

The Conversions of Adiabene and Edessa in Syriac Christianity and Judaism: The Relations of Jews and Christians in Northern Mesopotamia in Antiquity

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While these three texts emerged from a complex intertwined history of Jewish and Christian communities over several centuries, a careful reconstruction of the political, theological, and polemical motivations behind

As the diocese of Antioch exerted more and more ecclesiastical control over the Edessan church, tensions between these two versions of Christianity and between these Christianity and Judaism more generally escalated.

Legend of Abgar

The earliest account of this Syriac legend is a truncated Greek version that was preserved by the early church historian Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History* which was completed ca. 325 AD. In Book 1 of this text, Eusebius records the purported literary correspondence between King Abgar V Uchama of Edessa and Jesus of Nazareth.⁶

walk and you cleanse lepers, and cast out unclean spirits
and demons, and you cure those who are tortured by long

himself and his retinue. Thaddaeus willingly agrees but requests that the audience of the entire city be in his hearing.¹⁶ The following day the citizens were assembled, and Thaddaeus preached the Christian *kerygma* to the citizens of Edessa, and this resulted in the conversion of the “whole city of Edessans” to Christianity.¹⁷ The account ends with the statement: “These things were done in the 340th year.”¹⁸ The 340th year of the Edessan era is equivalent to the year 30 AD.¹⁹

The *Legend of Abgar* has piqued the interest of scholars throughout the years. However, claims of historical authenticity of the *Legend of Abgar*, which purports to record the actual correspondence between King Abgar V

Abgar.²² But this did not happen while King Abgar V, a contemporary of Jesus, ruled Edessa between 9-46 AD but when King Abgar IX, known as “Abgar the Great,” sat upon the throne (177-212 AD). In other words, the *Legend of Abgar* seems to date from the reign of Abgar the Great, but it was cast as if it were recording the actual events from one hundred fifty years earlier. To support this claim, scholars cite evidence which substantiates that Christianity came to Edessa during King Abgar IX’s reign.

provide an accurate accounting of Edessan history, records that there was an established worshipping community in Edessa prior to 201 AD. Secondly, extant fragments from the works of the Christian philosopher and theologian Bardaisan (Bar Day n; ca. 154-222 AD) demonstrate that a Christian author was writing in Edessa during the late second century.²⁸ Lastly, the *Book of the Laws of the Countries*—a work produced by the school of the philosopher Bardaisan at the beginning of the fourth century—

Judaism. Throughout antiquity there was constant traffic between Edessa and Adiabene through Nisibis. Trade was enhanced through the shared oral language of Aramaic and common Mesopotamian culture, including the

This thesis, proposed most comprehensively by J.B. Segal in *Edessa: The Blessed City*, demands a more detailed examination, for it provides the

the west through Antioch as this region was annexed by the Roman Empire. Why then was the Abgar legend originally created? The answer to this question hinges on when the Syriac legend first was promulgated. Comparison of the Eusebius's account of the *Legend of Abgar* and the Syriac text of the *Doctrine of Addai* led Rolf Peppermüller to conclude that these writings go back to a common Syriac source which dates to the second half of the third century AD.⁶⁶ Peppermüller's analysis is significant since it suggests the likelihood that Eusebius had access to a Syriac version, or a translation of such, when he wrote the *Ecclesiastical History*. Eusebius states several times that the legend comes from the Syriac, and there is no plausible reason to posit that Eusebius "invented" this story, for it does not seem to serve any overall purpose in his writings that would warrant such a creation.⁶⁷

It is very plausible that the new alignment and orientation of the Edessan community to the Roman Empire is the cause for the creation and promulgation of the Abgar legend. The introduction of Gentile Christianity through Antioch coupled with the fact that Edessa came under the control of the diocese of Antioch suggests the impetus. The confrontation between Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity, which Segal suggests might be reflected in the factional split of later Syrian Christianity, produced a climate in which the Syriac-speaking, Jewish-Christian church defended its authority. This legend was likely produced by Jewish-Christians to respond to the inevitable questions posed by this confrontation. The Syriac legend explains where Edessan Christianity came from and why it is authentic. In truth, it claims to be *more authentic* than Gentile Christianity for King Abgar converted to Christianity through direct correspondence with Jesus himself. The legend makes an even more dramatic claim: Abgar confessed the divinity of Christ before the crucifixion.⁶⁸ Abgar's letter provides the evidence:

For, as the story goes, you make the blind recover their sight, the lame walk and you cleanse lepers, and cast out unclean spirits and demons, and you cure those who are tortured by long disease, and you raise dead men. And when I heard all these things concerning you I decided that it is one of the two, either that you are God, and

The Abgar legend undermines the primacy of Gentile Christianity (i.e. Pauline) since Abgar confessed Christ well before Saul encountered the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. The legend might also suggest

his mother had also become

from the Jews who were seeking to do him harm.⁷⁷ More poignantly, King Abgar expressed the desire to kill those Jews in Jerusalem who put his Lord Jesus to death.⁷⁸ While these statements clearly reflect a tension between Edessan Christianity and Judaism, it is not surprising that an extant text such as the

also wished to undermine the authority and prestige of Gentile Christianity.

Doctrine of Addai

who must be avoided at all costs: “Crucifiers” and Christians are not to be friends.⁸⁴ The *Doctrine of Addai* reflects this new reality. It is a rewriting of an earlier Syriac Christian legend that seeks to establish Jewish-Christianity as the authentic and original faith rooted in the ministry of Jesus himself. At the same time, the redacted account shares the increased anti-Judaism of the Christianity of Aphraates and Ephraim.⁸⁵ The dating of the earliest manuscript of the *Doctrine of Addai* corroborates this setting.⁸⁶

The legend of Protonike undermines the more familiar western

The Protonike story, recorded in the *Doctrine of Addai*, claims that after she was converted by Simon Peter she traveled to the Holy Land with

