

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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Abstract

This paper examines the conversion legends of Adiabene to Judaism and Edessa to Christianity in the first century and the role these stories played in the relations of Jews and Syriac Christians in Northern Mesopotamia to the 6th century AD. Syriac Christianity retained closed connections to Judaism well into the fourth century. Why then did this relationship sour afterwards? These legends preserve evidence of a reorientation of the Christian community from its Mesopotamian Jewish-Christian roots to Antiochean, Gentile Christianity and thus provide an explanation for the collapse of positive relations between Jews and Christians in Mesopotamia.

The *Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene* (recorded by Josephus) recounts that Queen Helena and Prince Izates converted to Judaism in the first century. Similarly, Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* preserves the legend of the conversion of King Abgar of Edessa to Christianity. This Christian legend reflects a positive relationship between Syriac Christians and Jews. This is due in part to the Roman/Parthian stalemate which isolated Syriac Christianity from the more anti-Jewish, Antiochian Gentile Christianity.

After the Romans seized control of Edessa, Syriac Christianity established new connections with Antioch and the Roman Empire more generally; relations with Jews of Northern Mesopotamia deteriorated. These changes are witnessed in a sixth century adaptation of the *Legend of Abgar: The Doctrine of Addai*. As Syriac Christianity reoriented to Antioch, the *Legend of Abgar* was changed to reflect this new reality. By examining the social, cultural, and religious context that gave birth to the conversion legends of Edessa and Adiabene, the increase in anti-Jewish rhetoric in Syriac Christian writings is more easily explained.

Introduction

The history of the relationship between Jews and Christians in

Northern Mesopotamia is difficult to reconstruct. In part this is because there is a paucity of early and reliable documents. What texts that do exist are encrusted with layers of polemical redaction which must be carefully removed. While the task is difficult and the conclusions are understandably tenuous and incomplete, fortunately three extant texts preserve the legendary accounts of the conversions of the cities and residents of Adiabene and Nisibis to Judaism and Edessa to Christianity respectively.¹ Using these documents, it is possible to sketch a rough outline of Jewish-Christian relations in this region between the 1st and 5th centuries AD.

The *Legend of Abgar* purports to record the conversion of King Abgar V Uchama (“the Black”) of Edessa to Christianity through the direct testimony of a disciple sent personally by Jesus of Nazareth. The account, if historically accurate, preserves the very first conversion of a gentile kingdom to Christianity.² Curiously, this legend bears a remarkable similarity to the story concerning how Judaism became the religion of the region of Adiabene. The *Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene* records the conversion of Queen Helena and her son Izates to Judaism in the first century AD at the behest of two different Jewish traders.³ After becoming Jews, they showered Jerusalem with gifts, established a precedent that the royal sons of Adiabene be educated there, and decreed that their bodies be buried in the holy city upon death. Close ties bound Jerusalem and Adiabene together for more than a century, and many Jews from Adiabene fell to Roman swords while standing with their Jerusalem brethren in during the Jewish War in 70 AD. The third extant text is entitled the *Doctrine of Addai*. It is a late fourth century revision of the original *Legend of Abgar*.⁴ Apart from recording the original story of the correspondence between Jesus and Abgar and the subsequent conversion of Edessa, many additional legends have been woven into the *Doctrine of Addai* which simultaneously indicates an increasing tension between Gentile Christianity in the west and the Jewish communities to the east.⁵

¹ Refer to Figure 1: Map of Northern Mesopotamia.

² The *Legend of Abgar*, which was originally written in Syriac, is extant only in a Greek translation preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History*. All citations of the *Legend of Abgar* in this essay are cited from the English translation provided in Loeb Classical Library: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1.13.1-22; 2.1.6-7.

³ The *Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene* was preserved by Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities*. The English translation of this text is found in the Loeb Classical Library: Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, vol. 9 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 9.20.34.

⁴ English citations of the *Doctrine of Addai* are found in the bilingual text edition (Syriac and English) by George Howard: *The Teaching of Addai*, trans. and ed. George Howard, Texts and Translations of Early Christian Literature Series, (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

⁵ In this essay, the phrase “Gentile Christianity” refers to the community of Greek-speaking, Gentile Christians from the Mediterranean basin. While the development of Christianity in this area was complex, Gentile Christianity, following the Apostle Paul’s argument, proclaimed that Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews, i.e. undergoing circumcision, following dietary laws, celebrating Jewish festivals, and/or subscribing to all the regulations of the Torah. “Jewish-Christianity” by contrast affirmed the Jewish heritage of Christianity. According

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 these documents provides a window through which these texts can be examined. Once these texts are placed in their original *Sitz im Leben*, they reciprocally cast light back upon the world which birthed them. In this way, these three texts become an avenue for examining Jewish-Christian relations in these early centuries. Using the reconstruction of their original settings, answers to the most puzzling questions may be uncovered: Why is *Legend of Abgar* which purports to recount the conversion of Edessa to Christianity patterned after the *Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene* to Judaism? What might this indicate about the original impetus for the legend and about the relationship of Syriac Christianity to Judaism in Northern Mesopotamia in the first centuries AD? If this relationship is generally positive, what impetus accounts for the vitriolic, anti-Jewish emendations which are found in the later *Doctrine of Addai*? What might account for the apparent conflict between Syriac Christianity and Gentile Christianity represented in the much later *Doctrine of Addai*?

Comparison of the two accounts of the Syriac conversion legend will demonstrate that these two documents were most likely produced by the Jewish-Christian church in Edessa to establish simultaneously a claim of *prestige de l'origine* against Gentile Christianity based in the Mesopotamian world and to reorient the community away from its original Jewish roots. Although Jewish-Christianity in Edessa was originally tied closely to the Jewish communities in Nisibis and Adiabene, this relationship began to sour in the third century as Edessan Christianity reoriented itself from its traditional Mesopotamian Jewish-Christian roots to the Gentile Christianity found in the Mediterranean world. Due to this reorientation, the anti-Jewish elements that are found in some documents produced by Gentile Christians began to filter into Edessa, and the tension between Syriac Christians and their Jewish neighbors escalated. The *Doctrine of Addai*, which is filled with vitriolic, anti-Jewish statements, bears witness to a later stage of this development.

The relationship of the Jewish-Christian community in Edessa with Gentile Christianity however was not without its own difficulties. By appropriating the original Abgar legend, the *Doctrine of Addai* restated the Edessan claim to be the original church founded through the correspondence of Jesus Christ himself. This document intentionally sought to undermine the primacy and thus the authority of the Greek-speaking Gentile Church.

to this viewpoint, Gentiles could become Christians by first becoming Jews (i.e. following traditional Jewish practices). For all intents and purposes, Jewish-Christians were Jews who identified Jesus of Nazareth as the resurrected Messiah (Christ) of God. By utilizing the terms "Gentile Christianity" (also known by the label "Pauline Christianity") and "Jewish-Christianity," the author hopes to provide a convenient way of comparing these two distinctive Christian traditions.

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 Eusebius, as is often the case in his *Ecclesiastical History*, provides an introduction to this document. We learn that Abgar is a successful monarch in Mesopotamia who suffers from an unnamed, chronic disorder.⁷ When he hears of miraculous healings being carried out by Jesus of Nazareth, Abgar dispatches a letter to him requesting his presence in the city of Edessa so that he might be healed. As if to sweeten the pot, he also offers his kingdom as a place of refuge from the Jews who are mistreating him. Jesus replies that he is not able to travel to the region of Osrhoene—the capital of which is Edessa—, for he is bound to accomplish his appointed task in Jerusalem. But he promises to send one of his disciples to heal him and to bring the word of salvation to him and his kin.⁸ According to Eusebius, after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the apostle Judas Thomas sends Thaddaeus, one of the seventy, to Edessa in order to heal the king and proclaim the teachings and deeds of the Christ.⁹ Thaddaeus is the Greek version of the Syriac name Addai.

After this introduction, Eusebius presents the purported correspondence. According to Eusebius's testimony, the *Legend of Abgar* was translated from Syriac originals held in the Edessan archives.¹⁰ The correspondence is recorded by Eusebius as follows:

Copy of a letter written by Abgar the Toparch to Jesus and sent to him at Jerusalem by the courier Ananias:
Abgar Uchama, the Toparch, to Jesus the good Savior who has appeared in the district of Jerusalem, greetings. I have heard concerning you and your cures, how they are accomplished by you without drugs and herbs. For, as the story goes, you make the blind recover their sight, the lame

⁶ The *Legend of Abgar* is the sole reference in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* to a Christian community beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire. For an analysis of this, see Sebastian Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity," *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, eds. Harold Attridge and Gohei Hata, *Studia Post Biblica*, vol. 42, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 212.

⁷ Eusebius, *E.H.*, 1.13.3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.13.4.

⁹ The later Syriac redaction of the *Legend of Abgar* entitled the *Doctrine of Addai* records that Thomas sent the disciple Addai to heal Abgar and the preach the gospel. All citations from the *Doctrine of Addai* will be based on the numbering of the Syriac text found in George Howard's edition of *The Teaching of Addai*.

¹⁰ Eusebius, *E.H.*, 1.13.5.

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 came down from heaven to do these things, or are a son of God for doing these things. For this reason, I write to beg you to hasten to me and heal the suffering which I have. Moreover, I heard that the Jews are mocking you, and wish to ill-treat you. Now I have a city very small and venerable which is enough for both.

Jesus' reply to the Toparch Abgar by the courier Ananias:
Happy are you who believe in me without having seen me! For it is written of me that those who have seen me will not believe in me, and that those who have not seen me will believe and live. Now concerning what you wrote to me, to come to you, I must first complete here all for which I was sent, and after thus completing it be taken up to him who sent me, and when I have been taken up, I will send you one of my disciples to heal your suffering, and to give life to you and those with you.¹¹

Eusebius next recounts how Thaddaeus arrived in Edessa and stayed at the “house of Tobias, the son of Tobias” and healed many upon his arrival.¹² The king, when hearing rumors of the miracle worker, surmised that this was the one whom Jesus had promised to send. After summoning him, Thaddaeus went to the palace of the king. Eusebius records the following miracle: “As soon as he entered, a great vision appeared to Abgar on the face of Thaddaeus. And when Abgar saw this, he did reverence to Thaddaeus...and he asked Thaddaeus, ‘Are you truly a disciple of Jesus, the Son of God, who said to me, I will send you one of my disciples who will heal you and give you life?’ And Thaddaeus said, ‘Since you have had great faith in him who sent me, I was sent to you for this reason.’”¹³ Abgar testifies to his faith in a vitriolic tone: “I have such belief in him as to have wished to take force and destroy the Jews, who crucified him, had I not been prevented from this by the Roman Empire.”¹⁴ Upon hearing King Abgar’s confession, Thaddaeus healed his illness and many others in the court.¹⁵ Afterwards, Abgar requested that the apostle relate the events of the life of Jesus to

¹¹ Ibid., 1.13.6-10.

¹² The name Tobias is presumably Jewish. The fact that Thaddeus stays with Tobias indicates a positive relationship between Christians and Jews. It may also suggest that Christianity in Edessa started first within the Jewish community. Gilles Quispel suggests this too. See Gilles Quispel, “The Discussion of Judaic Christianity,” *VirChr* 22 (1968), 81-93. Cf. Eusebius, *E.H.*, 1.13.11-14.

¹³ Eusebius, *E.H.*, 1.13.14-15.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1.13.16.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1.13.17-18.

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 Uchama and Jesus in the early first century, have long been rejected by the academic world. It is indeed hard to imagine that, if this text contained both the correspondence between Abgar and Jesus and the account of the conversion of the first gentile king to Christianity, it would not have been celebrated throughout all of early Christendom and reflected many early Christian documents. It is equally difficult to believe that Syriac Christianity started from direct apostolic transmission within a few years of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In fact, there is no reference either in the New Testament or any other Christian document from the first century to any “official” missionary activity in Northern Mesopotamia. W. Stewart McCullough states that no New Testament figure even seems concerned about taking the gospel to this region.²⁰ The dearth of historical evidence has led some early scholars to dismiss the *Legend of Abgar* as a completely fictional account created from “whole cloth” in the late second or early third century. In his definitive history of the early church, Walter Bauer states: “Eusebius is not tracing the actual course of history but is relating a legend...today the only thing that remains to be asked is whether the church father’s presentation is completely useless for shedding light upon the origin of the Christian church in Edessa or whether in the justifiable rejection of the whole we may still single out this or that particular trait, in order to derive therefrom some sort of tenable insight for ourselves.”²¹ Recent scholarship has worked with this latter assumption: some aspects of the story might contain historical value. In fact, the prevailing consensus over the last few decades is that Christianity did enter Edessa during the reign of King

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.13.19-20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.1.6-7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.13.22.

¹⁹ Krisopp Lake converts the Seleucid calendar date to the equivalent in the Gregorian calendar: “The three hundredth and fortieth year of the Edessene era, which began in 310 B.C., would be A.D. 30, which agrees with the date of the crucifixion given by Tertullian...” Eusebius, *E.H.*, vol. 1, 97, n.2. Cf. J. B. Segal, “When did Christianity come to Edessa?,” *Middle East Studies and Libraries: A Felicitation Volume for Professor J. D. Pearson*, ed. B.C. Bloomfield, (London: Mansell, 1980), 180.

²⁰ W. Stewart McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam*, Scholars Press: General Series, no. 4, (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 21.

²¹ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed, eds. Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1996), 4.

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.

The evidence for the historicity of some aspects of the account found in the Abgar legend is compelling. Four pieces of evidence corroborate that Christianity was operative in Edessa during the late second century. The first piece of historical evidence comes from the later redaction of the Abgar legend: *Doctrine of Addai*. Although we shall have occasion to examine the *Doctrine of Addai* in detail below, one aspect of that text is best dealt with at this juncture. The *Doctrine of Addai* records that when the evangelist Addai died, he was succeeded by Aggai as bishop of Edessa.²³ After some years, one of the sons of Abgar succeeded him to the throne but rejected the Christian faith of his father. When Aggai did not follow the decrees of the new king, it is reported that Aggai’s legs were broken. Since he died quickly from his wounds, he was not able to consecrate Palut as his ecclesiastical successor.²⁴ The *Doctrine of Addai* recounts the conclusion to the story: “Palut himself went to Antioch and received ordination to the priesthood from Serapion, bishop of Antioch. Serapion himself, Bishop of Antioch, had also received ordination from Zephyrinus, Bishop of the city of Rome from the succession of ordination to the priesthood of Simon Peter who received it from our Lord.”²⁵ Since Serapion of Antioch served as bishop from 190-211, it is plausible to calculate an approximate date for Addai’s career in Edessa. McCullough concurs: “If this is a sound tradition... Addai’s career might then be put somewhere in the period 150-190.”²⁶

The remaining three pieces of evidence regarding the presence of Christianity in Edessa during the reign of Abgar the Great (177-212 AD) are external sources to the *Legend of Abgar* and provide strong evidence that indicates Christianity was operative in Edessa at this time and may corroborate the historicity of the conversion of Edessa during this time. The *Edessan Chronicle*, compiled in the late sixth century AD from earlier sources, records that the “temple of the church of the Christians” was

²² F.C. Burkitt in *Early Eastern Christianity* was the first scholar to propose that the *Legend of Abgar* may contain historical information about the conversion of Edessa to Christianity, although he suggested that Christianity came into the region during the reign of King Abgar VII. Other scholars have adopted his historical analysis but have argued that the story recounts the conversion of Edessa during the reign of King Abgar IX. For a thorough history of this approach, see Brock, “Eusebius and Syriac Christianity,” 212.

²³ *Teaching of Addai*, f. 32b.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 32a-f. 33a.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 32b-33a; see also, Brock, “Eusebius and Syriac Christianity,” 215; J. B. Segal, “When did Christianity come to Edessa?,” 180.

²⁶ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 25.

destroyed by a great flood in 201 AD.²⁷ The *Chronicle*, if it can be trusted to 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 Dayṣān; 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 third century—states that the king was a recent convert to Christianity and that he forbade castration in the city, which was a common pagan practice in Edessa.²⁹ Bauer summarizes the importance of this external source: “Thus we have reference to a Christian King Abgar by an Edessan author at the beginning of the third century. Since, on the basis of what is known, Abgar V does not qualify, one may think of the ninth Abgar, who probably would have been a contemporary of that author.”³⁰ The internal textual evidence of the *Doctrine of Addai* coupled with these external sources suggests that Christianity had reached Edessa in the latter half of the second century. If this is the case, why does the *Legend of Abgar* state that Christianity arrived in Edessa in the first century through a disciple sent by Jesus himself?

Whether or not the *Legend of Abgar* preserved by Eusebius (and the later *Doctrine of Addai*) records actual historical events concerning the entry of Christianity into Northern Mesopotamia is not the most compelling issue. The more interesting question concerns why the Syriac legend was promulgated in the first place and what purpose it served in Edessan Christianity. In order to answer these questions, one must attempt a plausible reconstruction of the *Sitz im Leben* of the Abgar legend. Once one understands the social, political, and theological setting out of which this document emerged, the more interesting aspects of the story will be illuminated and a tentative thesis concerning the impetus for the creation of the legend can be presented.

Cultural, Social, Political, and Theological Setting of Edessa in Antiquity

The Abgar legend purports to recount the conversion of the city of Edessa (modern Urfa in Southern Turkey), the capital of the region of Osroene in Northern Mesopotamia. Edessa lies east of the Euphrates and was connected by trade routes to the city of Nisibis and the region of Adiabene (the capital of which was Arbela).³¹ Both were important centers of

²⁷ The Syriac text of the *Chronicle of Edessa* is found in *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (CSCO): *Scriptores Syri*, ser. 3, vol. 4, 1-13.

²⁸ These fragments are preserved in the works of Ephraim the Syrian (ca. 306-373).

²⁹ The Syriac text with English translation of the *Book of the Laws of the Countries* is found in H.J.W. Drijvers, *Book of the Laws of Countries: Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa*, Semitic Texts with Translations, 3 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1965).

³⁰ Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 5; see also Segal, “When did Christianity come to Edessa?” 281.

³¹ J. B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 41-42.

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 religion of Judaism. Throughout various towns and cities extending along the “fertile crescent” from Edessa to Babylon, there was a sizable contingent of Jews. Helmut Koester states: “In most of these cities the Jewish communities were not very large. Adiabene is a special case...it had a strong Jewish population, perhaps remnants of the exiles from the northern kingdom of Israel brought there by the Assyrians at the end of III [sic] BC.”³² It is also likely that Jewish populations increased in these urban centers after the catastrophic events of 70 and 135 AD as refugees fled eastward.



Figure 1: Map of Northern Mesopotamia³³

Many Jews who inhabited Northern Mesopotamia participated in the merchant activities associated with the trade routes, and the fledgling Jesus movement likely came into this region via these same trade routes.

³² Helmut Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age: Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 222.

³³ This map illustrates the Northern Mesopotamian region, Euphrates and Tigris rivers systems, locations of various cities (e.g. Edessa and Nisibis), and regions (e.g. Osrhoene and Adiabene) that are important to the argument of this paper. The blank map, populated by the author of this essay, was created by Tom Elliott for the Ancient World Mapping Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Merchants were probably among the first to spread information about the fledgling Jewish sect in Palestine.³⁴ J.B. Segal in *Edessa: The Blessed City* also attributes the rise of Christianity in the region of Osrhoene to the presence of Jews in Edessa and beyond: “The swift progress of Christianity at Edessa is sufficient testimony to the influence of the Jews. It is a truism that the advance of the new religion was most rapid in those places where Jews lived firmly established and in security.”³⁵ Since the Jesus movement generally spread first in Jewish communities, it is very likely that Christianity arrived in Edessa from the eastern region of Adiabene and the cities of Arbela and Nisibis and not from the west. Segal offers this very reconstruction: “It seems likely that Christianity, like both the most celebrated theologians of Edessa in the first centuries, Bardaisan and St. Ephraim, originated in the East. We would expect it to have been conveyed along the high-road through Nisibis.”³⁶

The location of Edessa east of the Euphrates River isolated the city from extensive contacts with the western world during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. This great river prohibited easy travel from the Hellenized west to the Semitic east through the regions of Osrhoene. The great trade routes skirted to the north and to the south of Edessa leaving it a bypassed enclave.³⁷ Thus Edessa was more or less isolated from the west during the time of the appearance and development of early Christianity in the first century. The result is that Christianity most likely entered Northern Mesopotamia along a northern route which bypassed Edessa and entered and took root in the more heavily populated Jewish areas of Nisibis and Adiabene.³⁸ Christianity then arrived in Edessa as it moved westward from these regions. The implication of this reconstruction is profound: the earliest forms of Christianity in the Mesopotamian region reflected a strong Jewish character since it was promulgated first among Jewish communities; therefore, the earliest form of Christianity to reach Edessa was likely Jewish-Christianity.³⁹

³⁴ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20.2.3-4; cf. *The Teaching of Addai*, f. 4a.

³⁵ Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City*, 42; see also L.W. Barnard, “The Origins and Emergence of the Church in Edessa during the First Two Centuries AD,” *VirChr* 22 (1968): 161-175.

³⁶ Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City*, 42. See also, McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 22.

³⁷ Segal, “When did Christianity come to Edessa,” 183; cf. Steven K. Ross, *Roman Edessa: Politics and Culture on the Eastern Fringes of the Roman Empire, 114-242 CE*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 16. Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 277-374; Robert Murray, “The Characteristics of the Earliest Syriac Christianity” in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, eds. N.G. Garsoian, T. Mathews, and R.W. Thomson (Washington, D.C., 1982), 3-16; A. Vööbus, *A History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, vol. 1, CSCO: Subsidia 14, (Louvain, 1958).

³⁸ Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion*, 85.

³⁹ Many scholars have followed Segal’s reconstruction: the Christian faith was first established east of Edessa (in Nisibis or Adiabene) and that it reached Edessa from the east rather than from the west: J. B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City*, 69; cf. Jacob Neusner, “The Conversion of Adiabene to Christianity,” *Numen* 13 (1966), 144-150; Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 4-24; Han J.W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966), 215. In contrast, Han Drijvers in

This thesis, proposed most comprehensively by J.B. Segal in *Edessa: The Blessed City*, demands a more detailed examination, for it provides the most plausible reconstruction of the social, theological, and cultural setting of Edessa from which the Abgar legend emerged. Segal's central claim is that Northern Mesopotamia can be best understood in light of the two great rivers systems that dominate the landscape. The Tigris presents some difficulties in navigation, but for the most part, and this is true especially of the headwaters region, "the river and its tributaries were a means of communication, not a barrier to movement."⁴⁰ The Euphrates, on the other hand, was a firm barrier to movement. In fact, the segment of the Euphrates which seemed to present the greatest difficulty was "the great curve in the neighborhood of Edessa."⁴¹ As will be shown below, Roman military movements in these areas confirm that nearly always legions moving from Antioch in Syria eastwards swung north towards Armenia before turning south to enter Mesopotamia. The Euphrates River stood as the *de facto* border between the Roman and Parthian empires, for it was difficult to cross and thus served as a natural barrier from easy invasion.

The Euphrates River served as a boundary not only for military forces but also for cultural and intellectual exchange since trade did not pass easily across this water way. This is illustrated in the demise of Hellenistic influence when the Seleucid Empire began to lose control of the region to the Parthians in the second century BC. Although the Seleucids had brought Greek art, science, and religion into this region after the death of Alexander, Hellenistic culture which to date had been intertwined with these cities began to unravel.⁴² The Mesopotamian culture of the Parthians began to infuse itself into these regions and gradually Hellenism withered.⁴³ The demise of Hellenism is witnessed in archeological finds during this period. By the first century AD, there is a dearth of Greek inscriptions, and native princes are inscribing their coins with Syriac instead of Greek.⁴⁴ The

his more current research has presented a very different portrait in which Edessa, Nisibis, and Adiabene are thoroughly Hellenized. He argues that these cities, due to their location on the Silk Road, are participating in a direct relationship with the cities and provinces situated on the Mediterranean. Greek and Aramaic are used interchangeably, which suggests the area had a very diverse population. For Drijvers, Christianity entered Edessa from Antioch, the main center of Christianity in the Roman world, in much the same way that Christianity spread west throughout the Roman Empire. Drijvers rejects the notion that Edessan Christianity, connected via trade routes and in remarkably close proximity, would not have been heavily influenced by Antiochian forms of Christianity. See Han J.W. Drijvers, "Syrian Christianity and Judaism," in *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, eds. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak (London: Routledge, 1992), 125-127. In my opinion, however, Drijver's thesis does not take into account Roman military maneuvers which intimate that the Euphrates was a great barrier to movement of troops and therefore likely trade goods. If traders moved easily into Edessa from the west, why would the Roman military not follow a similar route when moving into this region? This central issue will be treated below.

⁴⁰ Segal, "When did Christianity Come to Edessa?," 181.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁴² Ross, *Roman Edessa*, 12-13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁴⁴ Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 2.

Parthian empire completely controlled the Mesopotamian region when the Romans marched into the eastern Mediterranean world in the first century BC.

As Rome emerged as the dominant player in the Mediterranean basin, she began to move eastward in order to secure the commerce and trade routes running through Mesopotamia to Iran, India, and China. It was along such routes that silk and silk garments came from China, muslin, spices, metals, drugs, and precious stones from India, and carpets from Iran.⁴⁵ Just as the Romans could not afford Parthian control over these routes, the Parthians were unwilling to relinquish their sovereignty over the major east-west routes. Koester summarizes the stakes: “The wars of the Romans with Parthia for possession of Mesopotamia involved in part the attempt to control this important trade route.”⁴⁶ Thus, conflict erupted over the control of the sweeping bend of the Euphrates River east of Edessa. But control was not easily gained, and security was even more fleeting.

The Roman Governor of Syria, Marcus Licinius Crassus, led his legions against the Parthians in 53 BC. Instead of taking a northern route through Armenia and then swinging southward to attack Northern Mesopotamia, he opted to cross the Euphrates at Zeugma, losing one of his own horses to the river.⁴⁷ He led seven legions into Parthian territory, but they immediately came under fire from opposing cavalry employing the famed Parthian shot.⁴⁸ With their backs against the river, communication, and more importantly, retreat strategies were impossible. The legions and Crassus himself were slaughtered and the famed Roman standards were captured. The Battle of Carrhae, on the eastern side of the Euphrates was one of the most humiliating defeats in Roman history.⁴⁹ Marcus Antonius’s own Parthian invasion also ended in defeat in 36 BC. Although his own life was preserved, his legions were decimated and their standards were likewise captured.⁵⁰ When Augustus became Emperor, he refused to venture across the Euphrates to engage the Parthians but accepted the river as the boundary of his empire. The biographer of Augustus, A.H.M. Jones, who sycophantically paints Augustus as the unassailable warrior of Rome, acknowledges the great power of the Parthians: “It is evident that Augustus had no ambitions for eastern conquests and fully realized how dangerous an operation an invasion of Parthia was.”⁵¹ In 20 BC this peaceful strategy was to pay off: Phraates IV, king of the Parthians, returned the military standards, the spoils, and the

⁴⁵ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 7.

⁴⁶ Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, 86.

⁴⁷ Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, 19.1-3.

⁴⁸ Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, 20.1.

⁴⁹ Marcel Le Glay, et al., *A History of Rome*, 3rd ed (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 134.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵¹ A.H.M. Jones, *Augustus* (New York: Norton, 1970), 57.

prisoners taken in 53 and 36 BC.⁵²

In 114 AD Emperor Trajan, exercising a more innovative plan, ventured to the far north of Edessa into Armenia, outflanking the Euphrates. He thus overran the Armenian region, including the main city of Elegeia, from a more accessible route.⁵³ From that territory, he swung south, and after crossing the Tigris, he secured Nisibis and left a garrison there to protect his flank.⁵⁴ As the campaigning season was coming to an end and he wished to return to Antioch for the winter, he marched westward from Nisibis towards Edessa.⁵⁵ Trajan established a temporary, military crossing point at the Euphrates near Edessa so that he might use Antioch as a base of operations for a renewed campaign the following spring campaign. This crossing, albeit more dangerous as Crassus's campaign suggests, did cancel the need to follow the long, circuitous, yet safer, campaigning route to the north; moreover, he had already conquered Armenia.⁵⁶ During 115-116 AD, Trajan's six legions conquered the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys and ventured as far south as Babylon. While Trajan had won the battles and the Senate even conferred the cognomen "Parthicus," he failed to win the war of conquest and annexation of the Parthian lands. After the death of Trajan, Hadrian abandoned both the Mesopotamian conquests of his predecessor and the newly established crossing point, and he accepted the Euphrates River as the border once again.⁵⁷ This withdrawal issued in a fifty year reign of peace between Rome and Parthia.

Marcus Aurelius broke the peace with renewed invasions of Mesopotamia. Utilizing the same northern approach as Trajan, the Roman

⁵² Augustus considered the recovery of these standards as one of his most important acts as emperor. He included a reference to this action in his *Res Gestae*: "I compelled the Parthians to restore to me the spoils and the standards of three Roman armies and to seek the friendship of the Roman people as suppliants; and I placed these standards in the inner shrine in the temple of Mars the Avenger." Augustus, "Res Gestae-29," in *Rome: The Augustan Age: A Source Book*, trans. and eds. Kitty Chisholm and John Ferguson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 9. The importance of this event is also enshrined in a remarkable image on the cuirass of the famous statue of Augustus from the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta. The cuirass contains a myriad of images symbolizing the "new ideology of victory." Paul Zanker, in his book entitled *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, interprets the central image on the cuirass of Augustus: "In the center of the composition, the Parthian king extends the legionary eagle, attached to a battle standard, to a cuirassed figure in military pose, either a representative of the Roman legions or perhaps the embodiment of Mars Ultor himself...[which represents that]...on the cuirass relief the victory over the Parthians is celebrated as the culmination of a perfect world order." Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 189.

⁵³ Stephen Dando-Collins, *Legions of Rome: The Definitive History of Every Imperial Legion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 414; see also, McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 4.

⁵⁴ C.S. Lightfoot, "Trajan's Parthian War and the Fourth Century Perspective," *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 80 (1990) 117.

⁵⁵ Dando-Collins, *Legions of Rome*, 415. Lightfoot notes that Trajan stayed in Edessa for the winter of 114 AD instead of traveling 150 miles southwest to Antioch (Lightfoot, "Trajan's Parthian War," 118).

⁵⁶ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 4.

⁵⁷ Dando-Collins, *Legions of Rome*, 420.

legions penetrated as far as Seleucia-Ctesiphon. As a reflection of the weakness of the Parthians toward the end of the second century AD, the kingdom of Osroene, of which Edessa was the capital, welcomed the Romans during this campaign. Segal summarizes the dramatic event:

Henceforth, after 164, acquaintance with and friendship with the people of Osroene were taken for granted by Rome. The King of Edessa now became a reliable ally of the Empire. When the Parthians invited King Abgar the Great to cooperate in the recapture of Nisibis from the Romans, he refused. Instead, he accepted the invitation from Emperor Septimius Severus to visit Rome, and he was given an extravagant reception there. Now the crossing of the Euphrates from Antioch to the neighborhood of Edessa had become secure and familiar.⁵⁸

As the Romans pushed the boundary of the empire further into Mesopotamia, a more permanent crossing of the Euphrates near Edessa became invaluable. Control of this area militarily enabled the Romans to create a more direct, west-to-east trade route which brought Edessa directly into the orbit of the Roman Empire. Finally, during the reign of Emperor Caracalla (198-217 AD), Edessa is mentioned as a major stopping point east of the Euphrates, noted both as a trading station and a military outpost.⁵⁹ Edessa turned to look westward.

Not surprisingly, the city of Edessa and the region of Osroene were annexed as part of the Roman Empire during the reign of King Abgar IX the Great.⁶⁰ This watershed event dramatically changed the orientation of Edessa. The opening of the trade routes to the east via Edessa linked Northern Mesopotamia with the Roman Empire through the great city of Antioch. This was a dramatic shift. With the Roman military firmly in control of both shores of the Euphrates and with a more permanent crossing established, trade could move directly from Antioch through Edessa thus shortening substantially the trade route into Mesopotamia.⁶¹ Cultural trends, new modes of thinking, and religious ideas began to flow into Edessa from the west instead of through the cultural filters of Adiabene and Nisibis in the east as had been the case earlier. The implications were staggering, especially for Christianity in Edessa. Gentile Christianity from Antioch, which had heretofore been largely denied direct contact with the enclave of Edessa, was suddenly thrown together with the established Jewish-

⁵⁸ Segal, "When did Christianity Come to Edessa?," 185.

⁵⁹ Ross, *Roman Edessa*, 17.

⁶⁰ Le Glay, *A History of Rome*, 372-373.

⁶¹ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 7-8.

Christianity which had previously arrived through the filters of Nisibis and Adiabene and developed *in vacuo*.

By the late third or early fourth centuries AD, two distinctive types of Christians churches existed side-by-side in Northern Mesopotamia: one was Jewish-Christian and the other was Gentile Christian (under the ecclesiastical supervision of Antioch).⁶² Both churches used Syriac as the language of liturgy and teaching, but they differed widely in their theological approaches. The existence of two different types of Christian groups in this region by the middle to the end of the third century AD is corroborated by a very unusual source. Gilles Quispel has demonstrated that Jewish-Christianity did not die out completely after the destruction of Jerusalem and the decimation of the church of James in Jerusalem (70 AD) but flourished in Mesopotamia for centuries. In fact, he cites an arresting inscription that was erected by the Zoroastrian Grand Inquisitor Kartir: "I banned from the empire and destroyed: Jews, Shamans, Brahmans, Nazorees, Christians, and Maktaks were crushed in the Empire."⁶³ As Quispel points out, this Zoroastrian priest distinguishes two types of Christianity: "Nazorees" are the Jewish-Christians in the Persian Empire; "Christians" refers to the Gentile Christians from Antioch.⁶⁴ That they are labeled as separate communities is significant. Segal, however, went even further than Quispel by suggesting that the two distinctive types of Christianity found in the third century were the progenitors of the two divisions later found within the Syrian Church: "The west Syrian church became in the course of time the Jacobite church; it was largely the product of Christians west of the Euphrates. But there was also in eastern Mesopotamia a church that... [had]...sympathy with Judaism...it clung obstinately to Jewish practices that had been cast off by Christians in the West. Even in the first half of the fourth century the theologian Aphrahat testifies to the eating of unleavened bread at the Passover and to the removal of blood before meat was eaten."⁶⁵ However, Segal's connection of a direct relationship of the Jacobites and the Nestorians with the two-stage evangelization of Edessa likely extends beyond the evidence.

Given the complex historical reconstruction of the social, cultural, and religious setting of Edessa in the late second and early third centuries, some preliminary conclusions can now be drawn regarding the *raison d'être* of the Abgar legend. There is no plausible argument that claims Christianity came to Edessa through direct apostolic contact in 30 AD. As has been shown, Christianity likely came into Edessa at first through the Jewish regions of Adiabene and Nisibis. This community of Christians clung to many Jewish practices, including perhaps circumcision, dietary regulations, holidays, etc. Gentile Christianity later exerted its influence and ecclesiastical control from

⁶² Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 13-22.

⁶³ Quispel, "The Discussion of Judaic Christianity," 87.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶⁵ Segal, "When did Christianity Come to Edessa?," 190.

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 came down from heaven to do these things, or are a son of God for doing these things. For this reason I write to beg you to hasten to me and heal the suffering which I have.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Rolf Peppermüller, "Griechische Papyrusfragmente der *Doctrina Addai*," *VirChr* 25 (1971): 289-301. Walter Bauer came to a similar conclusion concerning the dating of the Syriac source well before Peppermüller, see Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 10.

⁶⁷ Eusebius, *E.H.*, 1.13.5, 11, & 22.

⁶⁸ Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City*, 66.

⁶⁹ Eusebius, *E.H.*, 1.13.6-8.

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 Abgar's preeminence over other followers of Jesus since he had never encountered Jesus. Jesus purportedly called attention to his remarkable faith, even at a great distance: "Blessed are you who believe in me without having seen me! For it is written of me that those who have seen me will not believe in me, and that those who have not seen will believe and live."⁷⁰ By rooting the story in the direct correspondence between Abgar and Jesus, the Syriac legend not only proclaimed how Christianity arrived in Edessa but lent Edessan Jewish-Christianity authority and prestige over the newer Gentile Christianity that had just arrived with Roman hegemony.⁷¹

If the Abgar legend was created for this purpose, did the author merely invent the names and themes which are central to the story or were they borrowed from a common source? Recall that Jewish-Christianity in Edessa shared a close relationship with the Jewish communities in Nisibis and Adiabene: "Jews of Edessa looked eastward to more powerful Jewish communities in northeast Mesopotamia. In Adiabene, the ruling family adopted Judaism in the first century AD."⁷² Given the close connection of Jewish-Christianity with Judaism, one can assume that the Edessans knew the legend of the *Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene*. Needing to compose a foundation legend to counter Gentile Christianity, the author of the Abgar story drew upon the motifs and characters that were so familiar from the Adiabene conversion story.⁷³

Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene

There are several parallels between the *Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene*, as recorded in Josephus, and the Edessan Abgar legend. During the first decades of the first century AD, Monobazus, king of Adiabene, and his wife Helena had a son whom they named Izates (meaning, "Divine One"). Throughout his childhood, Izates was favored more than his brothers by Monobazus so their hatred of him grew intense. While Izates was still a young man, Monobazus decided, for his welfare and safety, that he should go and live within the royal palace of Charax Spasini, the capital of a nearby kingdom. Now during the time when he lived in that territory, a certain Jewish merchant named Ananias (or Hannan) visited that palace and taught the women Judaism. Izates was also converted to Judaism through the agency of a merchant, although he was not at the time circumcised. His father, having grown old and approaching death, requested to see him so Izates and Ananias traveled to Adiabene. Upon arriving, Izates learned that

⁷⁰ Eusebius, *E.H.*, 1.13.10. The author of the Legend of Abgar is clearly drawing on Jesus' statement in the Gospel of John (Jn 20:29).

⁷¹ Brock, "Eusebius and Syriac Christianity," 227.

⁷² Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City*, 41.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 67-69; cf. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 8-9

his mother had also become a Jewish proselyte through the teaching of another Jewish merchant. His father died shortly after Izate's arrival, and the son ascended to the throne in 36 AD. While he was at first reluctant to declare his allegiance to Judaism openly to the people, he eventually was circumcised and acknowledged his religious commitment publicly. While the royal families of Adiabene were scandalized by his rejection of the ancestral religions, the commoners joined their king in the practice of Jewish monotheism. Thus, according to the conversion legend, it was during Izate's reign that the region of Adiabene and Nisibis became Jewish.⁷⁴

The parallels with the Abgar legend are striking. Izates ascends to the throne in 36 AD and thereby is a contemporary of King Abgar V Uchama. Secondly, the young prince is converted to Judaism through a Jewish merchant named Ananias. This trader shares the same name as Abgar's emissary sent to Palestine in the Abgar legend.⁷⁵ It is Ananias who delivers Abgar's letter to Jesus and carries the Lord's response back to the king. In both stories, merchants, especially Jewish ones, play crucial roles in the transmission of monotheism. But the kings themselves convert to Judaism and Christianity respectively and thus render their sovereign territories monotheistic. The similarity of motifs and names led Robert Murray, in his book entitled *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, to declare that these parallels are more than a coincidence: "The Edessan story of the conversion of Abgar was *borrowed* by... Christians from their former Jewish brethren to the east. It was, perhaps, a garbled memory (though retaining not a few similarities) of the true story about the first century royal conversions in Adiabene."⁷⁶ Once the stories are compared, it is difficult to deny that the author of the Syriac legend appropriated large sections of the Adiabene conversion account to craft a story concerning the conversion of Edessa.

This process of appropriation of the legend intimates a fairly amicable relationship between the Jewish-Christian community in Edessa and the Jewish communities of Adiabene and Nisibis at least in the third century when the Abgar legend was created and promulgated. Had there existed a bitter schism between these communities, it is hard to imagine that the Edessan Christian community would have promulgated a conversion story which so closely resembled the *Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene*. This is not to say that anti-Jewish elements are not found in Eusebius's account of the *Legend of Abgar*. Indeed, King Abgar offered Jesus a refuge

⁷⁴ I have not attempted to offer an analysis of why the *Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene* was written. Others have ably treated this issue. See Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene in Josephus and Rabbinic Sources" in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. Louis Feldman and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 293-312. See also Jacob Neusner, "The Conversion of Adiabene to Christianity," *Numen* 13 (1966): 144-150; Jacob Neusner, "Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism: A New Perspective," *JBL* 83, no. 1 (1964), 60-66.

⁷⁵ Eusebius, *E.H.*, 1.13.8-9; *Teaching of Addai*, f. 1a.

⁷⁶ Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 8.

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 *Legend of Abgar* would contain anti-Jewish elements. What can be said definitively is that the anti-Jewish statements found in Eusebius's copy of the *Legend of Abgar* pales in comparison to what is found in the *Doctrine of Addai* which dates from the late fourth or early fifth century. Something dramatic happened within the Edessan community that created the occasion for a new redaction of the Abgar legend which features caustic, anti-Jewish rhetoric.

If the cultural, social, political, and theological reconstruction offered above is accurate, that dramatic event was the continued influx of Gentile Christianity into Edessa via Antioch.⁷⁹ As Gentile Christianity exerted more and more pressure on Jewish-Christianity in Edessa, the anti-Judaism of this strain of Christianity seeped into Northern Mesopotamia. The Abgar legend was then reformulated to reflect this new perspective on Judaism. However, the *Doctrine of Addai* also contains elements which suggest that the author

⁷⁷ Eusebius, *E.H.*, 1.13.8-9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.13.16.

⁷⁹ Due to the paucity of evidence, one cannot prove definitively that the *Legend of Abgar* and the later redaction of this legend found in the *Doctrine of Addai* were products of a Jewish-Christian community defending its authority against the influx of Gentile Christianity. But this thesis makes the most sense of the evidence. Han Drijvers, however, has suggested another impetus for the creation of this *Legend*. He claims that the rapid success of Manichaeism in the northern Mesopotamian region was the impetus for creating a religious document which undercut the authority of the Manichaean disciple Addai. He suggests that an interested member of Syrian Christianity created a document that usurped the name Addai and made this figure into the early Christian apostle that brought Christianity to Edessa around 35 CE. By utilizing the name Addai, the Syrian Christian could appropriate the energy of the Manichaeans for his/her cause. But there are serious flaws with Drijver's thesis. He fails to show convincingly that Manichaeism could actually provide a strong impetus. One can hardly deny that Manichaeism was a new, active religion in the early fourth century, but it seems that Drijvers overestimates how rapidly Manichaeism could have spread after the death of Mani. He seems to suggest that the "threat" of Manichaeism to undermine Christianity in northern Syria was great. This seems implausible. Secondly, his thesis assumes that Christianity would borrow the name Addai from Manichaeism. It seems unlikely that a fledgling religion would wield enough power to warrant the Christian writer's usurping of the name of the main Manichaean disciple. More convincing is the likelihood that the nascent Manichaean religion would attempt to utilize a name familiar in the area from a legend or story to gain credibility for itself. New religions often utilize existing myths, legends, or figures to gain authority within a new geographical setting. Finally, his thesis cannot account for two key features of the *Doctrine of Addai* which will be explored below. First, how, in light of the supposed anti-Manichaean rhetoric, can one explain the curious story of Protonike, the wife of Claudius? This story has obvious parallels with the Helena legends found in western histories of the Church, but no parallels with Manichaeism. This significant element in the Syriac *Doctrine of Addai* cannot be ignored. Secondly, the anti-Jewish elements strewn throughout the legend are also difficult to explain utilizing Drijver's theory. For a complete survey of Drijver's thesis, see Han J.W. Drijvers, "Jews and Christians at Edessa," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 36 (1985): 88-102; *ibid.*, "Syrian Christianity and Judaism," in *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, eds. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak (London: Routledge, 1992), 124-146. Cf. Han J.W. Drijvers, "Facts and Problems in Early Syriac-Speaking Christianity," *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1982): 160.

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

Doctrine of Addai

The redacted Syriac version of the Abgar legend is entitled the *Doctrine of Addai*. As the *Legend of Abgar* in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, this text features the correspondence between King Abgar and Jesus of Nazareth. However, the *Doctrine of Addai*, as the name suggests, provides a detailed description of Addai's preaching and healing in the region of Edessa.⁸⁰ The reader learns that pagan priests and many Jews were converted through Addai's sermon. But the Syriac version contains other curious accretions. One is the legend of Protonike, the wife of Claudius, who recovers the true cross and locates the most important Christian holy sites in Jerusalem.⁸¹ The *Doctrine of Addai* also records the anti-Jewish correspondence between Abgar and the Roman Emperor Tiberius concerning the evils perpetrated by the Jews of Jerusalem against Jesus of Nazareth.⁸² Both of these additions are post-Eusebian and seemingly emerge from the historical setting of Edessa in the late 4th and early 5th centuries when the Jewish-Christian church is simultaneously asserting its heritage and prestige vis-à-vis Gentile Christianity and breaking definitively with its Jewish roots.

Jewish-Christians found themselves in a difficult position by the fourth and fifth centuries. On the one hand, Gentile Christianity had exerted an enormous influence on Edessa. For decades Antioch exercised ecclesiastical control over the area. In addition, theologians such as Aphraates and Ephraim the Syrian used their theological acumen to propagate Greek Christian theology in the region. Both were aware that many Syriac Christians still engaged in Jewish practices and encouraged them to sever all ties with Jewish customs.⁸³ Whereas Aphraates's writings are more tempered, Ephraim's writings display an acerbic, anti-Jewish tenor which represented a new level of hostility not previously seen in Edessan Christianity. He states that the Jews are a slanderous and murderous people

⁸⁰ Sidney Griffith, in his study of the *Doctrine of Addai*, declines to treat the Abgar legend. He argues conversely that the theological teaching found in the document should be the central focus of inquiry. The author of the *Doctrine of Addai* employed the legends and traditions found in the earlier *Legend of Abgar* to present "a normative Edessan Christianity that he hoped would play an authoritative role in the largely Christological controversies of his own day." Griffiths theological exploration is compelling and offers collaborative proof that Edessan Christianity reorients itself toward the Christianity of the Mediterranean world in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, see Sidney Griffith, "The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought in Edessa in the Fifth Century," *Hugoye* 6:2 (2003), 1-46.

⁸¹ *The Teaching of Addai*, f. 7b-11a.

⁸² *Ibid.*, f. 25a.

⁸³ John Chrysostom faced a similar problem with his congregation in Constantinople. He preached numerous sermons, including some with strong anti-Jewish language, exhorting his parishioners to refrain from Jewish practices. For a detailed study of these matters, see Robert Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Wayne A. Meeks and Robert L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era*, SBL Sources for Biblical Study 13 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978).

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 Christian legend of Helena’s (i.e. Constantine’s mother) journey to the Holy Land. It certainly attempts to appropriate the authority of the western myth in order to establish the importance, if not prominence, of Syriac Christianity.⁸⁷ It is not far-fetched to assume that the author of the Syriac *Doctrine of Addai* sought to establish an authoritative position within the Church by undermining the authority of the Helena legends. This was done by claiming that he knew of an older version of the Helena story. Just as the Abgar legend claims to witness the establishment of the first Christian kingdom, so too does the Protonike story claim to be the original. How might one postulate such an interpretation? The similarities of the two stories suggest that there was a relationship between them. Since the Helena legends were well-established in the early fourth century AD, it is likely that the Helena legends were earlier than the Protonike story in the *Doctrine of Addai*.⁸⁸ Secondly, if the Helena story was not created previous to the Protonike story, it is difficult to imagine how the Protonike story, concerning the wife of Claudius, worked itself into a Syriac Christian text. Since we know that Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*—which contains a truncated account of Helena’s journey to Jerusalem and the subsequent building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher—was available in Syriac in the late fourth century, it is likely that the Syriac legend of Protonike was created and then circulated to undermine the western legend. In so doing, the author of the *Doctrine of Addai* is offering what he argues is the authentic history of Christianity, albeit a Syriac one.

⁸⁴ McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 25.

⁸⁵ Segal confirms that the anti-Jewish themes found in the *Doctrine of Addai* are contemporaneous with those of Ephraim the Syrian, see Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City*, 102.

⁸⁶ Most scholars posit that the *Doctrine of Addai* was written in the late 4th or early 5th centuries. See Brock, “Eusebius and Syriac Christianity”, 213. The only complete Syriac manuscript is usually dated to the sixth century, see William Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864; reprinted, Amsterdam: Oriental Press, 1967), 1-9.

⁸⁷ The earliest accounts of the Helena legends are found in Cyril of Alexandria and Eusebius’s *Life of Constantine*. Additional accounts of the legends are found in the writings of Socrates Scholasticus, Theodoret and Sozomen who attempted to write histories of the Church modeled on Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*.

⁸⁸ The visit of Helena to Jerusalem and the subsequent building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is mentioned by Eusebius (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 3.26-33). Socrates Scholasticus recounts an extended version of the discovery of the cross in his *Ecclesiastical History* (1.17). Sozomen records a nearly identical story, save accretions concerning the finding of the tomb (Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.1).

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 her daughter in search of the sites connected with the Savior.⁸⁹ After arriving, she hears that the Jews have taken over the sites and will not allow Christians into these areas. Furthermore, the three crosses that stood on Golgotha are guarded by the Jews as well. Protonike, requesting a meeting with the High Priest Onias, demands that the Jews allow her into the sites.⁹⁰ Coming into the tomb that contained the crosses, she is perplexed to determine which one is the true cross of the Savior. Curiously enough, at that very instant her virgin daughter “fell down and died without pain, illness, or any cause of death.”⁹¹ Conveniently, the death of the daughter is the tool by which she would be able to identify the true cross. She orders the servants to bring her daughter, and they place each cross over her body. The first two failed to bring her back to life; however, the third cross—of course, it is always the last one—is placed on her daughter, and she is miraculously healed.⁹² By Protonike’s actions, the true cross of Christ was recovered for Christendom. The *Doctrine of Addai* claims that these events happened in the early first century AD.⁹³ The Syriac version is usurping the western account by more than three hundred years!

The similarities of the Protonike story with the Helena legend are remarkable. Helena, the mother of Constantine, traveled to the Holy Land in search of the sites of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. The tomb, covered and hidden by a temple to Aphrodite, was found by Helena with divine guidance. After destroying the temple and opening the tomb, she discovered three crosses and the *titulum* on which Pilate had written the charges against the Savior. The *titulum* was removed from the cross so that one could not determine by sight which one was the true cross. Bishop Marcarius of Jerusalem suggested to Helena that God would provide a sign. The sign was this: a certain woman, on the point of death, lived nearby, and the bishop arranged for the woman to be brought to the tomb. One by one the crosses were placed on her body. The first two, which were not the Lord’s, left her in a moribund condition. However, the remaining cross was placed on her body, and she was instantly healed and regained her strength. Helena had found the true cross.

The two stories share many of the same motifs. Although the author of the Syriac *Doctrine of Addai* seems to have borrowed the main stories from the Helena legend, certain features in the *Doctrine of Addai* are added to lend to the appearance that the Protonike story was earlier and more credible. First, the claim that Protonike’s husband was Emperor Claudius (41-54 AD) suggests the desire of the Syriac author to root the story in the first century.

⁸⁹ *Teaching of Addai*, f. 7b.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 54b.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, f. 54b.

⁹² *Ibid.*, f. 8b-9b.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, f. 7b-11a.

Secondly, the frail girl on the point of death is the very daughter of Protonike. This suggests, it would seem, more intensity concerning the emotional impact of the story; there is more at stake than just a local woman's life. But the clearest indication that the Protonike story is the product of a Syriac redactor from the later fourth or early fifth century is the deliberate inclusion of anti-Jewish rhetoric.

As mentioned above, the Syriac *Doctrine of Addai* contains several anti-Jewish statements and stories that can only be explained fully when considered within a late fourth or early fifth century Syrian milieu. The anti-Jewish theme in the Protonike story is illustrative. The Jews have withheld the holy sites from the Christians.⁹⁴ Protonike orders Onias to relinquish the sites against his will. In addition, the *Doctrine of Addai* contains another legend in which King Abgar writes Emperor Tiberius because he is unable to “pass over into a country of the Romans to enter Palestine and kill the Jews, because they crucified the Messiah.”⁹⁵ Tiberius, instead of dismissing the letter, sends an emissary to look into the matter. Aristides, after hearing Addai's testimony concerning Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of the Jews, purportedly related the atrocities to Tiberius who in response sent troops against Jerusalem. When the troops arrived, they killed several leaders of the Jews. When Abgar heard the report concerning the massacre, he rejoiced greatly.⁹⁶ There is no evidence, however, that these reported events are historical. First of all, one must ask why Tiberius would be concerned about the death of an insignificant Jewish peasant in the backwaters of the Roman world. Secondly, why would Tiberius send troops into Jerusalem at the behest of a king from a province that was not controlled by Rome in the first century? Clearly, this anti-Jewish rhetoric fits much better in a fourth or fifth century setting.

The *Doctrine of Addai* does, however, ostensibly contain a handful of favorable comments about Jews. Jesus is said to have stayed with Gamaliel. Presumably, this is the famous Rabban Gamaliel of Jerusalem under whom Saul was reported to have studied.⁹⁷ Likewise, Addai dwelt in the “house of Tobias, the son of Tobias,” when he first entered Edessa.⁹⁸ As the result of Addai's mission, “even the Jews who were learned in the Law and the Prophets and who traded in silk, submitted and became followers and confessed that the Messiah is the Son of the Living God.”⁹⁹ But it is clear that the favorable comments concerning Jews are found in the earliest strata

⁹⁴ Ibid., f. 54a-54b.

⁹⁵ Ibid., f. 23b. Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, in a recent article, dismisses entirely that this account is connected to a religious controversy between Christianity and Judaism. She proposes that the *Doctrine of Addai* testifies to a political connection between King Abgar the Black and Tiberius. See Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, “The Possible Origin of the Abgar-Addai Legend: Abgar the Black and Emperor Tiberius,” *Hugoye*, vol. 16.2 (2013), 325-341.

⁹⁶ Ibid., f. 18a.

⁹⁷ *Acts of the Apostles* 22.3, cf. 5.34ff.

⁹⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.13.11-14.

⁹⁹ *Teaching of Addai*, f. 22a.

of the Abgar legend. Indeed, the retention of these positive comments may suggest the opposite meaning: Jews who continued to practice the traditions of their ancestors proved themselves to be stubborn and intractable. Addai's farewell address sums up the negative portrayal of Jews in the *Doctrine of Addai*: "Make the path and road smooth in a rough place, between the crucifying Jews and the erring pagans...beware of the crucifiers and do not be friends with them, lest you be responsible with those whose hands are full of the blood of the messiah."¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

This study has attempted to place these three legends in their proper social, political, and theological settings. Using the *Legend of Abgar*, the *Conversion of the Royal House of Adiabene*, and the *Doctrine of Addai* as the primary sources of information, it has been shown that Syriac Christianity underwent an enormous transformation. The Jewish-Christianity originally found in Edessa was heavily indebted to the Jewish communities of Adiabene region and the city of Nisibis to the east. However, after the Roman conquest of the Osroene region and the city of Edessa, Syriac Christianity came under the influence and ecclesiastical control of Gentile Christianity found in Antioch, one of the four Eastern sees of the Christian Church. The Abgar legend was created to explain the origins of Syriac Christianity and to make a claim for the authenticity and *prestige de l'origine* of Syriac Christianity vis-à-vis Gentile Christianity. The *Legend of Abgar* found in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, however, betrays the community's cultural indebtedness to their Jewish heritage since it reflects the motifs of the conversion legend of Adiabene. As time passed, the Syriac Christian community came under the increasing influence and ecclesiastical control of Gentile Christianity. Edessan Christianity gradually adopted the more anti-Jewish interpretation found in the theology of Gentile Christianity. This transition is seen in the later redaction of the Abgar legend: the Syriac *Doctrine of Addai*. Curiously, this document simultaneously attempted to undermine the authority of Gentile Christianity by presenting in Syriac the true history of the Church and to attack Judaism as a false and debased tradition which perpetrated the execution of the Messiah of God. By comparing these three documents, the history of the relations of Jews and Christians in Northern Mesopotamia are illuminated even if a final, conclusive reconstruction is still obscured by shadows.

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¹⁰⁰ Ibid., f. 26 b and f. 27a.