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TO TOUCH OR TO BE TOUCHED. DOUBTING THOMAS IN THE BIBLE, APOCRYPHAL TEXTS, AND THE ARTS. A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. In Christian tradition, the name of the Biblical Thomas is connected primarily to the story of John 20: 27 in which the apostle is invited by Jesus to touch his tortured body. This invitation is the result of Thomas' prior scepticism to the reality of the resurrection. Contrary to popular belief, the text of John does not indicate clearly if Thomas accepts Jesus' offer. John creates a narrative gap for the readers to fill in, stimulating the reader to contemplate the relationship between the notion of seeing, touching and believing, and their mutual dependency (or the lack of it). In this historical-literary article, the author investigates this literary dependency in the synoptic gospels, John's gospel, several apocryphal texts, and four famous paintings, all focussing on the character of Thomas, in search of the different ways in which these authors and artists try to fill in John's apparent narrative gap.

KEYWORDS: touching, Thomas, doubt, apocrypha, literature

The name Thomas means abyss; or it means twofold, the Greek word for which is *didimus*; or it comes from *thomos*, which means a dividing or separating. Thomas is called abyss because he was granted insight into the depths of God's being when Christ, in answer to his question, said: 'I am the way and the truth and the life.' He is called twofold because he came to know the Lord's resurrection in two ways—not only by sight, like the others, but by seeing and touching.

These are the opening sentences of Jacobus da Varagine's entry on Thomas the Apostle. In his famous *Legenda Aurea*, Jacobus writes of this apostle that he is rightly called 'twofold', since he not only saw the risen Lord, as the other disciples did, but was also allowed to touch Jesus' risen body. Branded the 'infamous avatar of unbelief', Thomas has entered and remained in our Western collective memory as a cautionary figure for those who are unable to believe on the basis of the authority of the divine word (e.g. the New Testament) alone (Bonney 2002). Thomas is the first Christian sceptic, the embodiment

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of ‘seeing is believing’ (Most 2005). Thomas required empirical verification before he could believe in Jesus’ resurrection (Haffner 2001). Caravaggio’s *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, painted in 1601-1602, is a stunning example, both artistically and conceptually, of how the doubter Thomas is envisaged: the risen Jesus takes Thomas’s hand to encourage him to place his finger in the wound itself (Varriano 2010).

The question, however, is whether Thomas in fact acted on Jesus’ invitation to touch his body (John 20: 27). The question seems rhetorical, but John’s gospel does not give its readers (and listeners) an easy, straightforward answer. John’s resurrection narrative, like all gospel stories, features ‘a system of gaps that must be filled in’ by its readers (Sternberg 1985). What complicates matters is that all four gospel narratives are heavily concerned with the transition from unbelief to belief, a transition triggered by several sensory inputs such as hearing, seeing and—although this is highly complicated—touching, and with the invitation to hear, see, or touch, whether or not it is acted upon (Binz 2016).

In this historical-literary article, I will focus on the figure of Doubting Thomas, especially as he appears in the canonical gospels, differentiating between the Synoptic gospels (section 1) and John (section 2), and in several apocryphal texts, which either identify the apostle as Jesus’ brother (section 3) or depict him as an initiate (section 4) or just as the embodiment of ‘seeing is believing’ (section 5). I will then discuss four artistic renderings of John 20: 27, by Caravaggio, Peter Paul Rubens, Carl Bloch, and Thomas Ribble, as examples of different exegetical and theological viewpoints (section 6).

In this article, all biblical quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (1995). For the analysis of the gospels and apocryphal texts, I have chosen a structural approach (Patte 2015).

Touching Jesus

The proper place for Thomas’s finest hour in John 20 is within the context of the gospel’s resurrection narrative, and—even broader—within the resurrection narratives of all four evangelists. As is often the case in similar instances, the resurrection stories appear in our collective memory as a harmonized narrative unity rather than as four separate accounts that differ from each other in smaller and larger ways, with Tatian’s *Diatessaron* (late 2nd century) as its earliest material form (Petersen 1994). And, even importantly, we have to remember that the four gospels do not describe the actual resurrection itself, which means that the resurrection is itself in fact one of the narrative gaps mentioned above (Kasper 2015).

If we focus on the resurrection narratives—to continue to use this not unproblematic notion—in the three Synoptic gospels, we come across some interesting major and minor differences. As described in the introduction to

this article, I am specifically interested in the transition between unbelief and belief, and in the sensory processes of hearing, seeing, and touching.

The Gospel of Mark is rather minimalistic in its rendering of the resurrection and the aftermath, certainly if we consider that this gospel ends (as its original version does in 16: 8), rather abruptly and unsatisfactorily from a narrative perspective, with verse 16: 8 (Black 2008). Three women—Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome (16: 1)—come to the tomb (16: 2), but see that it has already been rolled away (16: 4). In the tomb they meet a young man wearing a white robe ‘and they were amazed’ (16: 5). The young man tells the women that Jesus has risen (16: 6) and that they have to warn Peter to go to Galilee to see the risen one (16: 7). The women ‘fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid’ (16: 8).

This ‘original’ ending is rather puzzling and presents the reader with enormous questions (Lunn 2015). If the women were too afraid to tell anyone, how did ‘we’ hear of it? And even more frustratingly, the readers are kept in the dark about what happened to Peter and the apostles in Galilee. The current canonical ending of Mark (16: 9-20) was meant to repair these narrative problems by providing a short account of what happened after the women fled from the empty tomb. This ending is clearly based on Luke’s version, and, to a smaller degree, on Matthew’s. In the ‘original’ version of Mark’s resurrection narrative, there is no transition to faith, neither is the risen Jesus seen, heard of, or spoken to.

But if we focus on Luke’s account, we can clearly see such a transition, and its inspiration for the now canonical ending of Mark. First, ‘the women who had come with Him out of Galilee’ (23: 55), who are later identified as Mary Magdalene, Joanna and the other Mary (24: 10), come to the tomb (24: 1), and find it empty (24: 3). After the ‘terrified’ women (24: 5) meet ‘two men (...) in dazzling clothing’ (24: 4), who proclaim Jesus’ resurrection (24: 5-7) but refrain from issuing any command or instruction, the women remember Jesus’ words (24: 8) and report everything to the eleven disciples (24: 9). Unfortunately, the eleven disciples do not believe the report (24: 11), although Peter goes to the tomb to see for himself (24: 12).

What follows is the famous story of the road to Emmaus (24: 13-35), in which two travelers encounter the risen Jesus, but are prevented from recognizing him (24: 16). The two retell the story of Luke 24: 1-12 (24: 17-24), interpreting the two men at the grave as ‘angels’ (24: 23). The risen Jesus then begins to ‘explain to them’ (24: 27) how his own death was foretold in the Scriptures. As they arrive in Emmaus, the two travelers invite him to stay for the night (24: 29) and eventually recognize him, or rather ‘their eyes were opened’ (24: 31) during the meal (24: 30). As soon as they recognize him, the

risen one disappears (24: 31), and they travel back to Jerusalem (24: 33) to testify before the other disciples (24: 34-35).

The third part of Luke's resurrection story recounts the appearance of the risen Jesus to all the disciples (24: 36-49). He speaks to them (24: 36), but the disciples are 'startled and frightened', and think they have seen a ghost (24: 37). Then Jesus invites them to 'see my hands and my feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have' (24: 39). Because this invitation still does not convince all the disciples (24: 41), he asks for a boiled fish, which he eats before their eyes (24: 42-43). The interesting part for our purpose is, that even though Jesus does *offer* to be seen and to be touched, Luke does not mention whether the disciples in fact act on this or not. The disciples see (24: 40), but the narrative leaves the question open whether they dared to touch Jesus' body.

When taken together, the three parts of Luke's story (leaving aside the Ascension story, 24: 50-53), are clearly concerned with a gradual build-up of faith in the risen Jesus. First, the women seem convinced by the words of the two messengers in the tomb (hearing and seeing) (Schaberg and Ringe 2012). Peter, however, does not believe the testimony of the women (hearing), but marvels at what happened after his own visit to the grave (seeing). Finally, the travelers on the road to Emmaus do not believe the women or 'those who were with us' (hearing), neither do they recognize him when he explains the Scriptures to them (hearing), but they only recognize him when Jesus shares a very tangible experience with them, the breaking of the bread (seeing).

At that point, the risen Jesus appears in their midst, unquestionably identifiable as such. But when direct seeing and hearing are insufficient to remove the last grains of disbelief, Jesus invites them to see him and to touch him. When this too proves insufficient, the risen Jesus asks for and eats a fish. Whereas the travelers only witnessed the breaking of the bread by Jesus (but not the actual eating), they now experience the actual consumption of food. The transition from unbelief to belief appears to be bridged by seeing, hearing, (eating,) and touching, whether or not in the form of an invitation only.

Matthew's gospel tells a rather different (and much shorter) story than Luke and Mark do. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (28: 1) actually see the stone being rolled from the entrance of the grave (28: 2) by a shining, white angel (28: 3), who leave the guards for dead (28: 4). The angel instructs the two women to go to the disciples and tell them to leave for Galilee (28: 5-7). When the two leave the tomb 'with fear and joy' (28: 8), they meet Jesus himself, who greets them. The women instantaneously know what to do: 'they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him' (28: 9).

After this straightforward and seemingly unproblematic physical contact between the two Marys and Jesus, he confirms the instruction they were given earlier to warn 'the brethren' to go to Galilee (28: 10). The women apparently

do exactly that and are seemingly trusted immediately by the disciples (in sharp contrast with Luke's story), because after a brief excursus on the Jewish guards being bribed to spread lies about what they witnessed (28: 11-15), the eleven disciples arrive in Galilee, where they too see Jesus in person (Brown 1991). Some of the disciples worship him, but 'some were doubtful' (28: 17).

While Jesus speaks to them (28: 18-20), Matthew does not give any information about the disciples' reaction, especially whether his words were able to convince even the last doubters. Almost like Mark's initial ending, albeit less abruptly, the gospel of Matthew ends *in medias res*: there is no reaction of the disciples, no Ascension scene, it just stops. Just as in Luke, we witness a transition from unbelief to belief, but in a rather confusing sequence. The two women meet Jesus (seeing, hearing) and even touch him, while the disciples had to make do only with seeing and hearing. There is no indication that Jesus invited any of the disciples to touch him, nor that anyone did (except for the two Marys).

Thomas as Doubter

The name of Thomas as one of Jesus' disciples occurs outside John's gospel only in the context of a list of Jesus' inner circle, without any further specifications or particularities (Mark 3:18; Luke 6: 15; Matthew 10: 3 and Acts 1: 13). This is entirely different in John's gospel, where Thomas's name is mentioned in the context of four stories.

The first of these is the story of Lazarus being raised from the grave (John 11: 1-46) (O'Day and Hylen, 2006). The whole story revolves around the issue of trust and belief in Jesus' teachings and power. Jesus seems to linger when informed about Lazarus' pending death (John 11: 6) reaches him, almost as if Lazarus had to die first so that Jesus could make his death and resurrection a 'living parable' about the relationship between Jesus' resurrection and that of the individual believer (Elser and Piper 2006). A hint of such a device occurs a couple of verses later.

When Lazarus has passed away, Jesus tells his disciples: 'Lazarus is dead, I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him' (John 11: 14-15). It is Thomas, who replies—maybe speaking for the group—in a rather hasty fashion: 'Let us also go, so that we may die with him' (John 11: 16). Interestingly enough, it is possible to interpret the 'him' in the verse both as referring to Lazarus or—with knowledge of how the gospel narrative will end—to Jesus himself. The narrative continues with Martha and Mary, who—independently from each other—confess their faith in Jesus' power to save their brother Lazarus (John 11: 21 and 11: 32).

Once he has arrived at Lazarus's grave, Jesus asks Lazarus to come forth (John 11: 43), and Lazarus does (John 11: 44). Directly after the miracle, many people start to believe in Jesus (John 11: 45), but the chief priests and

the Pharisees convene a council to plot his death (John 11: 47-53). Again, and in retrospect, Thomas's words sound even more powerful: 'let us go, so we may die with him'. They serve as a triple reference: to Lazarus's rising, to Jesus' resurrection of which Thomas and the others were to be witnesses, and to the disciples' common fate, that is, martyrdom for confessing their faith in the risen Jesus.

The theme of belief/unbelief and death/resurrection occurs—again—in the narrative on the Last Supper, which in John's gospel focuses on the washing of the feet instead of the meal itself, as it does in the Synoptic gospels. When Jesus comforts his disciples—'do not let your heart be troubled' (John 14: 1)—Thomas asks: 'Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way? (John 14: 5) Jesus replies with words reminiscent of what he said to Martha (John 11: 25-26): 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me' (John 14: 6).

Although Thomas does appear later in the 21st chapter of John—probably a later expansion of the text of the gospel (John 21: 2)—his last relevant performance occurs earlier, in the context of John's version of the resurrection narrative (Anderson 2011). John's version is quite different from Luke's and Matthew's, and it starts with Mary Magdalene going to the grave (John 20: 1). When Mary finds the stone rolled away from the entrance, she runs to Peter and 'the other disciple whom Jesus loved' to tell them the news (John 20: 2). The other disciple arrives first at the grave (John 20: 4), looks inside, but does not go in (John 20: 5). Peter, too, arrives at the grave, does enter the tomb, and sees the linen cloths (John 20: 6-7). The other disciple enters too, 'he saw and believed' (John 20: 8), because 'for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead' (John 20: 9).

The next episode revolves around Mary and her encounter with the risen Jesus. After the two disciples have left (John 20: 10), she remains at the grave crying (John 20: 11). Looking into the grave, she sees two angels (John 20: 12) who ask her why she is sad (John 20: 13). She then meets Jesus but without recognizing him (John 20: 14). Jesus repeats the earlier question to Mary, to which she replies by asking him where they have taken his body (John 20: 15). Jesus replies with a simple 'Mary', at which point Mary suddenly recognizes him, and says 'Rabboni' (John 20: 16)

The exact implications of Jesus' answer, which is known in the tradition as *noli me tangere*, rendered as 'do not cling to me' in the modern English translation (John 20: 17), is one of the most hotly debated verses in John (Nancy 2008). But the result of the conversation between Jesus and Mary is that she returns to the disciples to tell them what she has experienced (John 20: 18), without explicitly having been told to do so (as was the case in Luke). Neither do we hear how the disciples react to Mary's testimony. The text of

the gospel somewhat abruptly shifts to the group of the disciples, and there is no further mention of Mary.

John relates how Jesus appeared in the disciples' midst (John 20: 19), showing them his hands and his side (John 20: 20). The reaction of the disciples is one of joy and (apparently) belief (John 20: 20). Unfortunately, Thomas was missing from the group when this happened—John does not offer any explanation for his absence (20: 24). When the others tell him about their experience, Thomas reacts skeptically: 'Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe' (John 20: 25).

Jesus then appears in their midst again, this time with Thomas present (John 20: 26). He says to Thomas: 'Reach here with your finger and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving but believing' (John 20: 27). Thomas responds to this by saying: 'My lord and my God' (John 20: 28). Jesus then seems to rebuke the doubter: 'Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed' (John 20: 29).

Again, in this passage, seeing and hearing are important in coming to believe in the risen Jesus. The beloved disciple is satisfied after simply seeing the empty grave. Mary needs something more, perhaps because her grief is greater: she needs to hear Jesus' voice but is not allowed to touch her Lord—we do not know exactly why not. Later on, the disciples—minus Thomas—come to believe by seeing and hearing Jesus. While he shows them his hands and side—probably as proof of his identity—there is no indication in the text that any of them feels the need to empirically verify Jesus' body, nor does Jesus invite any of them to do so.

This changes radically with Thomas, who has missed the first of Jesus' appearances to the disciples. When Thomas finally meets Jesus (seeing), who speaks to him directly (hearing), he is explicitly invited not to see (as the other disciples were) but to touch the wounded body of Jesus. Again, the text refrains from explicitly stating whether Thomas actually did touch Jesus or not. The text only gives Thomas's words: 'My lord and my God'. Thomas's reaction indicates that he is finally convinced of Jesus' resurrection, although technically not by touching—which he himself set up earlier as a *conditio sine qua non*—but by seeing and hearing alone. This interpretation—ultimately Thomas did not touch the risen body—is strengthened by Jesus' own remark about the blessed who believe even though they have not *seen*.

Thomas as Jesus' Brother

In four instances, John uses a Hebrew (or rather a Jewish Aramaic) loan-word in the text of his gospel, accompanied by the Greek equivalent: *lithostrotos* ('the pavement') and *gabbatha* (John 19: 13), *topos kranion* ('place of the skull')

and *golgotha* (John 19: 13), *didaskalos* ('teacher') and *rabboni* (John 20: 16), and finally Thomas, 'who is called *didymos*' (John 11.16; 20.24; 21.2). Both *tome* (Aramaic) and *dydimos* (Greek) mean 'twin', and *didymus* is the Latin translation.

This so-called *substratum* may well be an indication that John's gospel was originally written in Aramaic rather than Greek, that Jesus and his disciples conversed in Aramaic rather than Hebrew, and/or that John based (parts of) his text on older, Aramaic oral or written (but now lost) sources (Joosten 2004). Other commentators have suggested that John used the *substratum* to amplify certain notions within the text (Most 2005: 78-79).

Most has pointed out the etymological relationship between the concepts of 'two' and 'doubting' in multiple European languages (Most 2005: 80). *Dis* and *distazein* (Greek), *duo* and *dubitare* (Latin), *zwei* and *zweifelen* (German), *double* and *doubt* (English), and *twee* and *twijfelen* (Dutch). In this interpretation, Thomas simply lives up to his name: *nomen est omen*. Unfortunately for this theory, this etymological relationship does not exist in Hebrew or Aramaic. Besides, etymological interpretations are notoriously speculative and therefore unreliable in scholarly inquiry (Zenker 2002).

Nonetheless, the idea that Thomas and Jesus could have shared some kind of relation of kinship or of spiritual connection is not unthinkable in the context of either the canonical gospels or the apocryphal texts. Mark (6: 3) and Matthew (13: 55), for example, mention that Jesus had four brothers, or *adelphoi*, literally 'of the same womb': James (Jacobus), (Joses), Joseph, Jude (Judas non-Iscaiot) and Simon. Unfortunately, Thomas's name is inconveniently absent. The identification of James as 'the brother of Jesus' also occurs in Galatians 1: 19. The idea of Jesus' brothers (and possibly sisters) has nevertheless provoked fierce theological debate, especially because it conflicts with the treasured idea of Mary's perpetual virginity (McCarthy 2019).

The idea that Jesus had brothers is also frequently found in apocryphal texts, for example in the Protoevangelium of James and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (not to be confused with the better-known Gospel of Thomas). The Protoevangelium, which dates from the end of the 2nd century, starts with the pregnancy of Anne, Mary's legendary mother (Elliott 1993: 48-67; Schneemelcher 1992: 421-439). The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, which also dates from the end of the 2nd century, starts with a five-year old Jesus who plays with clay birds (Elliott 1993: 68-83; Schneemelcher 1992: 439-453). This text identifies its author as 'Thomas the Israelite philosopher' (manuscript A), 'Thomas the Israelite' (manuscript B), or even 'Thomas the elect'. The latter is found exclusively in the Church Slavonic tradition dating back to no later than the end of the 11th century. Lending support to the idea that James and Thomas were brothers of Jesus is the consideration that they

would then have been in a perfect position to write a book about Jesus' youth, since they were more or less eyewitnesses themselves (Most 2005: 97).

Assuming that Jesus and Thomas were brothers is already a bold step, let alone assuming that they were twins. Yet there are at least three apocryphal texts which at least implicitly suggest this. The first of the 'twin texts' can be found in the Gospel of Thomas, which was discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945-1946 and dates to the mid-2nd century, possibly containing material from the 1st century (Elliott 1993: 123-147; Schneemelcher 1992: 110-133). It contains 114 *logia* ('sayings') in Coptic that are attributed to Jesus, and it is sometimes identified with the hypothetical Synoptic source 'Q'. The Gospel of Thomas starts with the following words: 'These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down'. Both *tome* and *didymos* mean 'twin', while Judas is the name of yet another brother of Jesus mentioned in the canonical gospels.

The text known as the Book of Thomas the Contender (or just as the Book of Thomas), also written in Coptic, dating to not later than the first half of the 4th century, but probably earlier, makes a similar claim (Schneemelcher 1992: 232-247). This work identifies its writer as the Apostle Matthew who overheard a private conversation between Thomas and Jesus: 'The secret words that the Saviour spoke to Judas Thomas and which I, Matthew, wrote down. I was passing by and heard them speak with one another.' Directly after this introduction, Jesus identifies Thomas as 'brother', 'my twin' and 'my sole true friend'.

The last example comes from the Acts of Thomas, dating to the beginning of the 3rd century and composed in Syriac, although it is likely that an older Greek original existed (Elliott 1993: 439-511; Schneemelcher 1992: 322-411). This book begins with a meeting of apostles in Jerusalem, where they 'divided the regions of the world (...) to which the Lord sent him'. The lot assigned India to 'Judas Thomas, who is also (called) Didymus'. Again, we see the identification between Jude/Judas and Thomas and his nickname 'the twin'. Furthermore, a diabolical snake identifies Thomas as 'the twin brother of Christ'. And when Jesus appears before an oriental king, the latter identifies him—quite erroneously—as 'the apostle Judas Thomas'. Jesus corrects him by saying: 'I am not Judas, who is also Thomas. I am his brother'.

Whereas the canonical gospels do not mention Thomas as one of Jesus' brothers, the Gospel of Thomas, the Book of Thomas, and the Acts of Thomas identify him exactly as such: not just as a brother, but in fact as a twin brother.

Thomas as the Initiate

The idea that Thomas and Jesus shared a special relationship is not only developed through the idea that they were (twin) brothers, but also in terms of

initiation and wisdom. As we have seen, in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the apostle is identified—in the Church Slavonic text tradition—as an ‘elect’. And the superscript of the Book of Thomas the Contender reads ‘the contender writes to the perfect’. Both notions—*electus* and *perfectus* in Latin—are closely connected to classical Gnosticism with its focus on mind-above-matter, secret wisdom, and initiation (Groningen 1967: 178-179).

As we have seen, the Gospel of Thomas starts with the notion of ‘secret words’ exchanged between Thomas and Jesus. Later in the text, Jesus asks his disciples to ‘compare me to someone and tell whom I am like’ (cf. Matthew 16). Simon Peter suggests ‘a righteous angel’, and Matthew ‘a wise philosopher’, but Thomas remarks: ‘Master, my mouth is incapable of saying whom you are like’. Apparently, Thomas’s is the right answer, because Jesus ‘took him and drew him aside and spoke three words to him’.

When his fellow disciples ask him what he had heard, Thomas declines, saying: ‘If I tell you one of the words which he spoke to me, you will pick up stones and throw them at me.’ Undoubtedly, Thomas is referring to death-by-stoning, a punishment associated with blasphemy in the Hebrew Bible, for example in Leviticus 24: 10-16, although Thomas seems more concerned for his brothers than for himself: ‘And fire will come from the stones and burn you up’ (Talmage 2012: 168).

The Book of Thomas similarly starts with the idea of ‘secret words’ which Jesus imparts to Thomas. The text makes the relationship between Thomas as Jesus’ brother and (primary) initiate very clear: ‘Since you are called my brother, you should not remain ignorant of yourself (...) So, therefore, you (alone) my brother Thomas have beheld what is hidden from men, that is, that on which they stumble if they do not recognize it.’ Perhaps the suggestion is that Thomas is not Jesus’ brother in a biological sense, but that their relationship is like that between soul-companions. Judas is the first of the Christian initiates and therefore he is worthy to be addressed as Jesus’ brother.

In contrast to the canonical gospels, the apocryphal Book of Thomas and the Gospel of Thomas, although their characterization as ‘Gnostic’ is still debated, are clearly more interested in matters of the spirit than of the physical body (Quispel 1981: 218-266; Schneemelcher 1991: 234). In both texts, the author seems primarily concerned with a secret wisdom that Jesus is imparting to one specific disciple. Physical interactions, like healing miracles, infancy stories, the Passion, the Ascension, et cetera, as we know them from the four canonical gospels, are overtly absent from the apocrypha, let alone the idea of physical contact between Jesus and the chosen disciple. Gnostic apocrypha, or similar texts, tend to espouse a form of Docetism, avoiding the notion that Jesus was crucified, thus removing the ‘prop’ of Jesus’ wounds that could be shown, seen and touched (Lalleman 1998: 157). In these texts,

Thomas is neither a doubter nor someone who wants to touch Jesus' body, but a spiritual *perfectus*, elected by Jesus to be the recipient of hidden knowledge.

Thomas as a Believer

Other apocryphal texts point in exactly the opposite direction. The first example is the Epistle of the Apostles, dating to the third quarter of the 2nd century (Elliott 1993: 555-588). Scholars have suggested that it is anti-Gnostic, given its specific focus on Jesus' resurrection and incarnation. The Epistle gives its own version of a resurrection narrative, combining elements also found in the four canonical gospels. According to the Epistle, Sarah, Martha and Mary Magdalene visit the tomb, see the stone rolled away, and (this is a unique element!) open the door themselves to find the body gone. As they weep for the loss of the body, Jesus appears to them, comforts them and sends them to the disciples to tell them the good news.

The women seem to accept Jesus' claim immediately, but—just as in Luke—the disciples do not believe Mary's statement. Mary returns to her friends and to Jesus with nothing to show for. Jesus then sends Sarah to the disciples, but they accuse her of lying. Jesus tries to drive the message home a third time, now by appearing himself to the disciples, but they still 'doubted and did not believe', thinking he is a ghost. After referring to Peter's three-fold denial (Matthew 26: 33-35, Mark 14: 29-31, Luke 22: 33-34, and John 13: 36-38) and recalling his earlier words about 'my flesh, my death, and my resurrection', he invites Peter to lay his hand and his finger 'in the nail-print of my hands', Thomas to do the same with Jesus' side, and Andrew to verify that Jesus has indeed left footprints on the floor where he walked. Then, in contrast to John's story, the Epistle states that the disciples are convinced, because they 'felt him', 'that he has truly risen in the flesh'.

A second example is found in the Book of the Resurrection, which was long thought to be a part of the Question of Bartholomew, and dates to the 5th or 6th century. This text starts with the *descensus Christi ad inferos*, and continues with Jesus meeting his disciples, kissing and blessing them, after which 'they offered Eucharist' (a clear anachronism) (Elliott 1993: 652-672). Just as in John's gospel, Thomas is missing from the gathering. Whereas John offered no reason for Thomas's absence, the Book of the Resurrection provides one: Thomas has heard of the death of his son Siophanes (or Theophanes). Arriving at the tomb—it was already seven days after his son's death—Thomas raises him from the death.

After Siophanes tells his father about his journey through the afterlife, Thomas and his son go back to Jerusalem together. Siophanes tells his story to the people, while Thomas baptizes 12,000 of them, founds a church, and makes his son its bishop. Afterwards, a cloud takes Thomas to the Mount of

Olives, where the other disciples tell him of Jesus' appearance to them. Fully in accordance with his own legend, Thomas does not believe them. But when Jesus appears, he has Thomas touch his wounds before departing to heaven. The text remains silent on whether this rather stern action causes Thomas to believe, but it must be assumed it had this effect.

In both texts there is a transition from unbelief to belief. In the former, Jesus has to undertake three attempts to convince his disciples to believe in his resurrection. While the women apparently only need to see and hear Jesus, the disciples need more proof. Jesus invites them to put their hands and fingers in his wounds, which they do. Only this touch provides enough evidence for believing. The Book of the Resurrection is more succinct: it is understandable that Thomas is the only one who doubts, because he is the only one who did not witness Jesus' first appearance in which the disciples not only saw and heard Jesus, but celebrated holy Mass together, which necessarily involves the process of eating and drinking together. He expresses his unbelief, but is convinced by Jesus who 'makes' Thomas touch him. Whereas John and Luke are careful to portray Jesus' offer as just that, the Book of the Resurrection turns it into a direct order, to which obedience is the only appropriate response, whereas an invitation can be refused.

Thomas in Art

Thomas has many faces. He is the doubter, but also the confessor. He is the twin brother of Jesus and the chosen initiate. He is the weakest and the strongest one of the disciples at the same time. In the history of Western art, however, John's portrayal of the doubting disciple has become dominant, although it is possible to distinguish many subtle differences. In this section, I will look into four artistic renderings of doubting Thomas: Caravaggio's *The incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601-1602), Rubens's painting of the same title (1613), Bloch's *Doubting Thomas* (1881), and Ribble's painting, also called *Doubting Thomas* (2012). The sequence of discussion is chronological.

Image 1

Caption: Caravaggio, *The incredulity of Saint Thomas*

Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio, is one of the best painters of the Western tradition. His famous Doubting Thomas, *The incredulity of Saint Thomas*, was commissioned by Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani for his private collection, painted in 1601 or 1602, acquired by Prussia in 1816, and now displayed at the gallery of the Neues Palais of Sanssouci in Potsdam (Benay 2017: 59-82; Most 2005: 160-165). The image of Thomas probing Jesus' wound with his finger to assure his faith was very popular at the time. The Counter-Reformation was in full swing, Protestantism was a heresy to be fought with all means, and the doubting apostle was used to lure back lapsed Roman Catholics who were tempted by the new faith: 'Good Christians could waver and return to the fold stronger in their convictions' (Benay 2017: 60). Also, Thomas's tactile interaction with the body of the risen Lord was also used as an analogy for the ingestion of the Eucharist (Benay 2017: 67).

Caravaggio is regarded as a master of tenebrism, the dramatic use of sharp contrasts between highlighting and deep shadow, which suggests a radical experience of three-dimensionality (Fichtner-Rathus 2011: 74). This technique is also applied in his painting of Thomas: four figures, two in the back, two in the front, against a pitch-dark background. The two figures in the back are probably two of the disciples who were present at the scene. They cannot

be identified as individual apostles, because they lack any distinctive iconographic markers like keys or swords. Through their relative anonymity, these two figures represent the group of disciples, who are curious to see the interaction between Thomas and Jesus.

The heads of the four people in the painting together form an almost perfect square, tilted at 45 degrees. All four gaze at Thomas's finger as it slides into Jesus' wound. The viewer is drawn into a circular movement: from Thomas's staring eyes, to his finger, leading into the wound, upwards to Jesus' face, who is looking down on his own hand, which leads Thomas inside, concluding the visual narrative circle. Thomas's face is weathered, his nose rough and red, his clothes are torn, and his finger and nails are dirty. Jesus' skin is light and smooth, his clothing white, contrasting with the three disciples.

Three wounds are visible on Jesus' body: two tiny punctures on the backs of his hands, one rather big one in his side. It is striking that the wounds, especially the larger one in the side, do not bleed. This is indicative that the risen Jesus may be truly flesh and bones, but is not subject to the necessity of excreting bodily fluids. Jesus pushes Thomas's finger into his wound, approximately up to the first phalanx of Thomas's index finger. The gesture of Jesus touching Thomas's hand is somewhere between directing the hand and comforting its owner: no muscle tension appears in either hand.

Caravaggio's rendering of the story of Thomas is more akin to the Epistle of the Apostles and the Book of Resurrection than to John's gospel or the Synoptic gospels. Jesus not only invites Thomas to touch him, but this gesture actually takes place, with Jesus' explicit assistance. And the other two nameless disciples at the back not only look interested in Thomas's action, but they also seem very keen to try the same thing themselves.

Peter Paul Rubens's version of the Incredulity of Thomas was painted between 1613 and 1615, approximately a decade after Caravaggio's. It was commissioned by Nicolaas Rockox, mayor of Antwerp, and his wife, to decorate the couple's tomb. After the French took the painting to Paris in 1794, it was returned to Antwerp in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815. It is now exhibited in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp. Rubens's painting is a triptych, designed to be displayed above the altar, consisting of one large painting and two smaller ones on each side, which can be closed.

Image 2



Caption: Peter Paul Rubens, *The incredulity of Saint Thomas*

Nicolaas II Rockox and his wife Adiana Perez are depicted on the side panels of Rubens's altarpiece, a common way of immortalizing the sponsors of the painting in the work itself (Haeger 2004: 117). The context of its place in a burial chapel makes the choice of Thomas's story as the theme of the painting a very fitting one, since Jesus' rebuke 'Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed' (John 20: 29) can be easily applied to Nicolaas and his wife. Like all Christians, the mayor and his wife had to do exactly what Jesus told Thomas: to believe without having seen, let alone touch (Freedberg 1984: 59).

It is not easy to identify the three figures who surround Jesus. Possibly they were Thomas (the younger man on the right) and two other nameless apostles, just as in Caravaggio's painting. However, Monballieu has argued that the men beside Thomas are the Apostles Peter (middle, with white beard) and Paul (right, with black beard). This interpretation is based on an analysis of an 18th-century poem, written by Jacob van Sanden, describing the triptych, and the readings mentioned in Jacobus Tirinus's *Commentarius in vetus et novum testamentum* on the feast of Saint Thomas (Montballieu 1970: 140-146).

Jacobus Tirinus mentions 1 Peter 1: 8 and 2 Corinthians 4: 18. The first reads: '...and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory...' The text of Peter's first epistle connects those in the past who have not seen, but who nevertheless believed in Jesus' resurrection, to those in the present who are facing the same challenge here and now.

The second text connects seeing with temporal things and not-seeing with eternal things: ‘...while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal...’

From this perspective it becomes clear that Peter and Paul are included in Rubens’s painting of Thomas because they represent a different kind of visual contact with Jesus. Peter was able to see Jesus directly, before and after his death and resurrection, while Paul had to be content with just a vision of the risen one. Haeger has even suggested that Peter’s gaze upon Jesus’ body represents his human nature, while Paul’s gaze upon Jesus’ face represents Jesus’ divine nature (Haeger 2004: 124-125).

One intriguing detail is that the constellation is focused on the tiny wound in Jesus’ left hand. We cannot see whether the other hand has a similar wound, because it is covered from sight by Jesus’ thumb. No side wound on the belly or the chest is evident, leaving Jesus’ semi-naked body to shine in all its human glory. The focus of this painting is not on Thomas’s touch, nor on the disciples’ empirical approach to the body of a recently deceased friend, like in Caravaggio’s, but on the pious marvel with which the three apostles meet their risen master. Although Rubens took ‘a snap shot’ of the biblical scene, leaving room for further development, the emphasis is on the three men who look at Jesus’ hands and wounds, and there is nothing to suggest that physical contact is about to occur.

Caravaggio zoomed in on a concrete place and time to ‘capture the moment’, almost like we might take a photograph. Rubens did the opposite: he zoomed out to change this scene into a cosmic event which transcends its original, specific time and space, thus inviting the viewers to feel part of and take part in the painted movement. Through the eyes of Adriana (right panel), who looks directly at the viewer, the current viewer of the painting is drawn into the scene, invited to take his or her role in the narrative as a contemporary apostle of Jesus, who—like Paul—must rely on hearing instead of seeing, let alone touching.

If Adriana is the beginning of this catechetical journey, her husband (left panel) represents its conclusion: while his head is roughly directed at the same spot as Paul’s, that is towards Jesus’ face rather than the wound on his hand, his gaze wanders into the void. He is believing without seeing incarnate. Of course, there is some irony in the metaphorical dimension of this painting: it shows the very thing it deems to be unimportant. If it is Rubens’s intention to show that belief in Jesus can come through the Scriptures (hearing) and that Jesus does not have to be seen for someone to believe in his existence and resurrection, he does quite a masterful job at doing precisely that, depicting the risen Jesus.

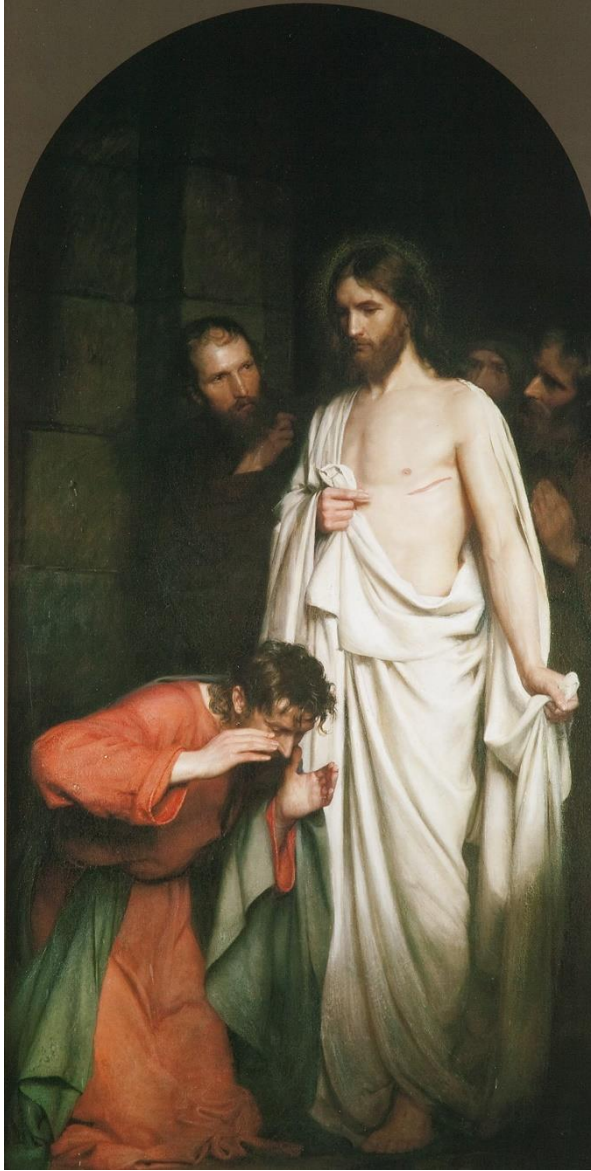
The distance between Jesus' body and the apostles is greater in Rubens's painting than it is in Caravaggio's earlier work, and it has grown even further if we look at our third example: Carl Bloch's *Doubling Thomas*, painted in 1881 as an altarpiece for the Lutheran church of Ugerløse, on the Danish island of Seeland. While Bloch was considered to be one of the greatest artists of his own time, his legacy is tarnished, partly because later critics accused him of Romantic Nativism, and partly because of his continuing popularity in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism), whose adherents favor his paintings of biblical scenes for use in their religious publications.

Jesus is depicted as a strong and severe looking man of uncertain age, with a hint of a halo around his head (a detail from Christian iconography that is absent in both Caravaggio's and Rubens's paintings). Both hands are clenched into fists, with his right hand clutching his white garment before his breast and his left held alongside his body. No puncture wounds can be seen on his hands, because his garment and hands are at an angle that conceals these parts of his hands. A superficial, light-red wound can be seen under his left nipple, but the aesthetical quality of this defies any association with pain or suffering.

Jesus looks down on Thomas, who is painted with rough facial hair, wearing green and red robes. He kneels before Jesus, but instead of looking up to his risen friend, he too looks down, to the ground, where Jesus' left foot appears with a rather faintly painted wound. Thomas holds his two hands beside his upper body in an expression of bewilderment or reverence. In the back we see three other disciples, two on Jesus' right, almost completely hidden by his body, and one on the right, shown more clearly but still only partially. All three look at Jesus, but not to the wounds on his body, but—as Paul did in Rubens's painting—to Jesus' face.

Jesus' and Thomas's body language in Bloch's painting is very different than it is in Caravaggio's and Rubens's works. In the two latter paintings, Jesus looks friendly and inviting, not just tolerating the inspection, but welcoming it. In Caravaggio's painting, Jesus even assists Thomas in probing his wound, and in Rubens's version, Jesus' gesture is one of friendly surrender to the peering eyes of his disciples. In Bloch's rendering however, Jesus looks almost angry or insulted by Thomas's unbelief and additional demands, especially in combination with his submissive position of bewilderment, with his face down, on his knees, making himself small.

Image 3



Caption: Carl Bloch, *Doubling Thomas*

In Caravaggio's work, the gesture of touch actually takes place; in Rubens's painting this is not shown but it is possible to imagine that it did. In Bloch's painting, however, the suggestion of physical contact between Jesus and Thomas seems highly inappropriate. Perhaps Thomas did touch Jesus, and we are witnessing his exclamation of 'My lord and my God' that followed

Jesus’—probably unanswered—invitation. While this is not impossible, the negative body language between the two main figures seems to favor the interpretation that Jesus is reprimanding Thomas for his lack of faith.

For the fourth example of Doubting Thomas in the arts, I return to Caravaggio’s initial painting, but with a modern twist. In 2012, the American amateur painter Thomas Ribble painted his version, for display in a Methodist church in Iowa, USA (Bushman 2012). Ribble views his painting as a form of ‘ministry’: ‘the paintings speaks words that I can’t’. The inspiration for his Doubting Thomas clearly came from Caravaggio, but Ribble re-interpreted the scene in such a way that the artist himself is incorporated in the story.

On the painting, we see a copy of Caravaggio’s *Incredulity* on an easel (left). On the right, we see a painter—probably Ribble himself—busy painting the almost finished version of Caravaggio’s work, although it appears to be a fragment, leaving room for only the two characters in the back. In his left hand, the painter holds three brushes somewhere between his own body and the painted body of Jesus. In his right hand, the painter holds a single brush, apparently the one he is using at the moment, which he places inside the wound of the painted Jesus. The painted Jesus holds the arm of the artist, leading his brush into his wound, thus placing Ribble in the position of the original Thomas.

Image 4



Caption: Thomas Ribble, *Doubting Thomas*

Ribble identifies the process of creating a piece of (devotional) art with the probing of Jesus's body by Thomas's finger: it is to penetrate the divine mystery. This probing is not something to be ashamed of (Bloch), or something from which one must abstain even though one is invited to do it (Rubens), but is something Christ himself actually encourages (Caravaggio). It suggests an intimate relationship between the act of belief and the art of artistic creation that Ribble connects with his own biography: 'I have a very strong faith and belief in God. Back in 2009, I just felt God really told me to use my talent this way and I started to paint these things. I didn't know why. I didn't have a clue.'

Closing Remarks

In view of the points mentioned above, it is possible to distinguish different approaches to the subject of the disciple touching the risen Jesus. Mark, in the original ending of this gospel, does not mention any touching; for Matthew the whole issue of touching seems totally unproblematic; Luke writes about a general invitation by Jesus to touch him; and John also describes a general invitation by Jesus to touch him, as well as a specific one extended to Thomas. The apocryphal Book of Thomas, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Acts of Thomas include neither an invitation nor an actual instance of any disciple touching Jesus. On the other hand, the Epistle of the Apostles and the Book of the Resurrection simply mention Thomas touching the risen Jesus.

With regard to the paintings discussed, Caravaggio directly depicts Thomas as he touches Jesus; Rubens depicts Jesus as fully willing to be touched, although it remains unsure if the invitation is acted upon by Thomas or not; Bloch's Jesus may (or may not) be inviting Thomas to touch his body, but he seems far from pleased that Thomas needs any such trivial thing to believe. Ribble returns to Caravaggio's depiction of the gesture of touching, while suggesting that every painter who tries to encapsulate the story of Thomas is similarly trying to touch Jesus, like Thomas wanted.

As has been seen, the sensory inputs of seeing, hearing and especially touching play an important role in the disciples' conversion stories in Luke, Matthew and John, as well as in those in the Epistle of the Apostles and the Book of the Resurrection. The notable absence of physical contact between Jesus and Thomas in the Gospel of Thomas and the Book of Thomas is understandable from their Gnostic context, which deprecates matter generally and specifically in relation to the risen Christ. The Gnostic books, and the Acts of Thomas, in slightly different ways, try to establish a brotherly bond between Thomas and Jesus, suggesting a shared blood connection and/or a spiritual bond between them.

Luke, Matthew, and John walk a narrow path, suggesting that Jesus did invite the disciples to touch him, without disclosing whether any of the disciples in fact acted on this, thus stressing that, while tangible contact with the risen Jesus is tempting and is not beyond the confines of Christian belief, it is less important than the more spiritual contact between the unseen Jesus and the individual believer.

This is exactly what Rubens did with his painting—the apostles inspect him visually but do not seem to touch Jesus. The other two renderings each favor either of the two sides: Caravaggio succumbed to the temptation to materialize the touching, and while Bloch does not strictly speaking ‘forbid’ the touching, he still makes it very clear that this was an inappropriate demand. The irony of artists who want to immortalize a scene about the necessity to believe without having seen (or touched), to believe without physical, empirical proof, is nicely—although probably unintentionally—encapsulated in Ribble’s version of the painter who pierces the wound.

Throughout this history, Thomas has lived up to his name, *nomen est omen*, as a two-faced hero of the faith: he is both the embodiment of the believer who wants to investigate, to probe, to penetrate the divine mystery, and of the believer who is capable of believing without any such hesitations. Both approaches are equally viable within the greater framework of the Christian, theological tradition.

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