

Tales of King Abgar: A Basis to Investigate Earliest Syrian Christian Syncretism

Emran El-Badawi[§]

Introduction

Although king Abgar V is known and celebrated as the first Christian king, little attention has been paid to how this giant of history has functioned as a literary bridge between paganism and Christianity in Syria. By sifting through sources remarking on Abgar, especially the *Doctrine of Addai*, we learn about the earliest history of Syrian Christianity and religious syncretism with earlier paganism. Furthermore the role of Urhai as a semi-autonomous city-state and as an ethnic crossroads plays an important role to this end as well, as it accommodates freer Christian development, with its many beliefs and practices more discernable to study.

Edessa, an ancient crossroads of different cultures, and more importantly, the birthplace of Christianity in “the East,” remains—alas—an obscurity. In particular, as pertains to this study, the relationship between Edessa and Christianity up until approximately the first two-hundred and thirty years after the Common Era¹ is, by and large, unresolved.² That is to say that scholars of the field have naturally remained, and still remain, concerned with Syrian Christianity’s origins, and have published a moderate amount of literature to this end.³ But this task is severely hampered by the sheer poverty of primary sources. Furthermore deducing the original language of a textual tradition, whether it is Syriac, Greek, or both,⁴ adds to the challenge. What is more, scholarly

[§] Mr. Emran El-Badawi is a Ph.D. candidate in Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations, from the University of Chicago. He has an M.A. in Religion from Temple University, Philadelphia, and a B.A. in Religion and Computer Science from Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

¹ This timeframe has been chosen to parallel, as best as possible, Bardaisan’s death and subsequent diminishing of “earliest Syrian Christianity,” before it is notably Chalcedonized by Ephrem Syrus (c.306-373) in the fourth century. Edessa also comes within the fold of the Roman Empire in 214 C.E.

² Bauer, Walter. *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971),44.

<<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rs/rak/publics/new/BAUER00.htm>>

³ Burkitt, F. C. *Early Christianity Outside the Roman Empire: Two Lectures Delivered at Trinity College, Dublin* (Glasgow: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 3-5, 26. I must agree with the late F.C. Burkitt, when he asserts that the very study of Jesus Christ should be principally employed via the study of Semitic tradition (principally Aramaic-Syriac). He also underscores the stability of Semitic language as opposed to Greek, and further emphasizes the difference between this and Greek civilization, which later came to dominate the landscape.

disagreement regarding this field is widespread and can be dreadfully problematic.⁵ The oldest known Edessan church building that we know of was destroyed by the flood of 201 C.E.⁶ In addition the scarcity of sources before 70 C.E., is customarily blamed on the “great catastrophe of the Jewish war...sack of Jerusalem...[and separation] of Church and Synagogue.”⁷ The scarcity thereafter until about the 5th century remains far more puzzling. The task at hand therefore is most challenging but duly imperative to the study of Christian origins, Classical Near Eastern history, and religious dialogue.

Indeed this study is of particularly great value, not simply because it constitutes an additional examination of Christian origins, but in truth because of the rarity of its kind and its challenge in scrutinizing a groundbreaking field. It is furthermore absolutely essential that we acknowledge the blended Semitic, and Greek elements involved in texts reflecting the Christianization of Syria—Harnack provides a helpful background to work with.⁸ As such, a great deal of

⁴ Drijvers, H. J. W. *East of Antioch: Studies in Early Syriac Christianity* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), 3. Dr. Drijvers is not unique in purporting that many Syrian texts of antiquity were simultaneously written in both Syriac and Greek, only he asserts that this textual duality does not matter much.

⁵ Cureton, William. *Ancient Syriac Documents relative to the earliest Establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the neighbouring Countries* (London, 1864; reprint, Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1967), 162; Drijvers, H. J. W. *Bardaisan of Edessa*, English translation by G. E. van Baaren-Pape (Assen, Netherlands: Royal von Gorcum Ltd, 1966), 1-59; Murray, Robert. *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 5-8.

⁶ von Harnack, Adolph. *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (translated by James Moffat): vol. I-IV (London and New York: Williams and Norgate, Putnam's Sons, 1908), 4:2.

⁷ Burkitt, 5.

⁸ von Harnack, 4:3:3. “The Apology of pseudo-Melito ...composed about the beginning of the third century, was probably written in Syriac originally (and in Coele-Syria), but it is the only Syriac writing which can be named in this connection. Investigations into the Acts of Thomas have not yet advanced far enough. The great probability is, however, that they were composed in Syriac, and that they belong to Edessa — in fact, to the circle of that great Eastern missionary and teacher, Bardesanes; ...and Burkitt in the *Journal of Theological Studies* The Syriac version of the gospels also belongs to Edessa, rather than to Western Syria. The gnostic Saturninus (Saturnil) also belonged to Antioch ...and other Gnostic sects and schools (Ophites, etc.) originated in Syria. Their language was Greek, but interspersed with many Semitic loan-words....According to reliable traditions, the first catholic bishop of Edessa was ordained by Serapion, the bishop of Antioch....Outside the gates of Antioch, that “fair city of the Greeks” ... Syriac was the language of the people; in fact, it was spoken by the lower classes in Antioch itself ..., and only in the upper classes of the Greek towns was it displaced by Greek. The Syriac spirit was wedded to Greek, however, even here, and remained the predominant factor in religious and in social life, although at first and indeed for long it did not look as if it would. Yet in this Syrian world, Christianity operated from Edessa rather than from

rummaging through sources and general investigative-work has been put forth. Having said this, it is with both hope and meticulousness that Syrian Christianity, in its *earliest* form(s), will be explored in light of the historical and religious character of king Abgar V of Edessa (Appendix 1).

Abgar: Sifted from the Sources

From amongst all the Syriac manuscripts of the first two and a half centuries of the Common Era, in addition to the later 5th-7th century translations thereof, Abgar V is mentioned only in a few. Amongst the relevant sources are: *the Doctrine of Addai*,⁹ both the apostle Addai's address to king Abgar and his address to the city of Edessa; Eusebius of Caesarea's (c.260-339)¹⁰ *History of the*

Antioch, unless we are wholly mistaken. The wide territory lying between these cities was consequently evangelized from two centers during the third century; from Antioch in the West by means of a Greek Christian propaganda, and from Edessa in the East by means of one which was Syro-Christian. The inference is that the larger towns practically adopted the former, while the country towns and villages went over to the latter. At the same time there was also a Western Syrian movement of Christianity, though it did not amount to much, both in and after the days of Paul of Samosata and Zenobia.... "The relations between the Greeks and the older population of Syria may be inferred clearly from the local terminology. The majority of the towns and districts bore Greek names, mainly derived, as we have seen, from Macedonia-e.g., Pieria, Anthemusias, Arethusa, Berœa, Chalcis, Edessa, Europos, Cyrrhus, Larissa and Pella. Others were called after Alexander or some member of the Seleucid house-e.g., Alexandria, Antioch, Seleucis and Seleucia, Apameia, Laodicea, Epiphaneia. The old native names kept their place indeed, as in the case of Berœa (formerly Chalep in Aramaic, or Chalybon), Edessa or Hierapolis (previously Mabbug or Bambyce), and Epiphania (previously Hamath or Amathe); but the newer names mostly displaced the old, and only a few districts (e.g., Commagene, Samosata, etc.) did without new Greek names."... The peculiarity of the Antiochene (upper) bishop in early days was that his interest in missions, extending as far as Mesopotamia, was confined to the spread of a Greek Christianity; he did little for the establishment of a national Syrian church. This was where Edessa came in. But I think it too much to say, with Burkitt...that "the church of Antioch was, so far as we know, wholly Greek." The country districts, where there was a Semitic-speaking population, seem to have remained unevangelized. Where the Jews had settled, the new Jewish heresy followed, but the country-side remained pagan." See also von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three*, 4:3:5.

⁹ Griffith, Sidney H. "The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought in Edessa in the Fifth Century." *Hogoye Journal of Syriac Studies* 6.2 (2003).

<<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol6No2/HV6N2Griffith.html>>

This manuscript is originally called "*malpanuta d'aday shlikha*," and is presently also called the *St. Petersburg manuscript*.

¹⁰ This document is included as Eusebius attempts to reproduce an older version of the original text, though he does make some personally-biased editions. See Phillips, George. *The Doctrine of Addai*. London: TR-BNER & Co, 1876.

<http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/addai_1_intro.htm>

<http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/addai_2_text.htm>

Church, I: XIII “Concerning the King of Edessa,” and II “the Doctrine of Addaeus the Apostle”; the apocryphal *Exit of Mary from the World, and the Birth and Childhood of Jesus Christ, II*¹¹; and the *Martyrdom of Habib the Deacon*.¹² All these sources are contended to have *originated* in the first two centuries of Christianity, but are only kept extant through manuscripts dating from the 5th-7th century.¹³

Later Syriac works mentioning Abgar, *not* examined in this study are: Moses of Chorene’s (c.400-490) *History of Armenia*, II;¹⁴ Mar Jacob’s (b.449?) *Oration on Habib the Martyr*;¹⁵ Mar Jacob’s *Oration on Shamuna and Guria*;¹⁶ and Mar Jacob’s *Canticle upon Edessa when She Sent to Our Lord*.¹⁷ These documents are histories and commentaries known to have *originated* much later than the fourth century and therefore qualify for a period of examination *after* the *earliest* period. Furthermore this period comes after the lives of the illustrious Ephrem, Syrus, Aphrahat, and Rabbula (fifth century),¹⁸ all of whom start a new era of Syrian Christianity—an era more akin to its ultimately Catholic neighbor.¹⁹ This period, initiating Syrian Christianity’s adoption of Greco-Catholic ideals and subversion of native Semitic ones,²⁰ will be called simply the “*later*” period of Syrian Christianity. We are now swiftly compelled to make a solid realization. The Church histories of the East (Syria-Mesopotamia) and West grew in separate tracks,²¹ and even later when eastern “Orthodox” leadership

¹¹ Cureton, 110-111.

¹² *Ibid.*, 72-85.

¹³ Historically this seems to be the case with several historical tales; they are documented centuries after actually taking place. Some examples would be the Old Testament book of Kings, Chronicles and even the Islamic Hadith traditions.

¹⁴ Cureton, 125-139.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86-96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96-106.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

¹⁸ Griffith. Scholars like Griffith and Drijvers discuss how bishop Rabbula may have been the final author of the *Doctrine of Addai*.

¹⁹ Burkitt., 16-17. This distinction is by all means *not* arbitrary, and is quite appropriate in separating heterodox earliest Syrian Christianity (c.36 – c.230 C.E.) from its later form (c.310 C.E. - onward).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-43. Semitic elements here signify two positions: the monotheism of Judaism so harshly and suddenly debated, partially due to hatred, by Aphrahat; and the ancient astrological practices of the Near East inherited into *earliest* Syrian Christianity (Consult Ephrem’s “Hymn Against Bardaisan” for example).

²¹ It is interesting to note a doctrinal difference here. Before the Greek takeover of Syrian Christianity, the Holy Ghost (Semitic: “ruh”) is regarded as it is linguistically a female, the Mother of the Trinity. This also gives rise to other splinter traditions in which the Holy Ghost is the Virgin Mary. J. Seely illustrates this best in his

took hold, movements not so close to the desires of Constantinople or Antioch, broke away yielding Monophysites or Nestorians. This continual antagonism between the Greeks and Syrians never subsided and ultimately spelled doom for the Byzantines in Syria.²² This should suffice as adequate textual data regarding the work at hand. Certainly the focus is not fundamentally placed on the Textual-Critical method, but on learning about Edessa's *earliest* Christian context, which, in the long run, entails the involvement of king Abgar V at some level.

Edessa: History, Religion and Background

Edessa in the first and second centuries C.E. was a crossroads to many peoples, cults, cultures, languages and political empires. Syria in general, no doubt retained a meager level of Hellenization, remnant of Seleucid times. Edessa's original Aramaic-Syriac name Urhai, is somewhat maintained today as Urfa. The number of Greek occupants in Syria had dwindled significantly by the year 133; thus Hellenization had little impact on the area unlike centuries earlier (Appendix 3).²³ Edessa was also briefly occupied by Tigranes of Armenia in 95 B.C.E. Yet the principal foreign influence during the first two centuries C.E., was exerted by Persia. That being said, it was first and foremost, the native Semitic tradition of Syria itself that was permitted to dominate in early Edessa.²⁴ This remained the case even after Roman occupation during the reign of Caracalla (211-217) onward and even after the inhabitants of Antioch and Edessa adopted Christianity (in separate tracks of course)—the common folk remained pagan well into emperor Justinian's reign.²⁵

Interestingly rulers of Edessa ever since 133 B.C.E. were kings, or more precisely tetrarchs with some level of autonomy, and were of Arab-Aramaean stock.²⁶ The royal court boasted thoroughly Arab names like 'Abdu, Abgar, Ma'nu, Bakru, Wa'il, and so on.²⁷ However, the kings were only called by the

Introduction to Eastern Spiritual Christianity (London and Toronto: University of Scranton Press, 1991), 7; See also Burkitt, 37-39.

²² Burkitt, 34, 45.

²³ Bauer, 2. Seleucid influence declines heavily in 129 B.C.E. whilst warring with the Parthians, who eventually gain influence over the Near East. Moreover, Bauer states, "there is a corresponding lack of Greek inscriptions for the first centuries of the common era."

²⁴ Drijvers, H. J. W. *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1980), 176. This dominance is epitomized in the Edessan adoption of Arab-Babylonian deities. Chaldean astrology was also prevalent.

²⁵ von Harnack, 4:3:5. Aside from their rural cousins, Haran is typically heralded as the urban pagan centre of Syria, till the very advent of Islam in the seventh century.

²⁶ As such, the Arabian-Syrian interaction lies very much in a transitional zone with two already-kindred centers of gravity at each end: Aramaic in the north (Syria-Iraq) and Arabic in the south (Arabia-Yemen). Nabataean Arabs of the seventh century B.C.E to the first century C.E.

title Abgar or Ma'nu. As such, at the popular and even aristocratic level, religious belief and traditional practice in early Edessa could be described as a kind of Irano-Semitic syncretism.²⁸ Cults for the worship of the Babylonian gods *Nebo* and *Bel* were most common.²⁹ The cult of Bel (or Ba'al) is certainly a most ancient Canaanite contribution to its neighbors. Other major cults included Atargatis (*Tar'atha*) of Mabbug, the Eagle deity of the Arabs, Azizu ('Izz and his consort *Al-'Uzza*),³⁰ Manimos (*Mun'im*), the Sun (*Shamash*) and Moon (*Sin*) cults of Haran, *Nikkal*,³¹ *Bat Nikkal*, Iranian Magiism, and various star cults like that of the Morning Star or *Ishtar-Venus*.³² Moreover most of these cults were worshipped in pre-Islamic Arabia and are denounced explicitly in the Qur'an.³³ Other cults of Hatra and Sumatar also influenced Edessa substantially.³⁴ Manichaeism eventually became a significant player as well during the third and fourth centuries. The knowledge of this plurality of sects and cults is primarily afforded by their attack from *later* Syrian Christians. And so the religious tolerance of the Parthian-Sassanian Empires is historically attested to be somewhat greater than that of the Roman-Byzantine Empires. Once Christianity gained political strength under the Roman banner of Nicaea, and especially Chalcedon, this intolerance turned into persecution—especially of Monophysite Christians in Syria and Egypt.³⁵ This Hellenic disdain and intolerance towards

²⁷ Bauer, 2.

²⁸ Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁰ The Qur'an even criticizes the worship of Venus-Sirius, *Allat*, *Manat*, and *Al-'Uzza* (Qur'an 53:1, 19-23, 49).

³¹ This is also spelled *Ningal*.

³² The original Arabian-Akkadian goddess Allat or Ishtar was most highly popularized in the capital of Syrian paganism, Haran. She was also adopted by the Greeks as Aphrodite. See Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 38-146. This is strongly attested in the *Doctrine of Addai*, *Acts of Sharbel*, Jacob of Serug's *Homily on the Fall of the Idols*, and Bardaisan's *Book of the Laws of Countries*.

³³ Qur'an 37:125; 53; 41:37.

³⁴ Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 122-145.

³⁵ The essential divergence between the two forms of Christianity would lay especially in that the Chalcedonian Creed of 451 C.E. Earlier Greek Christian Fathers, from the Syrian perspective, of the third-fourth century C.E. like Eusebius and Abgar's "friend" Sextus Julius Africanus (See *von Harnack*, 3:5), would study the Syriac works of even earlier Syrian Christians like Bardaisan specifically to locate Hellenic ideas of Christology. Original Eastern-Syriac elements of Christianity were ignored. See Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 96. Western Christianity's fascination with Christology truly becomes dominant in Syrian Christianity during the time of Ephrem Syrus in the former half of the fourth century. It is therefore not surprising that the Persians, the only other comparable superpower, more or less welcomed the development of native Mazdaism, briefly Manichean syncretism, Chaldean astrology,

the Eastern brethren is crucial to the development of Syrian Christianity, not least because it labeled Syrian's eternally as the "other" Christians.³⁶ And this along with exhaustive Roman-Persian wars, ultimately paved the way for the rapid rise of Islam in the Near East. The valuable lesson to be extracted from this is that *earliest* Christianity in Syria grew in this environment of Irano-Semitic syncretism, inter-religious coexistence, and not in stark contrast to other competing religious-philosophical beliefs.

In particular, the dominance of Babylonian-Arab deities and kingship in Edessa, go hand in hand.³⁷ Blended worship habits denoted a blending of peoples.³⁸ Waves of Semitic immigrations and emigrations between Arabia and Mesopotamia are common throughout ancient history. The Syria-Hijaz-Yemen trade route was a major lifeline of both Aramaean and Arabian society for centuries. It is this long-standing ancient social, cultural, religious, intellectual and commercial exchange between both nations that allowed, not just Arab kings to rule in Syria, but eventually the rise of Arab bishops and patriarchs.³⁹

Abgar, Edessa and Christianity

Throughout history the name Abgar is synonymous with captions like 'the King of Edessa' (Appendix 4) or 'the first Christian King.' Distinguishing this character's historic and legendary components from one another is not always simple. The chief text to be used is the *Doctrine of Addai*, both in its anonymous form and what Eusebius relates to us from it.⁴⁰ King Abgar *Ukama V* "the Black" (c.25 B.C.E-50C.E.) of Edessa reined during the time of Jesus and thereafter.⁴¹ The original manuscript is said to have been written by a Syriac scribe Labubna, son of Senaq, son of Abshadar.⁴² The account begins with the story of the letter of king Abgar, who is afflicted with an incurable disease, to Jesus Christ, and the reply of the latter.⁴³ Abgar is unable to travel to Jerusalem so as to not anger the Roman authorities for border contravention (or perhaps because of his disease). It is for this reason that there is a claimed correspondence

Jews (to some degree) and from so-called Christian heretics like Nestorians (labeled as such by their enemies).

³⁶ Later on, this Hellenic disdain for Syrian forms of Christianity would become legislated at the Councils of Ephesus (431), Chalcedon(451), and Constantinople (553) where Nestorianism and Monophysitism were denounced.

³⁷ Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 176.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁹ Sahas, D. J. *John of Damascus on Islam: The Heresy of the Ishmaelites* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 6-7.

⁴⁰ Much scholarly effort has been put forth just to compare both narratives. See Griffith, "The *Doctrina Addai*."

⁴¹ Cureton, 6; Phillips, *The Doctrine of Addai*.

⁴² Griffith, *The Doctrina Addai.*; Phillips, *The Doctrine of Addai*.

⁴³ Eusebius has some variations regarding this point.

between both Abgar and Jesus. Eusebius particularly treasures this correspondence insofar as it exhibits a compassionate bond between Jesus and the pagan world.⁴⁴ The reply, blessing the King of Edessa for believing in Jesus without having seen him, and informing him that an Apostle will be sent once Jesus goes to “[his] Father,” is carried by a royal courier Hannan, who also paints a portrait of Jesus for Abgar (Appendix 2).⁴⁵ Following Jesus’ Ascension, Judas Thomas sends Addai,⁴⁶ one of the seventy-two disciples and new ambassador,⁴⁷ to Abgar. Addai duly comes to Edessa, heals the king of his ailment, and many others. He also preaches before the royal court.⁴⁸ Addai then, at the request of Abgar, preaches to the general public of Edessa, and attacks the city’s many cults and forms of worship. All the people are converted.⁴⁹ The pagan altars are “thrown down,” and the populace is baptized. King Abgar persuades the Roman Emperor Tiberius to destroy the Jews for having crucified the Savior.⁵⁰ Churches are built by Addai, and sponsored by king Abgar. Deacons and priests are employed for the first time. On his death-bed⁵¹ Addai appoints Aggai, one of the king’s silk-workers, as his successor over all of Mesopotamia.⁵² He ordains the deacon Palut as an elder, and gives his last admonitions. Addai is honored by being buried in the sepulcher of the king’s ancestors. Many years after the death of both the apostle Addai and king Abgar, Aggai is murdered by one of Abgar’s “rebellious sons” who had succeeded the throne.⁵³ He is buried under the Church structure. His successor, Palut, is obliged to go to Serapion, Bishop of Antioch, in order to receive Episcopal Consecration,⁵⁴ which he received from he who “himself also received the hand from Zephyrinus, Bishop of Rome, from the

⁴⁴ von Harnack, 1:5; 4:1.

⁴⁵ This is not present in Eusebius’ account.

⁴⁶ Due to Eusebius’ version, Addai is most commonly accepted as the apostle Thaddeus. See also Cureton, 154. Others have claimed that Addai is simply Thomas himself.

⁴⁷ Murray, 173.

⁴⁸ This sermon is the first major part of the “doctrine.” Incidentally, the part of the document relating the discovery of the “True Cross” by Protonice, wife of the Emperor Claudius with all that follows, is later than Eusebius, being founded on the story of St. Helena.

⁴⁹ The text says that even those who initially rejected Addai’s message, later converted.

⁵⁰ References to the Jews are constantly followed by “the crucifiers.” However, they are identified as having had prophets, learned the law, and even “confessed that the Messiah is the Son of the living God.” See Griffith, *The Doctrina Addai*.

⁵¹ Cureton, 162-164. Addai is considered to have died before Abgar, this approximates his Edessan ministry at about ten or eleven years.

⁵² Murray, 192.

⁵³ This son would seem to be Abgar’s second, Ma’nu, who after being refused a request by the pious Aggai, breaks his legs.

succession of the hand of the priesthood of Simon Cephas, which he received from Our Lord.”⁵⁵ This is the story in a nutshell, and much needs to be said about it.

First and foremost, Addai is central to the doctrine, not Abgar. Furthermore numerous elements of *later* Christian apologetic are detectable within the story as well. Abgar’s two Christological statements are immediately suspect,⁵⁶ and are most surely *later* interjections. He states, when learning about the works of Jesus, “these powers are not of men but of God.” He then says, “when I heard of the great wonders which you do, I decided either that you are God...or that you are the Son of God because you are doing all these things.” Moreover *earliest* Syrian Christianity is not usually characterized by strong Christology, although the dearth of early sources leaves us in the dark. In addition, Abgar’s consideration and loyalty to Rome by not infringing on Roman territory seems once again, to be a *later* imposition aiming at reconciling both Syrian and Catholic Christianity, and dismissing the already established Persian influence.⁵⁷ And though the story “[contributes] important historical details, it nevertheless functions primarily as a framework for the main narrative...it makes claims for historical legitimacy.”⁵⁸ This last point does not seek to invalidate the historicity of the story, but only calls attention to its layered structure. Finally there exist several points that plainly reveal that the entirety of the doctrine, as we have it today, was completed by about the 5th century.⁵⁹ Some of the discrepancies that give themselves away are as follows: king Narsai of Assyria, whom Abgar wrote to concerning the majestic works of the Christ, reigned in the 3rd century,⁶⁰ and is therefore not a contemporary of emperor Tiberius; Tiberius’ reference to Spaniard wars can only refer to the invasion of the Visigoths during the early 5th century; and most of all the canon cited including Paul’s letters are most likely a product of the *later* Roman association. Chances are very slim that Paul’s Epistles were part of the Syriac canon that soon, yet again the lack of sources somewhat hampers either side of the argument. In addition, the author of the manuscript is profoundly

⁵⁴ This transfer of ecclesiastic authority, having one elder (episcopos) lay his hand on a successor is even reminiscent of Elijah’s assignment of Elisha (2 Kings). Aggai was unable to place his hands on Palut before dying.

⁵⁵ Murray, 180-181. There are traditions, like the *Hymn of Ephrem to Bishop Abraham of Nisibis*, which portray Jesus as an arch-priest and the laying of hands as the transfer of that priestly quality.

⁵⁶ Griffith, *The Doctrina Addai*.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* ; Drijvers, 177-178. Drijvers debates the potency of this Persian influence. Nonetheless, Persian names like Piroz (Fairuz), amongst others, are very much present. See Cureton, 156.; Burkitt, 11-12. Burkitt seems to juggle both the Greek and Persian influences.

⁵⁸ Griffith, *The Doctrina Adda*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

concerned with establishing Edessa's direct ecclesiastical linkage. Although the apostolic succession ascribed to Edessa cannot be proven false, it espouses the marks of 'orthodoxy' befitting *later* figures like Ephrem.⁶¹ And it also seeks to show an apostolic origin, not in Haran, Antioch or Damascus, but Edessa.⁶² In general, the Abgar-Jesus traditions, including the veneration of Christ's image, genuinely became widespread from the 5th century onward.⁶³

Another principal feature, not as outwardly discernable, that lends the Doctrine of Addai, as a layered anachronistic work, is its full blown attack on pagan cults.⁶⁴ Addai's long-winded reproach for Edessa's Jews and paganism alludes to criticisms of early characters like Marcion, Bardaisan, and Mani. This, above all other marks, is utterly characteristic of Ephrem.⁶⁵ So how and why is the foundation of the Doctrine of Addai even the least bit based on a world two centuries later? The answer lies in the gradual, but eventual, victory of Christianity in the Roman Empire, followed by its temporary victory in the Near East. Only once Christianity evolved into an orthodox force,⁶⁶ aided by Roman state-sponsorship, and had taken a strong foothold, was it able to employ its unique religious language to its benefit.⁶⁷

However, this by no means invalidates that *parts* of the doctrine are from the *earliest* period; some of the language even parallels primitive texts.⁶⁸ This can be said for usages of phrases like 'men and women of "qyama"'.⁶⁹ Another argument is that if indeed (an) early Christianity reached a large metropolis like Edessa, it would only be a matter of time until it was written about.⁷⁰ The doctrine is by no means an *altogether* fabricated piece,⁷¹ and certainly no Syriac scholars have ever established this or fully contested it.⁷² Therefore, the Abgar-

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Edessa for all its paganism, is also the purported home place of the Syriac dialect, this may play a role in the author's anxiety to root Christianity therein.

⁶³ Griffith, *The Doctrina Adda*.

⁶⁴ The doctrine's portrayal of Edessan pagan cults is extremely accurate (see Drijvers, H. J. W. *Cults and Beliefs at Edess.*, 42-43), only that the doctrine therefore seems to demur the city's favor of Persian suzerainty. See Griffith, *The Doctrina Addai*.

⁶⁵ Ibid. ; Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 33-34.

⁶⁶ This of course, is not to downplay the heavy influences of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and various Near-Eastern cults on Christianity as a whole.

⁶⁷ Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 175. Bauer, 130-132.

⁶⁸ For further textual study on the *Doctrine of Addai*, consult Burkitt, 13-15; and Cureton, 147-150, 192-193.

⁶⁹ Murray, 14-15.

⁷⁰ Griffith, *The Doctrina Addai.*; Phillips, George. *The Doctrine of Addai*.

⁷¹ Murray, 7.

⁷² Eusebius' version is certainly helpful because it is a pre-Ephrem, pre-Aphrahat recount of the narrative.

Addai tale, or ‘legend’ as some call it, may be founded on *some* fact and authentic historical figures, only that it is manipulated by *later* Syrian Christian authors toward an apologetic agenda. That being said some scholars on early Christianity express varying degrees of neutrality or doubt regarding the credibility of the tale altogether.⁷³ Although Harnack repeatedly casts the Abgar tale as a “venturesome...naive romance,”⁷⁴ he accommodates the possibility that the king Abgar in question “may have indeed spoken to a local bishop when he was at Ronin, and a letter which purports to be from Eleutherus to Abgar might also be historical.”⁷⁵ This may have spawned an Osrhoenean Christian community without any missionary agency. Furthermore Harnack leaves open the likelihood, and even probability, that the bishop of Edessa was consecrated by the bishop of Antioch.⁷⁶ Dr. Griffith calls it an integral work, a kind of novel completed during the fifth century during the time of bishop Rabbula, but utilizing *ancient* Edessan components.⁷⁷ Dr. Drijvers sees the tale as a Christian counter-attack to Manichean missionaries in Mesopotamia.⁷⁸ Burkitt does not seem to favor the historicity of the Addai scenario in general.⁷⁹ The *Doctrine of Addai* was not forged with historicity in mind, but rather as religious and political propaganda combating a highly syncretistic ethos. Herein lies the punch-line.

Another ancient Syriac document discussing king Abgar is found in an apocryphal work called, the *Exit of my Lady Mary from the World, and the Birth and Childhood of our Lord Jesus Christ: II*. The few relevant passages follow the subsequent pattern. A brief retro-mention of the passion is set as a backdrop. The chief-priests in Jerusalem beseech Emperor Tiberius not to allow Mary to pray at Golgotha, when a letter from king Abgar unexpectedly arrives to the court. Addai is mentioned as sent to Edessa to build a Church. Abgar’s letter to Tiberius expresses his respect for Roman law by not crossing the river Euphrates, but ends by requesting that Tiberius punish the crucifiers [Jews]. Tiberius is enraged at the Jews causing fear in Jerusalem. This tale is prone to many of the same historical criticisms as the preceding doctrine, and parts of the manuscript date from the fifth-sixth century, some folios even later. Yet the late Dr. Cureton maintains that the contents are much older.⁸⁰

⁷³ Bauer however refrains from passing judgment and remains silent.

⁷⁴ von Harnack, 1:5; 2:1. He further acknowledges the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Peter and Paul, as early as the end of the first century. However Harnack vehemently rejects all early (first-second century) claims of missionary activity.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 3:4:3.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 3:4:1; 4:3:5.

⁷⁷ Griffith, *The Doctrina Addai*.

⁷⁸ Drijvers, *East of Antioch*, 18.

⁷⁹ Burkitt, 13.

⁸⁰ Cureton, 193.

Sadly almost nothing is known about the earliest historical symbols of Syrian Christianity, Tatian and Bardaisan (c.154-222).⁸¹ Yet, along with the Abgar narrative, they alone are the native representatives of *earliest* Syrian Christianity. In truth, Bardaisan's *Book of the Laws of Countries*, the dialogue addressing free-will, human responsibility, and most of all fate,⁸² is most illustrative of the Semitic cosmological paradigm that characterizes the *earliest* form of Christianity. There is also no detectable boundary between Judaism and Christianity in Bardaisan's work⁸³ either. Though most rudiments of *earliest* Syrian Christianity become supplanted by Greek ideas, few ancient Semitic ideas survive—two central ones being God's mysteriousness⁸⁴ and luminosity.⁸⁵ What then can be confidently confirmed about Abgar V's bond with *earliest* Christianity? Before answering this, we must clarify the dialectic between Christianity and paganism—a symbiotic relationship particularly embarrassing to *later* “orthodox” fathers but vital in the study of Abgar.

It is vital to note that the *earliest* form of Christianity in Edessa developed historically akin to local pagan practices. The two developed together in parallel, and coexisted.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the two, though neither being monolithic in form, assimilated to one another and were therefore most often indistinguishable. Indeed it would have made little difference what side of the religious fence one stood on during the first two centuries of Christianity in Edessa. This is because doctrinal divergences were merely nominal and therefore not exceedingly significant to the *earliest* period in Edessa, but practical application (worship) due to its immense social involvement crossed religious borders.⁸⁷ The utter dominance of Nebo, god of wisdom and fate, who is a son of the Heavenly god Bel has its cognate in the Christian Jesus,⁸⁸ who is the son of God and His wisdom incarnate.⁸⁹ The

⁸¹ Though he did acknowledge Christ, and related this to the soul's “bridal chamber of light.” See Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 192.

⁸² Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, 67, 76-95.

⁸³ So extremely early, and therefore different, is Bardaisan's outlook on life that he is often labeled as a semi-Christian, Gnostic, or heretic.

⁸⁴ Bardaisan's inclusion of darkness and light as two of the five primordial creative substances, and Genesis' assertion that existence was a formless void before the creation of light, are both cognates in this respect. Christ is the light and conqueror of *sheol*, the realm of darkness.

⁸⁵ Beggiani, Msgr. Seely J. *Early Syriac Theology: With Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition* (Lanham, MD: United Press of America, 1983), 64.

⁸⁶ Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 190-191, 193-194. For example earliest Christian funerary art at Edessa was no different from its pagan counterpart, and both developed mutually. In many cases, telling apart the Christian graves from the pagan ones is impossible.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁸⁸ Jesus is also, as in the Syriac *Acts of Thomas*, referred to as “*hadaya*,” and even *later* as “*shraja*,” light-lamp. The same language is used to describe Addai and Aggai as lights, guides and leaders of the Church. See Beggiani, 28; and Cureton, 163.

same correspondence can be drawn between ideas expressed by the Orpheus Mosaic and the Syriac *Odes of Solomon*. Both retain very Semitic ideas of the afterlife, and a yearning for the return of the soul to its original abode in Heaven.⁹⁰ Even some of the language used is ambiguous. The word “*kahna*” for instance was broadly used to describe a pagan or Judeo-Christian priest.⁹¹ These are only a few examples. But another broad issue need be mentioned here. Edessa was one of the earliest centers of Judeo-Christianity, emanating from a well-established Jewish and pagan background, despite heavy *subsequent* anti-Jewish polemic.⁹² And thus from the modest number of texts available to us, it is still the *Doctrine of Addai* that best proves the colorful syncretism of classical Syria from whence eventual Orthodox Christianity crept out of. Furthermore, it ostensibly delineates the shifting of Edessa from a pagan center of gravity to a Christian one.⁹³ And this is how king Abgar is made significant in the totality of *earliest* Syrian Christianity. For he is the symbol of the Syriac re-birth, stepping from paganism to Christianity.

A further derivative of Abgar’s character is that it publicizes the values of paganism that were inherited by *earliest* Syrian Christianity. For Aggai is said to have been, before serving the Lord, the maker of the king’s headbands. This custom is wholly pagan, and was performed for Bel and Nebo.⁹⁴ There is no sign that this practice ever abruptly ended, but rather evolved or even lost significance over time. Additionally the kings of Persia, Edessa, and therefore Abgar V as well, seem to have arrogated the title “son of the gods.” Certainly Shahpur I used this title or a similar one. There is nothing strange about this Near-Eastern title which is reminiscent of the Biblical Hebrew appellation, “*bene elohim*,” similarly applied to King David, and several others in the Old Testament.⁹⁵ Only eventually the plurality of “gods” would have to evolve into just “God.” Some researchers furthermore, intimate that the king Abgar and Addai relationship is

Moreover, both words and their conception are also prevalent in Islam (Qur’an 2:21; 9:19; 43:40; 45:23; 33:45-46; 24:35-38; etc). Subsequent bishops are known as “lighters of the lamp.” See Murray, 170, 192.

⁸⁹ Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 195.

⁹⁰ This idea is also quite strongly the backdrop of the Islamic afterlife (Qur’an 7:29; 89:27-30; etc).

⁹¹ Murray, 178. Established and popularized by Jews as “kohen,” even ancient Arabians referred to those who were “kahin” as cult-priests, without clear characterization of the word’s Jewish or pagan implications.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 6-7; Burkitt, 19, and Cureton, 156.

⁹³ Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 195. Even so, the early Syrian fathers, like Sharbil and Barsamya of the first-second century, still did not entirely agree on fundamental precepts of Christianity like the divinity of Christ. See Cureton, 181.

⁹⁴ Cureton, 157.

⁹⁵ Genesis 6:2-4; Psalm 2:7; Matthew 14:33; etc.

analogous to the relationship of king Shahpur I and Mani.⁹⁶ This relationship is essentially one where the king (Abgar or Shahpur I) provides patronage and support for a state-sponsored missionary (Addai or Mani). Whether or not this is actually true is not the issue, but rather that the figure of king Abgar possessed great authority and popularity, at the very least, to *later* Syrian Christians, and most probably during the early period as well.⁹⁷ Support for this is provided in Jacob of Serug's naming Edessa, "daughter of Abgar."⁹⁸ This obsession with Edessan valor seems therefore prevalent throughout Syrian Christian history. Other evidence is present that king Abgar shared correspondences with Tiberius and even the Philosopher Aristides.⁹⁹ By using other sources,¹⁰⁰ making calculations based on rulers' reign and the life of Jesus, king Abgar's conversion to Christianity is estimated to have occurred in the year 31.¹⁰¹ This seems too early and therefore unlikely. But of course we cannot be sure.

Final Remarks

The crisis of primary data shortage, coupled with scholarly differences, cannot be overstated. Furthermore the role of Abgar can only be considered beneficial to this study as a partial source of information. The figure of Abgar, must not be studied through scientific reductionism and measured purely by historical merit. To do so would be a grave error, seeing as to how *later* Christian projections of Abgar, most probably by schools of Ephrem or Aphrahat, are what synthesized the normative view on this character in general. That is to say there should be no aim to 'deduce' something historical at the end of such a study, especially with the sheer primary data concerns, but only show worthwhile evidence to compliment our understanding of Syrian Christianity in its *earliest* phase.

What then is the *true* merit of the Abgar legend if not historical? The entire narrative cannot be divorced from the *Doctrine of Addai*. It is just that, a "doctrine" ("*malpanatu*" or "*ulpana*"), not history ("*tash'ita*") — a 'gospel of Addai' to Edessa. The text is religious, and political; apologetic and occasionally polemical.¹⁰² Addai, some scholars claim, most likely represents symbolic Christian orthodoxy—ridding Syria of Manichean and pagan forces. Consequently Ephrem, the later Syrian champion, has much to polemicize about with Marcion, Tatian, Bardaisan and Mani, the historical architects of early, and

⁹⁶ Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 180, 196.

⁹⁷ This is likely true almost exclusively due to Edessa's cultural prominence and rich history.

⁹⁸ A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8 (1886). Edessa was also called "daughter of the Parthians." See Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 161.

¹⁰⁰ *The Doctrine of the Apostles*, Chronicum Edessenum, Eusebius and Barhebraeus.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 147.

¹⁰² Griffith, *The Doctrina Addai*.

unorthodox, Syrian Christianity(s). He makes no mention however of Judas Thomas or Addai!¹⁰³ At any rate this study has utilized the figure of king Abgar to exemplify, as far as possible, the gradual shift of Edessa from paganism to Christianity. Even this statement risks being too over-simplified. Nonetheless *earliest* Christianity, in whatever syncretistic form(s),¹⁰⁴ did succeed the complex mesh of the pagan system.¹⁰⁵

We have therefore elucidated the setting of *earliest* Christianity in Edessa. Both sources and history, at the very least, agree that *earliest* Syrian Christianity originated in Edessa region and was a Syriac tradition partaking in the intricate socio-religious Jewish, Arab-Mesopotamian pagan, and astrological fusion—the works of Bardaisan remain the prime examples.¹⁰⁶ With that said, this still leaves the opportunity open that the tradition was originally codified in both Syriac and Greek. Of course the text, as evident in its strong apologetic language, has undergone much editing and redaction. Although this ostensibly threatens the historicity of the Abgar tale, it should not eliminate it.

Additionally despite *later* Christian polemic against Jews, as made utterly apparent in the treatises of Ephrem Syrus and Aphrahat, it is universally acknowledged that *earliest* Syrian Christianity grew out of ambient Judaism, as well as on ambient pagan cults. It was a syncretism, comparable to others, only with even more vibrant Arabian, Babylonian and Iranian elements—a super-syncretism. Syrian Christianity entered its *later* phase during the 4th century when Greek Christological ideas were grafted onto the Syriac tradition, in many cases replacing native Semitic elements themselves. In all this, Abgar is momentous because of his historically attested greatness in the Near East. Therefore, he develops into the epicenter, the pride and piousness, by which Syrian Christianity is validated as originating in Edessa through a chain of unbroken ecclesiastical Apostles. The study of earliest Syrian Christianity or Syriac in general, cannot therefore be divorced from the brilliance of Edessa. Herein lays the magnitude of Abgar and his eternal contribution to Syrian Christianity.

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¹⁰³ Drijvers, *East of Antioch*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Bauer, 229-232.

¹⁰⁵ Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, 183.

¹⁰⁶ Drijvers, *East of Antioch*, 4, 5.

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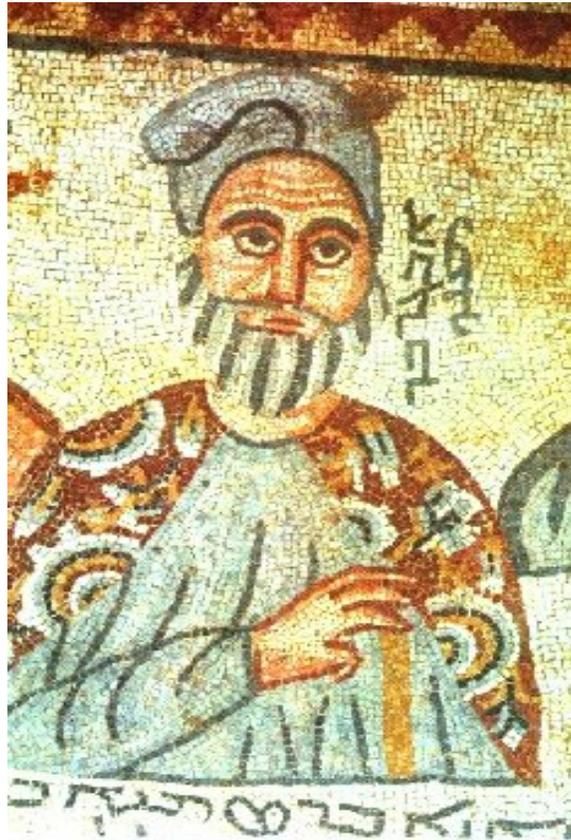
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Appendix 1 - Abgar Bar Ma'nu mosaic from Urfa



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¹⁰⁷ Assyrian Kingdom of Osroene.

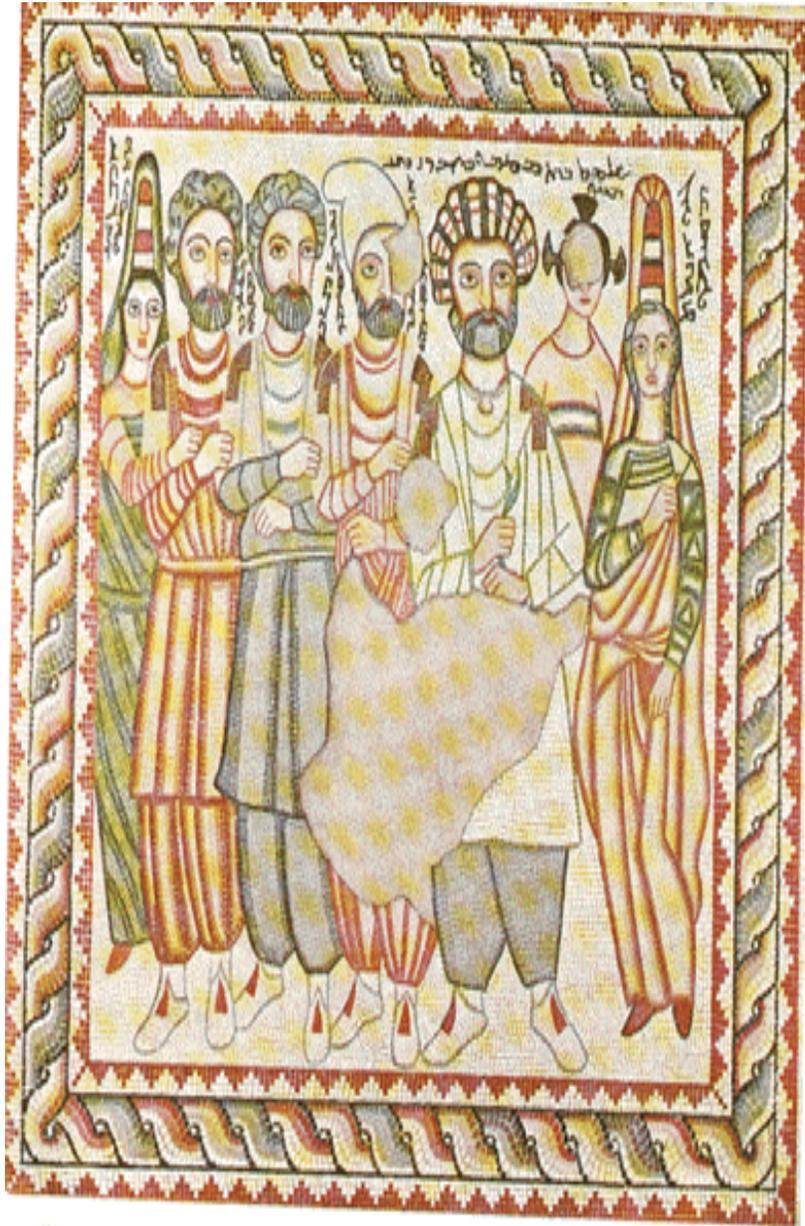
**Appendix 2 - Abgar Bar Ma'nu presented with the portrait of Jesus,
from Edessan Church**



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Appendix 3- Edessan Family mosaic 2nd-3rd century

¹⁰⁸ Porter, Daniel. *Skeptical Inquirer and the Shroud of Turin.*



THE FAMILY PORTRAIT MOSAIC, with names in Syriac; probably second or early third century A.D.

¹⁰⁹ Assyrian Society of the United Kingdom.

Appendix 4- Edessa and the Kingdom of Osroene



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110 Assyrian Kingdom of Osroene.