


# Parthian-India and Aksum: A geographical case for pre-Ezana early Christianity in Ethiopia

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The narrative of Indian Christianity that is compositely based on Thomine tradition derives significantly from the reality of Parthian-India geo-economics and geopolitics. Although Aksumite trade and diplomatic visibility are a prevalent feature of the Greco-Roman imperial history in the BCE – CE era, the narrative regarding Ethiopian Christianity is a 4th-century CE reality. Ground is made to deduce the possibility of early Christianity akin to apostolic Christianity in Ethiopia as a consequence of similar circumstances in Parthian-India. So as to solidify the arguments and engage relevant data, document analysis complemented by cultural historiography and the archaeology of religion was implemented in this study. A deductive parallel review of Indian and Ethiopian geopolitical and geo-economics history within the context of Christianity as an emergent religion of the 1st century CE is implicative. The narrative of Ethiopia is completed when it is placed within its extensive geographic context, thereby consequently acknowledging its role within the Mediterranean world. Reference to India substantiates the logic of the argument and entails the possibility of the 1st to 3rd century Christian presence in Ethiopia.

**Contribution:** The research highlights a revisionist history of Ethiopian Christianity thereby creating a new narrative for Jewish Christianity and Christian origins, a subject key to the field of theology.

**Keywords:** Christian history; Ethiopia; India; Thomas; early Christianity.

## Introduction

The narrative of Indian Christianity as traced to the tradition of Thomas is integrated within the complex of geo-economics and geopolitics of the 1st to 2nd century Common Era (CE) Parthian-India and its maritime connections with the Mediterranean world. Based on the prevalent literary and epigraphic evidence that validates the reality of India within Before Common Era (BCE) and early CE commerce and politics, historians have decoded concrete accounts that have been established. The interconnection between the records of trade and politics and the spread of Christianity in India forms a basis for a case for Ethiopian Christianity. The research observes the connection between Parthian-India and Aksum, correspondingly the role of Ethiopia within the economic and political networks in which India was a part. By validating the reality of Aksumite economics and diplomacy within the Mediterranean world within the 1st to 3rd century CE, the research argues for the possibility of an earlier Christianity in Ethiopia – one that was connected to apostolic Christianity. In perspective of the primacy of Jewish elements within early Indian Christianity, a deductive comparison with Ethiopia is merited.

Aggregately, Ethiopia and India were directly linked and this enhances the argument. The viability of trade relations between BCE Ptolemies and Aksum–Adulis also sets base for another argument regarding the visibility of Ethiopia in these early eras. Further corroboration of the preceding assertion will be developed by reviewing the continued links between Aksum and Rome.

## Methodology

The main method in application is document analysis, which involved the systematic review and evaluation of primary and secondary data (cf. Bowen 2009:27; Ritchie & Lewis 2003). So as to develop a discussion that gives due regard to the socio-cultural dynamics, cultural historiography was duly implemented (Danto 2008:17).

As an extension to cultural historiography, the implied religious-political complex characteristic of the study is viewed through the lens of enculturation and self-definition (Rukuni 2018:156). The archaeology of religion was an inferred method because of the diverse artefacts referred to in the study and to substantiate literary evidence (Insoll 2004:59,61; Yamauchi 1972:26).

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## Substantiating the Thomas tradition in perspective of Ethiopia

The legend of Thomas is generally accepted by a significant number of Indian and non-Indian scholars (Panikkar 1963:13; Rawlinson 2002; ed. Rapson 1922:579). A relatively substantial argument for the tradition came in the form of numismatics. Discoveries in the Kabul Valley of Afghanistan, a Buddhist city located in the proximity to Peshawar, unearthed numismatics and stone tablets that facilitated the dating of the reign and existence of King Gundaphar (Medleycott 1905:3–10; Smith 1906:36–38, 54–56).

The find at Peshawar is significant in that it entails a more precise dating for the reign of King Gundaphar. This is because it places the reign of King Gundaphar within the time frame beginning in the c19 century CE, thereby implying he was still the king during the traditional dates of the inception of Thomas' mission in the c4 to c5/6 century CE. This is because the king is dated to have been reigning during the *Samvat* year 103; this is a numbering that begins what was termed the Vikrama era in 58 BCE (Pothen 1968:13; Thomas 1913:636). The geopolitical significance of King Gundaphar is substantiated in his alliance with the Persians, hence resulting in the Partho-Scythian dynasty titled the Pahlava Indian dynasty (Ayyer 1926:13–16). Historical evidence suggests that King Gundaphar was a dominant ruler within the region of Northwest India.

The other composite evidence stems from the detailed marine travel evidence in the 1st century CE. A mariners' manual titled the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, dated to have been written in the 60 century CE by an Egyptian Greek, corresponds to a latter dating of the Thomas' tradition of the c50 and c72 century CE (Moffet 1998:31; Schoff 1912). The detailed nature of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* is notable in its description of routes characterised by focus on specific winds, currents, harbours, prominent centres of trade and native peoples. Aggregately, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* affirms the possibility of inter-travel between the Roman Empire and India, thereby further validating sections in Strabo.

Strabo made claims regarding his tour to Egypt that places him as a contemporary of Jesus Christ. In his narrative that positions himself during the Roman Prefecture of Gallus over Egypt, he recounts how 120 ships a year were bound for India from the Myos Hormos in the Red Sea (Strabo's *Geographica* 2.5.12, ed. Jones 1917:455).

Significantly, in addition, he mentions the Ethiopian frontiers as notable stops within his Egyptian tour.

The Pax Romana entailed that mercantile practice would be viable when accessed through Roman routes both by sea and land. This thereby meant an eastern incline by land for Armenian, Syrian and Jewish traders and by sea for Greek and Arab middlemen (Moffet 1998:31). There were also

notable discoveries in the phenomenal monsoon winds within the Arabian Sea that entailed the ease of respective voyages in different seasons (*Ptolemy's geography*) (Warmington 1974:83). From India, Roman ships brought jewels, spices and pepper, ivory and peacocks and Kashmir wool (Warmington 1974:61). Notably, labour or slave trade was not an unusual factor in the 1st century CE as evidenced by the importation of Greek carpenters by the Chola monarch of the Southern Tamil kingdom (Warmington 1974:61). This highlights a significant fact regarding the case of Ethiopian Aksum that was characterised by the legendary port at Adulis (cf. Bowersock 2013; Schoff 1912). Adulis, now part of modern-day Eritrea, was an official imperial trading centre situated close to the Gulf of Zula. The port city was an *emporion nomimon* [legal emporium] (Bowersock 2013:30; *Periplus*, section 4, Casson 1989:51–52). The above-mentioned title implies the autonomous significance that characterised the port city, as it was under the regulation of the local monarch rather than the customary Roman commercial law that generally authorised trade centres. Adulis has a record of imports which came into Ethiopia such as glassware and beads, Roman currency for resident Romans, cloaks, wares in gold and silver (*Periplus*, section 6, Casson 1989:52–55). Notably, there is no verification as to all imports reaching Axum as some could have been for Adulis alone (Munro-Hay 1991).

Mention of Ζωσκαλις (Greek) (Zoskales)/*Zahakale* (Ethiopic) as the 1st-century sovereign over the Erythraean coast, the region ranging from the Moschophagoi to Barbaria in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, confirms the significance of the port city, which was under his domain (Schoff 1912:23). The city held an autonomous existence as a unit within the greater region of the Aksumite negus' reign (Cerulli 1959:4).

Perceivably, given the long titlature of the Aksumite negus that identified him as the king of kings, the prince/*nagasi* was therefore a subservient ruler to the Aksumite king. This thereby subjects the port city of Adulis to the extensive geopolity of Ethiopia. The relevance of this port was its role as part of the Red Sea maritime enterprise during the Pax Romana and the active international policy of Ethiopia in Himyar in the Arabian Peninsula.

The significance of Adulis with respect to the Mediterranean world was a function of its natural resourcefulness in ivory, elephants and the influence of Ethiopian rulers over regions south of the Nile (Bowersock 2013). This reality defined the relevance of Ethiopia in the Ptolemaic era. This was evidenced by the Hellenic influence that was impressed upon Ethiopian royal practice. Zoskales is identified as to have been an expert in Greek letters, the reconstructed monumental throne of Adulis, and the inscriptions by Sembrouthes was in Greek and antequely dated Ethiopic numismatics are in Greek (Conti Rossini 1927:179–212). Cerulli (1959:8) argues that this hellenisation was a function of Ethiopia's role during the Lagid dynasty with respect to the Egyptian maritime route to India. The connection of Adulis with the rest of the Roman sea route world leads to a direct contact with Indian trade. Indirectly this establishes

the possibility of the 1st-century Christianity within the nation of Ethiopia. This is arguably so as deduced from the prevalence of Aksumite, Adulis port within the Mediterranean civilisation. The next step is positioning Ethiopian Christian tradition against Indian Christian tradition as a function of the 1st to 3rd century trade.

## Locating Ethiopian and Indian Christian tradition amidst 1st to 3rd century commerce

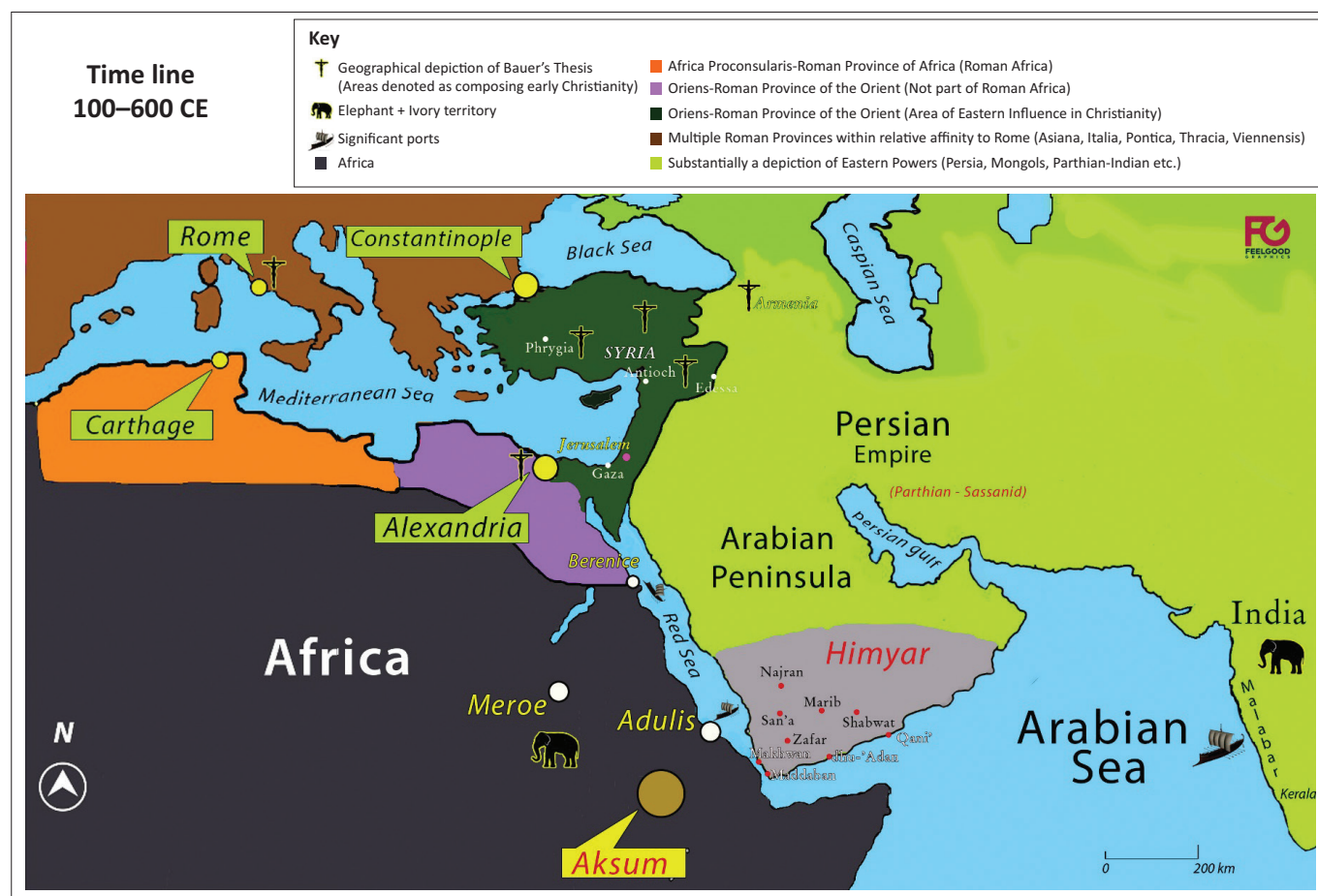
Perceivably, the trade between Rome and India is an extensively corroborated establishment; however, by extension the involvement of Aksum within this respective commerce is also implied directly. Cosmas Indicopleustes, although wrote in the 6th century, recounted that Aksumite vessels reached eastern areas, such as modern-day Sri Lanka (*Christian Topography* III 65; Wolska-Conus 1968–1973:1:502–505). During the 525 CE invasion of Himyar, the composition of the Byzantine–Aksumite alliance’s navy was characterised by a substantial Aksumite armada. A notable fact is that these ships from Aksum were of Ethiopian origin, made at Adulis. The preceding claims by Cosmas Indicopleustes were recently entrenched by the recovery of an Aksumite copper coin and Aksumite pottery from the southern coast of Arabia. That was at the port settlement of Qana (Phillipson

2012:200). In addition, in Berenice Troglodytica, an Egyptian seaport on the western Red Sea coast, there was a discovery of a coin dated the c. 3rd – 4th century CE of Aphilas together with Aksumite pottery (eds. Sidebotham & Wendrich 2007:201, 373; Tomber 2008:104–107). This compositely implies the economic geopolitical visibility of Ethiopia in the c. 3rd – 4th century CE and possibly earlier, thereby implying the possibility of religious interexchange in the form of migrating Christians and Jews. Although essentially based on the mentioned evidence, the preceding fact remains intrinsically a possibility (see Figure 1).

Correspondingly, the observations regarding Indian trade serve to authenticate the possibility of the accounts narrated within the tradition of *Acts of Thomas*. From the insinuation of substantial intercontinental trade between the Roman Empire and the Persian–Indian region, to the numismatic evidence of King Gundaphar’s existence, a considerable pool of evidence from which the Thomas tradition can be validated is derived.

Although not directly implying the authenticity of the account, the highlighted evidence increased its probable credibility. For starters, there was an actual king named Gundaphar; he was a notably significant ruler.

Thomas’ travel to India was the 1st-century CE marine reality. The insinuation of inter-regional labour exchange was a



Source: Adapted from Bowersock, G.W., 2013, *The throne of adulis: Red Sea wars on the eve of Islam*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

FIGURE 1: Aksum and its geopolitical environment in 100 CE – 700 CE.



possibility and recurrent phenomenon with Indian monarchs. Mention of ports that correspond to specific routes in credible classical sources such as *Ptolemy* and *Strabo's Geographics* implies that the *Acts of Thomas* transcend myth and legend. This may also give credence to the theory that the narrative was made to resonate with reality.

Arguably, the account of Thomas' Indian evangelistic expedition took place; however, possibly because of fluid oral tradition and dynamics in the development of Christian orthodoxy (100–300 century CE), the *Acts of Thomas* is a reflection of latter impressionism. In perspective of Ethiopian Christianity and an argument positioning it in tangent with apostolic Christianity, there are deductive insights. As established, the Indian apostolic tradition is derived from the Thomine tradition. The tradition itself has been exposed to substantial evaluation in relation to marine expeditions, records of Indian dynasties and Persian–Indian geopolitics. In reference to Ethiopia, a question can be posed relating to its resonance with the 1st-century marine travel, geopolitics and validation of dynasties.

Ullendorff (1960) and Conti Rossini (1928) by assigning an 'exaggeratedly' catalytic significance to Ethiopia's foreign interactions with Southern Arabia implied a later dating for cultural innovations and diverse developments within the ancient Aksumite civilisation (Phillipson 2012:19). Substantial epigraphic details have proved that much of the cultural phenomenon in Aksum to have been of indigenous origin and, therefore, has originated essentially before the assigned dates that are ascribed in conformity with foreign contact (Phillipson 2012:19). This aggregately implies the exclusion of Ethiopia in narratives detailing the 1st century CE, for example.

There is substantial evidence to validate the involvement of Aksum in the noted trade and diplomacy of the 1st-century CE world. Significantly, in addition to links with Rome and Jerusalem, Ethiopia stretched its influence as far as to India. Ethiopia was renowned for its ivory an elemental feature of furniture in the Mediterranean world (see *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, section 6; Casson 1989:55). This increased after the 3rd century CE with Byzantine. There was emphatic and explicit recognition of the ivory trade and the abundance of elephants and rhinoceroses in Ethiopian Axum (Casson 1989:274–276). This thereby implies certain probabilities regarding the spread of apostolic Christianity. Within the convolution of commercial exchange, a basis could be derived of possible contact with early apostolic Christianity.

## Maritime links of Ethiopia

The maritime connections between Aksum and the rest of the world affected an exchange that was not limited to trade and economics alone. Although part of an obsolete argument that attributes the sophistication of Ethiopian civilisation to exotic influences, the inference of substantial cultural interexchange between Aksumite Ethiopia and the Mediterranean and

eastern world consequent of its link in the maritime route from Egypt to India is notable. Cerulli (1959:9) argued that the trade route linking Ethiopia and India implied Ethiopian initial contact with countries in the Mediterranean West and Central Asia. Correspondingly, the prominence of the Indian red route directly implied the significance of Ethiopia and its foreign policy in the west and with the Middle East. Reiteratively, the establishment of Aksumite economic significance to the antique world is traceable to Alexander's Hellenic era (see Figure 2).

Cerulli (1959:9) asserts that the age of Alexander promoted civilisation interexchange through multiple sea ports such as Myos Hormos, Arsinoe, Philothesa and Berenike that were founded along the Red Sea. Adulis together with Μουζα (Greek: Mokha) formed part of this network, although in a distinguished capacity as εμποριον νομμοι (Greek: legal emporiums), that is ports recognised under the local authorities within the imperial maritime trade network. The autonomy and relevance of Ethiopia to the Ptolemaic influence in Africa is implied in the inscriptions at Adulis that honoured Ptolemy Euergetes and the Ethiopian Negus's military accomplishments. The alliance and strategic partnership are implied between the two monarchs when in consideration of these inscriptions (*The Christian Topography of Cosmas* 2.59–66, ed. McCrindle 1897:98–116).

Ethiopia and the port of Adulis stood at the centre of geopolitical and geo-economic rivalry. There was substantial competition between the maritime route to India via Aksumite Adulis and Persian land route to Syria (Cerulli 1959:10; *Diodorus Siculus* 1.2.55–60, Oldfather 1933:65–81). This caste continued under the Roman–Byzantine Empire.

The hostility between the Roman Empire and Persia in the east materialised in conflicts regarding the Red Sea routes; therefore, Ethiopia continued to be a necessary ally. This was more explicit within the 5th and 6th centuries CE; however, even in earlier centuries there were implications to this effect. The Arsacids and then later Sasanians decoded Adulis and the route it promoted as a Roman proxy that was a target (Bowersock 2012:283–287; Cerulli 1959:12; Hendrickx 2015:73–75). Therefore, the Persian–Roman wars where Rome would support Ethiopia in consolidation of territory within the Arabian Peninsula can be deduced as composite to this continuum of Persian–Roman hostility (Smith 2016:17–25). The notable role taken by Ethiopia would translate into messianic legend in certain elements of eastern Christianity. This is because the conflict between Constantine and Shapur was compositely premised on Christian persecution in Persia (Cameron & Hall 1999:156–158; Penn 2015:108–140; VC IV.8–14, Smith 2016:34–44).

This is a notable discussion regarding the geopolitics of Ethiopia upon the Arabian Peninsula; however, there is another direct establishment regarding the spread of Christianity that can be attributed to the maritime links of Ethiopia with Rome. As already established, the maritime route to India established Adulis and correspondingly



Source: Adapted from Bowersock, G.W., 2013, *The throne of adulis: Red Sea wars on the eve of Islam*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

FIGURE 2: Map illustrating area under discussion, is a zoomed excerpt.

Ethiopia as a notable participant of the 1st and 2nd century global polities. The development and spread of Christianity can be explicitly traced therefore in perspective of the cosmopolitan nature of the Adulis port. It can therefore be inferred that Christianity could make its way from the orient into Ethiopia via the sea.

In sync with the Thomine tradition, it would be logical to argue that there can be the 1st-century CE tradition that can trace the introduction of Christianity into Ethiopia; after all, it was an essential part of the connected world then.

The 3rd-century CE narrative of the Ethiopian Christian odyssey that recounts the royal religious romance of Ezana with Frumentius' religion is an implied maritime legend. Although this composes the established narrative regarding the Christianisation of Ethiopia, the evidence of extensive apostolic global influence as attested to by the Thomine tradition and the Lukan-Acts narrative that mentions the Ethiopian Eunuch implies that the 1st-century Ethiopian apostolic Christianity is a possibility. In a related argument, the connection between Ethiopian and Indian trade can be substantiated by the prevalence of elephants in both countries and correspondingly the implications upon trade.

## Elephants in Ethiopia and India: Greco-Roman foreign policy implications

There is a monumental depiction of the triumphal return of the Greco-Roman deity Dionysus upon a Sarcophagus (Abbey 2017). This was after conquering Ethiopians and Indians. Notably, apart from the mythicised illustration of the event as evidenced by the depiction of a train of Roman gods such as Pan the *Κενταυρος* [man-horse like creature], winged victory and other mythical beings, there is a literal impression of contact with Ethiopia and India. The elephant is a very visible component of the sculpture. Given the verified prominence of Ethiopia as a source of ivory and elephants for the Ptolemy and then later the Roman Empire (Bowersock 2013:34), the depiction of Dionysus in a 2nd century-dated monument highlights the geopolitical significance of Ethiopia in the 1st century CE.

Another similar depiction of Dionysus upon the sarcophagus is discussed below, taken from the reserve of The Museum of Fine Arts (MFA 2019), Houston, Texas.

The depiction of the Greek deity being drawn by elephants alternatively deduced as Indian shows the Greek Dionysus

with a mythological entourage characterised by pans, maenads, satyrs and literal beasts from India.

This artistic depiction is dated to be of c. 215–225 century CE, although deductively an illustration of religious political triumphalism in the Roman Empire has the implications of foreign policy. The elephants perhaps added to the picture to assign majestic significance to the deities who found physical personification in the imperial cult do highlight the distinctive elements of India and African Aksum to have been notable. The preceding assertion derives from the tailoring of the imperial cult as per the political ends sought by the emperor through religious loyalty (Lee 2006:160).

Both these inscriptions give credence to the Ptolemaic foreign policy that involved Ethiopia. The use and knowledge of Greek by the monarchies within the region of Adulis implied BCE Hellenic influence (Bowersock 2013:32). Ptolemy III of Egypt, also known as Euergetes who reigned from 246 BCE to 221 BCE, was mentioned in a Greek inscription upon a basalt stele located close to the monumental throne of Adulis (Bernand, Drewes, & Schneider 1991–2000:26–32). Cosmas Indicopleustes who took note of the inscription recorded its words (*The Christian Topography of Cosmas* 2.57–59, ed. McCrindle 1897:93–98). There is a possibility according to Bowersock that this stele was positioned in Aksum because of the Ptolemaic history of elephant hunts for military use within this region. This can be aggregately substantiated by Hellenistic settlements ascribed to Ptolemy's predecessor, his father Ptolemy III, which were located within the Red Sea coast at Ptolemais Theron and Philotera. Arguably, it was for the purpose of elephant hunts that they were established (Cohen 2006:343–383).

In a resonance with the mythological depiction on the sarcophagus, the titulature of Ptolemy is replete with cultic claims of akin-ness to deity. Within the inscription, Ptolemy referred to *theoi adelphoi*, that is, brother-sister gods; correspondingly he makes the claim to divine ancestry from Heracles and Dionysus (Huebner 2007:21–49). Having closed the gap between the two cited artefacts and the basalt stone Ptolemaic inscription, a reversion to the significant link with subject matter will substantiate the developing theory. Emphatically, there is an explicit reference to elephants in the inscription, thereby positioning ivory trade and elephant hunts as an element definitive of East Africa. After Strabo's *Geography*, Pliny also referred to Trogodytes neighbours of Ethiopia, who were by definition elephant hunters (*The Natural History of Pliny* 1.75, Bostock & Riley 1855:107–108).

Arguably, the Aksumite kingdom from the BCE era was characterised by significant elephant commerce, and this to a considerable degree implied its relevance to Greco then Roman foreign policy.

Nonnosus, Justinian's ambassador to Kaleb in the 530 century CE, mentioned how he encountered scenic views of herds of

elephants at Aua during his journey to Aksum from Adulis (Berti 2019). In addition, he mentioned how the Negus stood astride upon a gold-leafed palanquin that was held up by the circular saddles of four elephants yoked together.

The preceding discussion thereby brings up the subject of Ethiopia's visibility and participation in the geopolitics of the Hellenic Ptolemaic empire and correspondingly Augustan Rome and onwards. This bears significance in substantiating the probability of connections consequent of possible travel and trade. Obviously, there are other matters to consider such as the noted evidence for pre-Christian monarchy in Aksum before Aezana (Kaplan 1982). In perspective of the preceding observation, there still remains ground to argue for a possible early contact between Ethiopia and apostolic Christianity. The Ethiopian eunuch's encounter with Phillip should not be treated as an abstract incidence, one without ripples or parallels or repetition. In conformity of this observation, it thereby follows that credence to the probability of an apostolic mission that focused on Ethiopia is not a logical impossibility. There is notably a direct link with Indian Christianity in this perspective that could have been consequent of the accessibility of Ethiopia via sea routes. If a substantiation is made regarding the probability of the Thomine tradition based on the reality of the 1st to 3rd century marine and trade, it thereby follows that Aksum, once positioned as a geopolitical influence, was similarly susceptible to apostolic Christian influence in the 1st century and earlier. This perspective finds a launch pad from the Lukan-Acts narrative regarding Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch and did not necessarily end at that point if anything a continuum could be assumed.

Based on respective evidence, such as the preceding discussed archaeological artefacts, conclusions could be made as to the authenticity or rather the probability of a recurrent continuum of Ethiopian eunuch's contact with Phillip as per the Lukan-Acts account. Correspondingly, another significant evaluation of the Thomine tradition draws from references from Patristics concerning the Christianisation of India-Persia.

## The Thomas legend as per early Christianity

Retrospectively, the evaluation of Thomine legend that precedes this section is the 21st-century critique; however, there was an institutionalised Christianity beyond the 2nd century that had substantial documentation consequent of its literate leadership. With the consolidation of Constantinian imperial-political-religious matrix of Christianity in the 3rd to 4th century onwards, Christianity became entrenched parallel to imperial magnificence. Hence, this constructs the case for a review of the perspective of the early church regarding the Thomine tradition and apostolic connections within Indian Christianity.

It appears that Thomas transcended historicity and became legend. Thomaskutty (2018:161) observed how Indians claimed equal significance between the tradition of Thomas



in India and that of Peter in Rome (Jayakumar 2002:5–6). In a derivative manner, Eusebius and Jerome imply Thomas' mission to India, although Eusebius and deductively Socrates assign Thomas to Parthia (ed. Schaff 1885b:174, 1885c:49). Correspondingly, given the eminence of Eusebius within the ecclesiastical establishment, implications regarding the official record on Thomas were derivative and therefore not implicit. Perceivably, Eusebius was the early Christian epoch equivalent of the apostolic Luke (cf. Fergusson 2005). The preceding observation arguably clarifies the Alexandrian incline that had placed Thomas as an apostle in Parthian Persia as Eusebius as quoting from *Origen's commentary on Gen 3*. The Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum* directly concurs with the *Acts of Thomas* by positioning Thomas amongst Peter, Mark and James whilst referring to the respective localities of their ministrations; it explicitly mentions Thomas as the evangelist to the Indian region (ed. Cureton 1967:33, 34). The emphatic nature of his influence was in all of India, its borders stretching to the furthest sea implies the macro-focus of Thomine influence, hence rather expanding the possible areas evangelised by Thomas. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* makes another direct claim for an apostolic connection for the city of Edessa (ed. Cureton 1967:34). According to the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Addai, one of the first evangelists sent out at Jesus' charge (Lk10:1–24), was the apostle to Edessa. Moffett (1998:38) thereby argues that when aggregated, the traditions that place Thomas in Parthia or India could be reconciled.

Because Gundaphar could be remembered as a Parthian Suren, aggregately a mission to India was interchangeably a mission to the Parthians. As a guide, however, Moffet (1998) notes generic issues that have direct implications on reconstructing an Ethiopian narrative derived from apostolic Christianity. Relative to Thomaskutty (2018), who derives much from the patristic substantiation of the Thomine tradition, Moffet (1998:33) aggregates the variations in established accounts from Eusebius, the Syrian tradition and the Indian tradition. Notably, there are confirmations and variations on the account from the *Acts of Thomas* in perspective of said songs of Thomas which are titled in India as '*Thomas Rabban Pattu*' and '*Margam Kali Pattu*' (Brown 1956:49–50). Aggregately, Indian tradition harmoniously mentions a traceable missionary tour that is launched from the Malabar Coast. Thereafter, tracing locally identified places that geographically sync with the inception point from Malabar leaving a trail of churches, Thomas stops at Cranganore, Quilon and Paravur until his seventh stop at Cayal (Brown 1956:52). These narratives derived from oral tradition resonate with the ethnic terrain of the respective place, thereby implying a successful mission that was consequent of enculturation (Roldanus 2006:6).

The ordered accounts of oral tradition, although generically discredited as genuine evidence, may essentially be the original story as recounted by the participant ethnic group. Archeologically, the existence of monarch titled Gundaphar is established, but the conversion to Christianity is unaccounted for, rather numismatics identified for his reign

show allegiance to the Roman Pantheon (Moffet 1998:35). This does not discount the tradition recounted by a still existent community of Christians that refers to the Thomine tradition as history and not legend. This brings insights regarding the authority of *Kebra Nagast*, *Ethiopian Synaxarium* and native Christian communities of Ethiopia as evidences in constructing an objective history of Ethiopian Christianity.

Deductively, this incline towards native traditional sources resonates with the observation regarding the enculturation and self-definition of Christianity ethnically (cf. Drodge 2006; Lieu 2006; Rukuni 2018). In spite of inclinations at mythification, exaggeration and selective edition, arguably authenticated natively originated accounts remain the relatively precise original narrative. The flaws attached to oral tradition are perceivably often a characteristic of accepted authenticated sources, which also are to be taken with a certain level of criticism (Fergusson 2005:22–24). Eusebius, the titled father of Church History, whilst prominent and overall in his narratives, is replete with the aforementioned distortions (Fergusson 2005:24). Therefore, reference to native sources is perceivably elemental to the construction of a genuine holistic narrative, which passes the test not only of objective historicity but also conformity with its respective ethnic participants.

## The second wave: Patristic influence

After the encounter of Thomas, Indian Christianity as per the authorities of early Christianity was defined by the visit of Pantaenus (ca 180–190) *Jerome Ep LXX ad Magnus oratorem Urbis Romae* (ed. Schaff 1885d:371), Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* (ed. Schaff 1885a:561–562). In another narrative replete with parallelisms to Ethiopian Christianity's narrative by Rufinus and Theodoret, the Alexandrian patriarch Demetrius sent the Christian philosopher Pantaenus to Indian Christianity at the invitation of natives in the c189/c190 century CE (ed. Schaff 1885b:344–346). Eusebius (ed. Schaff 1885b) recounted how the native Indian Christians possessed a Hebraic version of the Matthean gospel allegedly brought by the apostle Bartholomew. The assertion by Pantaenus regarding the influence of Bartholomew was possibly a misinterpretation of *Mar Thoma*, which is *kerala* (Indian) for Bishop Thomas; as a foreigner of Jewish ethnicity he could have deduced this as *Bar Tolmai*, that is, Hebrew for Bartholomew (Moffet 1998:38). This reiterates the case for a reconciliation of established narratives with the prevalent ethnic oral tradition. Philip ([1908] 2002:32) suggests that Pantaenus was the leader of Chatechetical school of Alexandria, and implicatively amongst his mentees were Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Consequently, Clement of Alexandria's and Origen's explicit references to India are derived from this fact (Moffet 1998:38).

The Jewish ethnicity of Pantaenus is a significant observation in the establishment of early Christian narratives. This is because it gives credibility to the notion of enculturation and self-definition of Christianity within the first four centuries of Christianity (Rukuni & Oliver 2019:1–5). The preceding fact

is elemental to the narrative of Ethiopian Christianity, which is arguably Jewish in essence. The Jewish ethnicity of Pantaenus tallies with his recounted retrieval of a copy of the Hebrew Matthean gospel back to Alexandria. They were Jewish colonies in India, some dated to have been from as far back as the second temple era such as the one at Kalyan named Bene-Israel (Warmington 1974:59, 131). At Cochin, within the radius of Malabar Coast (the mentioned coast in Thomine tradition), there was a group of Jewish diaspora whose immigration is placed between the temple destruction by Titus 70 CE and the banning of Jews from Jerusalem by Hadrian in 136 CE following the uprising of Bar Kosibha (Bauckham 1998:228–238; Mor 2002; Warmington 1974:59, 131). The significance of these observations is that they reconcile Pantaenus with Thomine tradition such as the aforementioned conversion of the Jewish flute girl by Thomas (*Acts of Thomas*, ed. James 1924). Hence, this implies that the Jewish nature of the Christianity that emerged from these regions gave the apostolic connection and the Jewish impression of Pantaenus. As evidenced in the apostolic *modus operandi* of growing Christianity as an expanding element of Jewish nucleus, the prevalence of Jews within the narratives arguably implies the definition of this form of Christianity (cf. Marcus 2006). This explicitly connects with Ethiopian Christianity that has a dual connection to Judaism as per the links with Israel courtesy of Queen Makeda's legendary visit and, additionally, the connection to the eastern strand of Christianity (1 Ki 10:1–29; *Kebra Naghast* 25–32, Budge 2000:21–33; Dashu 2012:1–7). Although these are said to be verified connections, the present author adds the apostolic Phillip's connection; the Ethiopian eunuch from the narrative is arguably a God-fearer, a proselyte, and the contact with a member of the nucleus group of Christianity, as evidenced in Acts 15, implies aggregately of Judaic Christianity.

## Ethiopia as derived from tradition: Positioning Ethiopia against eastern Christianity

Strabo's geographic depiction (Strabo's *Geographica* 2.5.12, ed. Jones 1917:455) of ancient eastern world was proved as an argument for the reality of apostles' mission. Comparatively, Cosmas in his delineation of the world from a Christian explorative view includes Ethiopia and its surroundings. This brings to view the tours and events within the narratives of Christian history of Ethiopia whilst in the perspective of geopolitical realities such as trade and economy. In the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and Cosmas, the port of Adulis is a significant locus. In addition, the ancient trade routes corroborate the Christian expeditions. The Thomas tradition as derived from the *Acts of Thomas* (ed. James 1924) incites the review regarding the continuum of the narrative of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

The story of Thomas, *Acts of Thomas* (ed. James 1924:1), is replete with an aura of aristocratic conversions and regional significance of Christianity; these are themes in Lukan–Acts,

Theodoret and Rufinus on Absynnia, thereby corroborating the par-significance of the Ethiopian Christian narrative, given its striking parallels. The appointment of the deacon Xenophon by Phillip to remain as his replacement corresponds to the hagiographies of the *Ethiopian Synaxarium* (ed. James 1924:77). As noted, this also corresponds with the deduced episcopal polity of the 2nd to 3rd century CE (Ignatius and Cyprian).

The substantiation of Gundaphar's existence through numismatics poise a framework for the validation of the existence of Christian monarchs' derivate of tradition (Medlycott 1905:3–10; Smith 1906:36–38, 54–56).

The details derived from the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a document of marine travel, entail the investigation of historical narratives as a synthesis of denoted routes (Schoff 1912). In the same manner, the travel of Syrian monks to Ethiopia later or in the mentioned journey of the eunuch implies an interexchange of travellers between Ethiopia and Jerusalem.

The analysis of mercantile trade in reference to dominant empires, such as the Roman Empire, was an implied method of deducing the probability and possibility of travel by Thomas (Warmington 1974:61). In a similar manner, reference to economic ties between Ethiopia, Jerusalem and Rome as noted in elephants and trade validates claims of the influencing religions. The oral tradition as a derivate of songs '*Thomas Rabban Pattu*' and '*Margam Kali Pattu*', when reconciled with further historical evidence, builds a case for the recognition of ethnic participants as valid evidence (Brown 1956:49–50). This as noted denotes the significance of enculturation and self-definition of Christianity amongst respective ethnicities as elemental to the establishment of Christianity (cf. Rukuni 2018). Compositely, the preceding observations imply that the authenticity of a historical Christian narrative should be derived from relative conformity to local traditions. In a direct manner this implies the elemental nature of the *Kebra Nagast* and *Ethiopian Synaxarium* in the construction of an Ethiopian narrative.

The patristic reference of the mission of Pantaenus (ca. 180–190) *Jerome Ep LXX ad Magnus orator em Urbis Romae* (ed. Schaff 1885d:371), Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* xxix.ii (ed. Schaff 1885a:561–562) and Eusebius' *Hist Eccl.* 5.10.3 (ed. Schaff 1885b:344–346) corresponds to Rufinus and Theodoret. This does not only poise a parallel significance but rather implies the influence of Alexandria in the development of ethnic Christianities beyond Rome and Jerusalem, as reflected in the Athanasian link with Ethiopian Christianity (Binns 2017:43). The Hebraic inclinations of Indian Christianity as evidenced by the gospel of Matthew in Hebrew and the mentioned conversion of the Jewish flute girl imply a parallel to Ethiopian Christianity.

The assertion of prevalent Jewish minority in India, who probably was a preliminary target for apostolic evangelism, corroborates the notion of Judaism as a nucleus for an



expanding Christianity. The resultant Christianity would thereby reflect Judaic influences and correspondingly fall under the category of Jewish Christianity. This serves to establish an alternate theory of native Christianities that were in essence Jewish and were not essentially Hellenised as the case with Roman Christendom. This thereby constructs the basis for the divergence of respective Christian elements to establish imperial orthodoxy in the 4th century CE. The preceding is a notable feature of Ethiopian Christianity.

## Conclusion

Ethiopia when placed in perspective of respective regions without the influence of Roman Christendom represents the existence of regional orthodoxies of diverse ethnicities. A parallel and interrelated narrative to that of Ethiopian Christianity is derived from Indian and Parthian Christianity (Davidson 2004:154). Defined by the tradition of Thomas and the accounts of Pantaneus, Indian-Parthian Christianity's narrative provides a modular framework regarding the establishment of narratives. That is, as a reconciliation of oral tradition and the established authenticated historical sources, a composite history of Indian-Parthian apostolic early Christian tradition provides a generic outline as to the development of a complete history of Ethiopian Christianity.

The Hebraisms embedded within the native Christianities that were distinct from Rome apart from being derivatives of diverse factors such as the 70/135 century CE dispersions are an arguable case for the influence of apostolic Christianity upon these respective Christianities. Ethiopia qualifies this category relatively when exposed to an extensive application of the archaeology of religion that focusses on social and religious culture (Binford 1962:218, 219; Insoll 2004:47). Deductive from its tradition, claims are made as to the contact with BCE Judaism and correspondingly early Christianity. Deductively, Harnack made martyrdom narratives and the existence of episcopacy a demographic basis to ascertain the existence of Christianity (Trombley 2006:302). In addition, papyri, artefacts and inscriptions are a corresponding substantiation for localised Christianities. Given the prominence of Harnack, his theorem composite to Bauer's thesis has defined the framework for the geographical spread of Christianity.

In the perspective of the deductions of Harnack regarding the essence of epigraphic evidence in corroborating narratives, Ethiopia has to be examined for inscriptions, papyri and archaeological artefacts that connect it historically to its regional and broader influences. The exclusion of Ethiopia from the broader narratives of Christian history is intrinsically notable. The preceding challenge is arguably an extension to an aggregately sketchy depiction characterising endeavours to establish a comprehensive record of Ethiopian history. In perspective of the account of Acts 8, there is reasonable ground to deduce the perceived silence of Christianity in Ethiopia in the first three centuries to rather be a matter of undiscovered or missing evidence.

Strabo's geography and map are implied evidences of an apostolic mission in the eastern world (Strabo's *Geographica* 2.5.12, ed. Jones 1917:455). Correspondingly, Cosmas and the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* include an explorative view of Aksum and the port city of Adulis. The use of numismatics in determining the existence of Indian monarch Gundaphar implies a generic application of archaeological evidence in validating information derived from tradition. Similarly, the analysis of mercantile trade within the Roman Empire deductively asserts the probability and possibility of travel by Thomas (Warmington 1974:61). Of equal significance is the substantial ivory trade that is associated with Ethiopia, as it implies the geopolitical visibility of Ethiopia and by extension the possibility of apostolic contact.

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