

***“Un-Doubting Thomas”*: Recognition Scenes in the Ancient World**

The reputation of Thomas Didymus as one of Jesus’ disciples is almost completely formed from his words recorded in the Gospel of John. His nickname, “Doubting Thomas”, has found its way into the stock phrases of the English language and is even recorded in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, and the *Oxford English Dictionary*.¹ Once an image has reached such distinguished heights of popularity and is fixed so firmly in the sphere of urban legend, its popular perception is difficult to change.

This paper will seek to determine whether Thomas Didymus has truly earned his “doubting” moniker. The method I employ focuses on anticipating the response or responses by an ancient auditor. The methods of Peter Rabinowitz and James Phelan prove helpful here.² Their methods of defining literary conventions employed by the author help us to realize that, in most cases, the author must employ conventions that his “authorial audience” will have at their disposal.

In order to anticipate this response, it is necessary to identify the literary

¹*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, and *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

² Writings by Rabinowitz and Phelan include: James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and Peter J. Rabinowitz, ‘Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences’, *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1977), 121-41, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987) and Peter J. Rabinowitz and Michael W. Smith, *Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature* (Language and Literacy Series; eds. Dorothy S. Strickland and Celia Genishi; New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

conventions of many modern readers. One of these conventions results from the use of Thomas through the writings of ancient Christian writers. In order to illuminate these modern conventions, I will briefly examine evidence regarding Thomas's reputation as reported in various authors from ancient church history.

For the purpose of identifying the literary conventions of ancient auditors I will survey the recognition scenes in the Fourth Gospel and Homer's *Odyssey* and identify common literary threads. Finally, I will explore the use of the word *ἀπίστος* in classical literature in order to approximate the historical context of Thomas's words in the first century. After highlighting these three literary conventions, both ancient and modern, the paper will determine whether we should "un-doubt" Thomas.

References to Thomas in the Greek Fathers

The first concern is the reputation of Thomas as it has been established through church history. The Thomas episode is frequently cited or referred to as an example by the Greek fathers. Prominent among the references to the John 20.24-29 pericope is its use as apologetic material. Thomas's demonstration of the fleshly body of the resurrected Jesus provides frequent fodder for the apologetic arguments of the fathers. One example will suffice.³

³ For other discussions of the real, fleshly body of the resurrected Jesus see Ignatius, *Smyrn.* 22, Tertullian, *An.* 17.129, Augustine, *Faust.* 16.33 and 29.2, and *Enarrat. Ps.* 50.5, Theodoret, *Letters* 83 and 145, Jerome, *Letters* 108.24, Cyril, *Lecture XIII.*39, and Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 3.20. A second quote can be found in John Cassian, *Against Nestorius*, 3.15.25-26, (*NPNF*². 11:571). "But I want still to add one more testimony from an Apostle for you: that you may see how what followed after the passion corresponded with what went before it. When then the Lord appeared in the midst of His disciples when the doors were shut, and wished to make clear to the Apostles the reality of His body, when the Apostle Thomas felt His flesh and handled His side and examined His wounds — what was it that he

See now, though not as Thomas was allowed, yet by another way, He afforded to them full assurance, in being touched by them; but if you would now see the scars, learn from Thomas. 'Reach hither thy hand and thrust it into My side, and reach hither thy finger and behold My hands;' so says God the Word, speaking of His own side and hands, and of Himself as whole man and God together, first affording to the Saints even perception of the Word through the body, as we may consider, by entering when the doors were shut; and next standing near them in the body and affording full assurance. So much may be conveniently said for confirmation of the faithful, and correction of the unbelieving. (Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, 4.35)⁴

In similar fashion, the confession by Thomas was used to demonstrate the deity of the resurrected Jesus. Again one example will suffice.⁵

But, you ask, What was it that Thomas believed? That, beyond a doubt, which is expressed in his words, My Lord and my God. No nature but that of God could have risen by its own might from death to life; and it is this fact, that Christ is God, which was confessed by Thomas with the confidence of an assured faith. (Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 7.12)⁶

The Greek fathers also struggle with expressing the purpose or reason for Thomas's apparent lack of faith. Thus, throughout history, Thomas has become the exemplar for a variety of human frailties. Four examples will suffice at this point. First, he is the example for those who struggle with the absence of visual evidence.

And should any one appear like Thomas, who has little faith in what he hears, the

declared, when he was convinced of the reality of the body shown to him? "My Lord," he said, "and my God." 26 Did he say what you say, that it was a man and not God? Christ and not Divinity? He surely touched the body of his Lord and answered that He was God. Did he make any separation between man and God? or did he call that flesh Theotocos, to use your expression, i.e., that which received Divinity?"

⁴ Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 4.35 (NPNF² 4:447)

⁵ On the deity of Jesus see Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 50.5, Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 2.16.23, and *Letters*, 59.10, Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 11.2, Ambrose, *On the Trinity*, 3.15.108, and John Cassian, *On the Incarnation* 6.19.

⁶ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 7.12, (NPNF² 9:123)

faith of the eyes is not wanting, so that what one hears he may also see. In the servant of God, the glory of the wounds made the victory; the memory of the scars preserves that glory. (Cyprian, *Epistle XXXIII.2*)⁷

Second, he is the example for those who express their various doubts. Augustine reports and then responds to the argument of Faustus.

[Faustus] When the Apostle Thomas was in doubt, Christ did not spurn him from Him. Instead of saying, "Believe, if thou art a disciple; whoever does not believe is not a disciple," Christ sought to heal the wounds of his mind by showing him the marks of the wounds in His own body. Does it become you then to tell me that I am not a Christian because I am in doubt, not about Christ, but about the genuineness of a remark attributed to Christ? But, you say, He calls those especially blessed, who have not seen, and yet have believed. If you think that this refers to believing without the use of judgment and reason, you are welcome to this blind blessedness. I shall be content with rational blessedness.

(Augustine, *Reply to Faustus* 16.8)⁸

[Augustine] You see, my argument is not that if you are a Christian you must believe when He says that Moses wrote of Him, and that if you do not believe this you are no Christian. . . . You say you wish to be taught like the Christian Thomas, whom Christ did not spurn from him because he doubted of Him, but, in order to heal the wounds of his mind, showed him the marks of the wounds in His own body. . . . So, if you believe as Thomas did, you are no more a Manichaean. If you do not believe even with Thomas, you must be left to your infidelity.

(Augustine, *reply to Faustus* 16.33)⁹

Third, he is the example for those who think the resurrection impossible.

As to believe carelessly and in a random way, comes of an over-easy temper; so to be beyond measure curious and meddlesome, marks a most gross understanding. On this account Thomas is held to blame. For he believed not the Apostles when they said, "We have seen the Lord"; not so much mistrusting them, as deeming the thing to be impossible, that is to say, the resurrection from

⁷ Cyprian, *Epistle* 33.2, (*ANF* 5:313)

⁸ Augustine, *Faust.* 16.8, (*NPNF*¹ 4:222)

⁹ Augustine, *Faust.* 16.33, (*NPNF*¹ 4:233-34)

the dead. (John Chrysostom, *Homilies*, 14.87.1)¹⁰

Finally, Thomas comes to exemplify all the disciples in their doubts.

So he calls Him “The firstfruits of them that slept,” and “The first born of the dead.” When He had risen and was wishful to show that what had risen was the same body which died, when the Apostles doubted, He called to Him Thomas and said “Handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have.” (Hippolytus in Theodoret, *Dialogues* 3)¹¹

The firm establishment of Thomas’s reputation as the “doubting” disciple may be exemplified in the writing of two ancient writers. The image of Thomas as the example of one who doubts is provided first by the “heretic” Tertullian in his arguments against Epicurus and Menander.

Heresies, indeed, for the most part spring hurriedly into existence, from examples furnished by ourselves: they procure their defensive armour from the very place which they attack. The whole question resolves itself, in short, into this challenge: Where are to be found the men whom Menander himself has baptized? whom he has plunged into his Styx? Let them come forth and stand before us — those apostles of his whom he has made immortal? Let my (doubting) Thomas see them, let him hear them, let him handle them — and he is convinced. (Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, 50)¹²

Secondly, in what is perhaps most damaging to Thomas’s reputation, Chrysostom takes Thomas’s character to task in his homilies on the Fourth Gospel. He describes Thomas as more fearful as well as “weaker and more unbelieving than the rest”.¹³ Chrysostom also contrasts Peter and Thomas and concludes that the motive for Thomas’s

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, *Homilies*, 14.87.1

¹¹ Theodoret, *Dialogues*, 3 (*NPNF*² 3:235). See also Cyril, *Lecture* 14.11.

¹² Tertullian, *An.*, 50 (*ANF* 3:228).

¹³ Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 62, (*NPNF*¹ 14:228). Footnote on “unbelieving” states “cowardly”

questioning of Jesus resides, not in a desire for learning and following or in “loving affection”, but in cowardice.¹⁴ Finally, in what may be the ultimate solidification of his reputation, Chrysostom names Thomas as the supreme example of those who would disbelieve the events of the crucifixion. “And not this only, but the deed then dared was a demonstration of the faith, to those who should afterwards disbelieve; as to Thomas, and those like him.”¹⁵

We can discern from this brief survey of the Greek fathers that Thomas’s reputation for doubting was of secondary concern. His “doubting” moniker does not prevent him from being a reliable witness to the events of the crucifixion, to the resurrection, and to the humanity and deity of the resurrected Jesus. Thomas is utilized as a frequent example for many of the Greek fathers in their sermons, letters, discourses, and arguments to both the church and its opponents. As modern readers, it should now be possible to set aside an intrinsic reading of “doubting” Thomas.

Recognition Scenes

Our second concern is with discovering the literary conventions employed by ancient auditors. One such convention would involve the scene type where Thomas and Jesus interact. The words of Thomas in John 20 occur within the context of a recognition scene. Jesus is appearing to his disciples and the text records their identification of him. Such recognition scenes are common in ancient literature. The

¹⁴ Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo 73*, (*NPNF¹* 14:269).

¹⁵ Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo 85*, (*NPNF¹* 14:319).

recognition of an individual was critical for the acceptance of their authority. In order to understand the literary conventions associated with such recognition scenes we will now examine the intratextual evidence of the Fourth Gospel and the intertextual evidence of Homer's *Odyssey*.

Recognition Scenes in the Fourth Gospel

The recognition scenes in the Fourth Gospel can be divided into three distinct groups, 1) pre-ministry scenes, 2) ministry scenes, and 3) post-resurrection scenes. Of the first group, the first scene involves John the Baptist who twice identifies Jesus as "the Lamb of God" (Jn 1.29, 35). The other two scenes involve Jesus as the one who recognizes the other. In the first case he identifies Simon and gives him the name Cephas (Jn 1.40-42), while later he demonstrates his recognition of Nathanael (Jn 1.45-50).

Within the second group there are many possible scenes that deal with the recognition of Jesus' true identity, but only a few where the character involved did not apparently know Jesus at all prior to the encounter. Three scenes stand out. The first scene involves the woman at the well. This woman recognizes Jesus as a Jew, but doesn't name him by name. At the end of the encounter, because of his recognition of her, she identifies him as Messiah (Jn 4.7-29). The second scene occurs at the Pool of Bethesda. The man does not know who healed him when he is first asked by the Jewish leaders. Only after a second encounter with his healer can he attribute his healing to Jesus (Jn 5.2-15). The third scene is during his arrest. The arresting party confronts Jesus without knowing his identity. Jesus is required on two occasions to identify himself before they will arrest him (Jn 18.3-8).

This paper is primarily concerned with the third group of recognition scenes. Jesus has been crucified and buried. Those he has known do not anticipate any further encounter with Jesus. **As in the first two groups, there are again three scenes.** The first scene involves Mary Magdalene. She is weeping outside the tomb because the body of her Lord is not there. Hearing a voice behind her, she turns and faces a man without any recognition. Only when she is called by name does she recognize this one as Jesus (Jn 20.11-16). The second scene involves Thomas. After being informed about the other disciples' encounter with Jesus—and their apparently immediate recognition of him—Thomas refuses to believe without specific proof. When given that proof, he expresses his belief (Jn 20.24-28). The final scene involves seven fishermen: Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, the disciple whom Jesus loved, and two other unidentified disciples. These seven do not recognize Jesus as he stands on the beach until after they catch the 153 fish (Jn 21.2-8).

Of these nine scenes, two are of particular interest to this paper, those of Nathanael (Jn 1.45-50) and of Thomas (Jn 20.24-28). In both scenes the character expresses initial skepticism to those introducing him to Jesus' identity. Nathanael's response focuses on Jesus' lineage and city patronage. During his initial encounter, Nathanael is curious as to how Jesus knows his own identity? After receiving specific information about a situation from Jesus who was *in absentia*, Nathanael confesses that Jesus is the Son of God and King of Israel; a confession Jesus identifies as belief.

When Thomas is confronted by the other disciples in the upper room, he is skeptical of their recognition of this one who died. When Jesus provides Thomas with information gleaned while *in absentia*, Thomas **also** utters a confession, identifying Jesus as “my

Lord and my God,” a response that is also identified by Jesus as belief. The initial negative response by the character is followed by the disclosure of information specific to that individual and replaced by an affirmative recognition.¹⁶

Recognition Scenes in Homer

The status of the Homeric material in the Hellenistic world is often recognized and, as I have demonstrated this elsewhere, it needs no further discussion.¹⁷ Homer’s stories were a basic element of the common body of literature in the ancient world. In the *Odyssey*, there are several recognition scenes when Odysseus returns home to Ithaca.

The first scene of interest occurs when Eurycleia is commanded by her mistress Penelope to wash the feet of the “stranger,” Odysseus.¹⁸ For this service Odysseus does not seek a young maid to wash his feet, but rather he requests an old woman.

Aye, and baths for the feet give my heart no pleasure, nor shall any woman touch my foot of all those who are serving-women in thy hall, unless there is some old, true-hearted dame who has suffered in her heart as many woes as I; such an one I would not grudge to touch my feet.¹⁹

When the nursemaid to the young Odysseus is brought she sees much in common

¹⁶ Another similarity found in these two passages includes the focus on seeing, Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. Translated by John Vriend. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997, pp. 87-95 and 646-49.

¹⁷ Stan Harstine, *Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel: A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques* JSNTSupp 229 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 132-133. See also Craig Koester, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 10, where he quotes Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 141.

¹⁸ *Odyssey*, 19.335-507 (Murray, LCL).

¹⁹ *Od.*, 19.343-348

between this stranger and her absent king as she notes, “I declare that never yet have I seen any man so like another as thou in form, and in voice, and in feet art like Odysseus.”²⁰ Odysseus replies, “Old dame, so say all men whose eyes have beheld us two, that we are very like each other.”²¹

However, it is only when she actually washes the stranger’s feet that recognition comes. In his youth, Odysseus had earned a scar above the knee in battle with a wild boar.²² When the nursemaid touches the scar, instant recognition comes to her.

She let fall the foot. Into the basin the leg fell, and the brazen vessel rang. Over it tilted, and the water was spilled upon the ground. Then upon her soul came joy and grief in one moment, and both her eyes were filled with tears and the flow of her voice was checked. But she touched the chin of Odysseus and said; “Verily, thou art Odysseus, dear child, and I knew thee not, till I had handled all the body of my lord.”²³

For this woman, who knew Odysseus better and longer than any other living being, recognition did not come by sight, or by sound, or by appearance. The recognition and confession of his true identity came only by touch.

A second recognition scene comes after the suitors to Penelope have been slaughtered by Odysseus and Telemachus, his son. Penelope is told by Telemachus and Eurycleia of Odysseus’ return, but fails to immediately embrace him as her

²⁰ *Od.*, 19.380-381

²¹ *Od.*, 19.383-385.

²² *Od.*, 19.447-451.

²³ *Od.*, 19. 468-475.

husband.²⁴ Odysseus addresses her,

Strange lady! to thee beyond all women have the dwellers on Olympus given a heart that cannot be softened. No other woman would harden her heart as thou dost, and stand aloof from her husband who after many grievous toils had come to her in the twentieth year to his native land. Nay come, nurse, strew me a couch, that all alone I may lay me down, for verily the heart in her breast is of iron.²⁵

Only after Odysseus provides her with an answer to her trial—an answer only Odysseus would know—does she demonstrate her recognition of him.

So he spoke, and her knees were loosened where she sat, and her heart melted, as she knew the sure tokens which Odysseus told her. Then with a burst of tears she ran straight toward him, and flung her arms about the neck of Odysseus and kissed his head.²⁶

Penelope is only convinced when provided with specific knowledge known only to her.

In the recognition scenes of Eurycleia and Penelope we see traits similar to the scenes of Thomas and Nathanael. In both the Fourth Gospel and Homer, the recognition scenes begin with a negative response to or lack of acceptance of the apparently dead individual, (Jesus/Odysseus), proceed to the presentation of some specific knowledge by that individual, and conclude with an embracing confession for the one seemingly brought back from the dead (Jesus/Odysseus?).

Before Rereading

The third convention to discuss are the literary conventions surrounding the use

²⁴ *Od.*, 23

²⁵ *Od.*, 23.165-172.

²⁶ *Od.*, 23.205-208.

of the word, ἀπιστοῖ. Are there specific conventions in the Greek literary corpus of which a modern reader should be aware? Specifically, would hearing the Greek word ἀπιστοῖ direct an ancient auditor toward the concept of doubt and/or unbelief as it does a modern reader? An examination of the use of this word and its connotations in ancient literature will assist this process.

One source often consulted for understanding word use is a lexicon. Mounce identifies ἀπιστοῖ as “*unbelieving, without confidence in any one, violating one’s faith, unfaithful, false, treacherous, an unbeliever, infidel, pagan*” and in the passive “*incredible*”.²⁷ BDAG identifies ἀπιστοῖ as “1) unbelievable, incredible” and “2) without faith, disbelieving, unbelieving”.²⁸ Louw and Nida identify it as “pertaining to not being believable,”²⁹ or “pertaining to not believing, with the implication of refusing to believe”.³⁰ Liddell and Scott identify ἀπιστοῖ as “I. Pass., *not to be trusted,*” and “II. Act., *mistrustful, incredulous, suspicious*”.³¹ This survey notes that the first three examples identify this word with a reference to “unbelief”, which is different than the classical lexicon, a tendency that would certainly prejudice a reading away from the first century.

²⁷ William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan Greek Reference Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), ἀπιστοῖ

²⁸ ἀπιστοῖ, BDAG, 103-04.

²⁹ L&N, 31.40

³⁰ L&N, 31.98

³¹ ἀπιστοῖ, LSJ, 189.

A second source for consultation is the text of the ancient writers. In Plutarch's *Lives* ἀπίστοις is frequently utilized as an adjective with the translation "incredible."³² Dio Cassius uses ἀπίστοις in reference to individuals who are "faithless" or "untrustworthy."³³ Thucydides uses the term in similar fashion.

After the death of Chalcideus and the battle at Miletus, Alcibiades began to be suspected by the Peloponnesians; and Astyochus received from Lacedaemon an order from them to put him to death, he being the personal enemy of Agis, and in other respects thought unworthy of confidence.³⁴

The writings of Sextus Empiricus provide a more logical discourse in which ἀπίστοις appears frequently with ἐστῆναι in an apparently technical sense that contains the idea "discredited."³⁵ From these few examples we can see that in the ancient world ἀπίστοις had a wider understanding than just "unbelief." But what happens when this word is paired with its opposite, πιστοί, as in John 20.27?

In Appian's *Roman History*, such a pairing does take place. In Book 4, Appian describes the aftermath of the Second Triumvirate's rise to power. Speaking of the response by slaves to their masters, Appian writes:

For these reasons each one became treacherous [ἀπίστοις] to the household, preferring his own gain to compassion for the home. Those who were faithful [πιστοί] and well-disposed feared to aid, or conceal, or connive at the escape of the victims, because such acts made them liable to the very same

³² Plutarch *Num.* 7.3 (silence), *Luc.*, 10.3 (fury), *Ant.* 68.2 (report), and *Flam.* 10.5 (loud). (Perrin, LCL).

³³ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 46.3.4 (of Cicero), 48.54.7 (of Menas), 67.1.3 (of Domitian), and 71.25.1 (of Cassius) (may appear as 72.25.1).

³⁴ Thucydides, *History*, 8.45.1 (C.F. Smith, LCL).

³⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrr Hyp.* 1.98, 1.114, 1.115, 1.116, 1.122 (Bury, LCL).

punishments.³⁶

In this situation the connotation of this pairing is one of loyalty and not of belief. In the writing of Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, the following statement is found, “But it is extremely absurd to term the same thing at once both pre-evident and non-evident, both trustworthy and untrustworthy.”³⁷

An examination of the literary background for the word, *a)pi/stoj*, especially when combined with the word, *pi/stoj*, would infer that the first image drawn by an auditor of the first century when hearing Jesus’ words in John 20 would not have been related to religious faith, but to personal loyalty and/or trustworthiness. It is now possible for a twentieth century reader to include literary conventions gleaned from an understanding of ancient recognition scenes and the term *a)pi/stoj* as they are used in non-Christian texts when reading the Thomas episode. It may not be possible to eliminate totally the voices of church tradition and the common parlance of “doubting” from this reading, but hopefully they can be filtered out by the reader. The time has arrived to look at the account found in John 20.

Rereading the Thomas Recognition Scene

The Thomas recognition scene is found in Jn 20.26-29.

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but

³⁶ Appian, *Civil Wars*, 4.3.14 (White, LCL).

³⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, 2.344, “*pisto/n te kai\ a)1piston*” (Bury, LCL).

believing.”²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”³⁸

The common focus of this passage is Jesus’ command, “do not be faithless, but believing” and his question, “Have you believed because you have seen me?” The most common reading is that Thomas is an unbeliever.³⁹ Bonney notes further that,

The manner in which Thomas phrases his statement of unbelief should come as no surprise to the reader. It falls well within the parameters of the sort of behavior he previously exhibited in the narrative. What the reader has seen of Thomas to this point in the gospel is a “realist” known to express an acute sense of the way of the world. . . .

His response to the disciples’ news of the resurrection is in keeping with his character. He ridicules their claim with an exaggerated realism. . . . It is far easier to see Thomas’ language as befitting a personality that tends toward sarcasm than it is to see it as a genuine request to probe Jesus’ wounds.⁴⁰

We thus find the attribution of “doubting” or “unbelief” to Thomas as a commonly held **preconception**. Furthermore, this doubt is often seen as being entirely consistent with the characterization of Thomas throughout the Fourth Gospel. But is this the appropriate manner in which to characterize Thomas?

C.K. Barrett states, “Thomas appears in John as a loyal but dull disciple, whose misapprehensions serve to bring out the truth.”⁴¹ William Bonney himself notes that Barrett’s view of Thomas is an exception. Barrett later notes, “On the other hand, the

³⁸ John 20.26 RSV

³⁹ William Bonney, (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 158.

⁴⁰ Bonney, 158-159

⁴¹ C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (London: SPCK, 1958), p. 382

earlier references to Thomas suggest a loyal but obtuse, rather than a doubtful and hesitating character.”⁴² Should Thomas’s statement in John 20 be heard from the perspective of loyalty or of belief?

The key to unlocking this puzzle may again exist in Homer. After the nursemaid for Odysseus has recognized her master and lord she approaches her mistress, Penelope. In book XXIII of *The Odyssey*, Eurycleia announces to her mistress the return of Odysseus. Penelope responds with an accusation of madness.⁴³ Upon Eurycleia’s continued insistence of his return, Penelope is glad but cautious, as she asks to hear the story of his return and the slaughter of her suitors.⁴⁴ Even this story does not fully convince Penelope, as she attributes their deaths to the immortals. The aged nurse gives further proof of her master’s identity after a brief word of rebuke.

My child, what a word has escaped the barrier of thy teeth, in that thou saidst that thy husband, who even now is here, at his own hearth, would never more return! Thy heart is ever unbelieving (αἰπιστόν).⁴⁵

After entering the room, Penelope is again rebuked, this time by her son Telemachus.

My mother, cruel mother, that hast an unyielding heart, why dost thou thus hold aloof from my father, and dost not sit by his side and ask and question him? No other woman would harden her heart as thou dost, . . . but thy heart is ever harder than stone.⁴⁶

⁴² Barrett, 476.

⁴³ *Od.*, 23.11.

⁴⁴ *Od.*, 23.32-57.

⁴⁵ *Od.*, 23.70-72.

⁴⁶ *Od.*, 23.97-104.

Finally, upon receiving proof known only to Odysseus and herself, Penelope embraces Odysseus and asks forgiveness.

But be not now wroth with me for this, nor full of indignation, because at the first, when I saw thee, I did not thus give thee welcome. For always the heart in my breast was full of dread, lest some man should come and beguile me with his words; for there are many that plan devices of evil. . . . But now, since thou hast told the clear tokens of our bed, . . . lo, thou dost convince my heart, unbending as it is.⁴⁷

To this, Odysseus wept and embraced his “dear and true-hearted wife.”⁴⁸

Penelope is not portrayed as one who “doubts” the identity of Odysseus upon his return from the presumed dead.⁴⁹ Instead, she is characterized as the wise and trustworthy wife,⁵⁰ who is unwilling to hand over the bed and property of her husband to any other man.

Given that the first century auditor would possess knowledge of this prominent portrait of loyal fidelity, one should ask the question, “How would the Thomas episode have been understood by ancient Mediterranean auditors?” Would Thomas’s resistance to swear loyalty to anyone proclaiming to be Jesus raised from the dead have been viewed as unbelief regarding Jesus’ identity? Would the loyal character who desires to follow Jesus but doesn’t know where to go (Jn 14.1-7) so quickly replace his loyalty with doubt? Would the disciple who was willing to follow Jesus to Bethany so

⁴⁷ *Od.*, 23.213-230.

⁴⁸ *Od.*, 23.233.

⁴⁹ *Od.*, 19.257-58.

⁵⁰ *Od.*, 19.135-136.

that he might die with him (Jn 11.16), when given proof of his identity suddenly refuse to accept this same man? Would this disciple so characterized easily exchange his fidelity for doubt and mistrust?

Given the information gleaned from the recognition scenes (private information) and an understanding of the use of *πίστος / ἀπίστος* in the ancient world, I suggest that Thomas's presentation in the Fourth Gospel would be understood by a first century reader as that of a loyal and faithful servant, a servant who is waiting for a sign of recognition that only his true master can provide. The loyalty and fidelity of Thomas has been mischaracterized for the lack of some religiously based recognition (i.e. faith and/or belief). By utilizing the viewpoint of characterization, a reading results that recognizes the unswerving loyalty of Thomas throughout the Fourth Gospel rather than a sudden and unexpected desertion after the resurrection. Perhaps "Thomas the Loyal Twin" is a more historically accurate moniker for this disciple.

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