ESV). Eight days later, Jesus appeared to Thomas and said, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe” (John 20:27 ESV). Thomas answered, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28 ESV)

Finally, in John 21:2, Thomas joined Peter and several other disciples on a fishing trip. After they caught nothing, Jesus appeared and told them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. When they did, they caught 153 fish (John 21:3–14).

Extrabiblical References

Early Christian traditions variously indicate that Thomas became a missionary to Parthia or to India. The tradition that he went to India is primarily associated with the Syrian church; it appears in the late second or early third century *Acts of Thomas* as well as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the fourth-century work of St. Ephrem the Syrian. The tradition that he went to Parthia is associated with the Egyptian church. Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.1) follows the latter tradition, citing Origen (Moffett, *History of Christianity*, 32–33).

Three later nonbiblical works are associated with Thomas:

1. The *Gospel of Thomas*
2. The *Acts of Thomas*
3. The *Book of Thomas the Contender*

However, all of these were rejected as noncanonical by the early church.

Didymus

In three passages, John notes that Thomas was also called Didymus, or “Twin” (Δίδυμος, *Didymos*; John 11:16; 20:24; 21:2). Thomas is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew דָּוִם (*te'om*) or Aramaic ܬܝܡܝܬܐ (*te'oma'*), which both mean “twin” (Carson, *John*, 410; see also Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, *Lexicon*, 463).

In two Syriac manuscripts of John 14:22, in place of the accepted text “Judas, not Iscariot,” one Syriac manuscript reads “Thomas” and another reads “Judas Thomas” (Klijn, “Judas Thomas,” 88). This suggests that a disciple of Jesus with the name Judas was called “Twin” (i.e., Thomas or Didymus). Klijn suggests that the principal character of the *Acts of Thomas* may have originally been Judas, and the name was later changed to Thomas (Klijn, “Judas Thomas,” 92). The *Acts of Thomas* indicates that Judas (Thomas) was called “Twin” because he looked like Jesus (Klijn, “Judas Thomas,” 92–94).²

² Aaron K. Tresham, [“Thomas the Apostle,”](#) in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).