The Beauty of Jesus and His Twin: Redirected Erotics in the *Acts of Thomas*®

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It is dawn. A bride’s parents go to visit their newlywed daughter and her bridegroom, who have just spent their first night together in the wedding chamber. They find the newlyweds full of good cheer. Responding to her parents’ queries, the bride declares that she is greatly in love because of the husband she has sensed that night. Evidently, the morning after the night before, she is radiant with honeymoon bliss.

And yet all is not as it seems, for she and the groom have not even touched one another. The husband with whom she is in love is not the man she married the previous evening, but Jesus Christ. The groom, in turn, keeps talking of how Jesus loves him. The bride and groom are no longer interested in having a sexual relationship with one another, or with any other earthly partner. They sit apart, directing their attentions toward their heavenly lover and beloved.

This scene occurs near the beginning of an East Syrian text from the 3rd century CE known as the *Acts of Thomas* or the *Acts of Judas Thomas*. The work narrates the Christian missionary activity of the favourite apostle of the Syrian church, Judas Thomas, who is sometimes called simply “Judas” or “Thomas” in the text (Bremmer, 2001a: 74–78; Klijn, 2001: 6–7). The episode of the bride and groom presents in vividly dramatized form an early Christian lifestyle entailing the renunciation of sexual activity, even within marriage. Such sexual asceticism was becoming an actual or ideal way of life for many Christians in Late Antiquity, with major social repercussions on the imperial ethos of the patriarchal household (Brown, 1988; Cooper, 1996). Much of the *Acts of Thomas* promotes Christian sexual asceticism, both sexual abstinence within marriage and the refusal to enter into marriage, not to mention abstinence from sex with anyone who is not one’s spouse. The text explains the theological foundations of this way of life and dramatizes the familial and legal conflicts that could ensue.

Scholars have often concentrated upon the negative pole of this bodily practice, the denial it involved. Peter Brown, for instance, comments on the story

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of this bride and groom: “In no other legendary Acts do we meet in such vivid form the classic ascetic scenario of sexual renunciation on the wedding night”. Speaking more broadly about the period, he goes on to say, “In the Encratite tradition, the end of the present age was to be brought about by the boycott of the womb. And the boycott of the womb was crucial because sexuality was presented less as a drive than as the symbol of ineluctable processes, the clearest token of human bondage” (Brown, 1988: 98, 99).

Now, it is true that the newlyweds are opting for sexual continence, and that the transitoriness of human allure and the unappealing aspects of parenthood are operative factors in their decision. However, Brown’s framing of this practice as a kind of renunciation and as an aversion to seeing sexuality as a drive runs the risk of distorting the interpretation of the present text. For the new Christians in the Acts of Thomas do not achieve continence by a total staunching of desire. Rather, they are establishing an erotic connection with Jesus. In the bride’s case, especially, salvation is imaged as an incorruptible marriage with Jesus. She has rejected a coupling with her human husband in order to be yoked to Jesus, and she is full of love and gladness in so doing. Thus the bride’s desire—and the desire of several other Christians in the Acts of Thomas—is not totally denied or staunched, but redirected from earth to heaven. Although eroticism no longer results in sexual union and procreation on the human plane, it is still active in the relationship to God and to Jesus Christ.

To foster the practice of sexual asceticism by encouraging an attraction to Jesus is hardly unique to the Acts of Thomas; it was a commonplace within the forms of early Christianity that valued virginity and sexual continence (see, for example, the other major apocryphal acts of the apostles, or Jerome’s Letter to Eustochium) and it carried through into the erotic mysticism practised by many Christian celibates in later centuries. However, its distinctive feature in the Acts of Thomas is the role of Judas Thomas himself, who redirects desire via his discussion of beauty and via his own beauty. Under the basic presumption that one desires what is beautiful, the text uses its protagonist to portray the heavenly as beautiful and thus desirable. Heavenly desire is placed in relation to earthly desire, which issues in earthly sexual activity and the indulgence of other earthly pleasures such as the acquisition of wealth and power. Hence the discussion of the heavenly and the earthly is structured using the same vocabulary for both, not only for delights such as feasting and adornment but even for visual appeal, love, marriage and sexual union.

The text arouses heavenly desire and negotiates earthly desire via two techniques, contrast and mediation, both of which are founded upon widespread ancient philosophical notions rooted especially in the work of Platon. In one technique, earthly beauty is devalued to the point of denial, by being contrasted