

AD ABGARUM

The Sahidic version of the letter to Abgar
on a wooden tablet

BY

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The apocryphal correspondence between King Abgar of Edessa and Jesus is found in many languages and among these versions, the Coptic versions have their own important place. Not only concerning the question about the relations between the shorter and longer versions of the letters, but also the question if this correspondence in a certain form has been used for a special purpose: in the fight against the arianism, as M. E. Drioton tried to prove in a study in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 2. sér., X, (1915—17) where all the Coptic versions of the letters which at that time were known, were published by E. Drioton. After the publication of this article, however, other Coptic versions of the Letter to Abgar have been discovered. A very fragmentary version was published by W. E. Crum in: W. E. Crum and H. G. Evelyn White, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes*, New York 1926, II, p. 11. There is, however, another unpublished version. This version and the *use of it* and other versions into *other* languages is the subject of this paper.

This until now unpublished version of the Letter to Abgar is written on a wooden tablet, acquired in Egypt in 1917 together with many other Coptic¹, Demotic and Arabic manuscripts by J. Rendel Harris for the John Rylands Library in Manchester. The manuscript is *Ryl. Copt. Suppl. No. 50*, which I publish here.²

¹ Of these Coptic manuscripts five letters are published by W. E. Crum in his *Short texts from Coptic ostracha and papyri*, London 1921. Most of the biblical texts are published by Walter C. Till (*Ryl. Bull.*, 34, 1952, p. 432—458) and an acrostical hymn by Søren Giversen: *Acrostical St. Menas-Hymn in Sahidic* (*Acta Orientalia*, vol. 23, p. 19—32, Copenhagen 1958.)

² I thank the librarian of the John Rylands Library, professor E. Robertson, M.A., D. Litt., D.D. for permission to publish the text.

Ryl. Copt. Suppl. No. 50. Text.

Recto:

- L. 1. παντιφραθον ιτεπιστολην ιη̄ς πε̄χ̄ς
 πινρε μ̄πνουτε ετοινε
 εφσραλ ναγταρος προ νεδεσσα
2. χαριετε ναειατκ ιτον
 αγω ππετνανουτ ναυωπε μ̄μοκ
 αγω ναειατ̄ς ιτεκπολις τᾱι επεσραν
3. πε εδεσσα επιαν ουν μ̄πεκναγ ανπισετευ
 νιαχι κατα текштес
 αγω ката текпродересис етнаноуε
4. νεκωπε сенаταλσοου
 αγω εψωπε αν̄ρενκеноѳе зос ρоме
 сенакааγ наκ εβολ αγω εδεσσα ναυωπε
5. ессмамаат шаденε
 ιτεπεооу μ̄πноуτε ашад̄ι ρ̄μ̄песлаос
 αγω тпистис мптагалн ашад̄ι ρ̄μ̄песп̄ла^{та}
6. анок ῑс анок а̄исра̄ι анок етρω̄н нншад̄е
 εβολ же аκме емате
 φ̄наκω мпекран

- L. 1. Incipit Leid.: τεῑστολην ιη̄ς πε̄χ̄ς π̄χοε̄ις
 шадγварос ραμνι
 ναγταρος] Leid.: π̄ναγварос
 νεδεσσα] Leid.: π̄ετессα
1. 2. χαριετε ναειατκ ιτον] Leid.: χᾱῑρετε наа̄т̄к
 наειατ̄ς] Leid.: н̄д̄а̄т̄с
1. 3. εδεσσα] Leid.: етессα
 ουν] om. Leid.
 текпродересис] Leid.: текпродерсисε
1. 4. εψωπε αν̄ρενκеноѳе] Leid.: еш̄жезакер
 ραε μ̄ноѳе
 εδεσσα] Leid.: етессα
1. 5. ашад̄ι sec.] Leid.: наероγο̄ε̄н
1. 6. а̄исра̄ι нншад̄е] Leid.: етρω̄н αγω анок
 етшад̄е

Translation.

Recto:

- L. 1. Copy (ἀντίγραφον) of the letter (ἐπιστολή) from Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, who writes to Abgar, the king of Edessa:
2. Salute (χαίρετε)! Blessed are you and that which is good shall happen for you, and blessed is your city (πόλις) whose name
3. is Edessa. Although (ἐπειδή) you yet (οὐν) not have seen, you have beleived (πιστεύειν)^{a)}; you shall receive according to (κατά) your faith (πίστις) and according to (κατά) your good will (προαίρεσις);
4. your discases shall be healed and if you have committed some sins also as (ὡς) a man they shall be forgiven you; and Edessa shall be
5. blessed for ever; the glory of God shall grow in her people (λαός) and the faith (πίστις) and the love (ἀγάπή) shall grow^{b)} in her streets (πλατεῖα)!
6. I, Jesus, I have written and I have commanded these words: Because you have loved much^{c)} I will put your name

a) John, 20, 29.

b) 2. Tess. 1, 3.

c) Cfr. Luke, 7, 47.

Text.

Recto:

7. εϋρ̄π̄μ̄εεϋε ψ̄αε̄νε̄νεϋ αϋω οϋτ̄μ̄ῑν̄ μ̄ῑοϋε̄μοϋ
 η̄ῑτ̄ε̄νε̄ᾱ τ̄η̄ροϋ
 ε̄τῑν̄ μ̄ῑν̄ε̄ω̄ν̄ ϋ̄ρᾱῑ ϋ̄ῑτε̄ν̄πᾱτρια
8. τ̄η̄ρ̄ε̄ αϋω̄ η̄ε̄σο̄τ̄μ̄ε̄ϋ ψ̄ᾱαρ̄η̄ϋϋ̄ μ̄π̄κ̄ᾱϋ
 ᾱνο̄κ̄ ῑε̄ η̄τᾱῑς̄ρᾱῑ η̄ε̄τε̄νε̄π̄ῑστο̄λ̄η̄
 ϋ̄η̄τᾱσ̄ῑϋ̄ μ̄μ̄η̄ε̄ μ̄μ̄ο̄ῑ π̄μ̄α
9. ε̄τοϋ̄η̄ᾱτ̄ω̄σε̄ ε̄βο̄λ̄ η̄̄ρ̄η̄τ̄ε̄̄ η̄η̄ῑσ̄ῑϋ̄ η̄ς̄ρᾱῑ
 η̄η̄ε̄λᾱαϋ̄ η̄τε̄η̄ᾱμ̄ῑε̄ η̄τε̄πᾱν̄τῑν̄ῑμ̄ε̄νο̄ς̄
 ο[ϋ̄ϋ̄ε̄] λ̄ᾱαϋ̄ η̄ε̄νε̄ρ̄ε̄τ̄α
10. μ̄]π̄η̄ᾱ η̄ᾱκᾱθ̄αρ̄το̄ν̄ ε̄ψ̄ε̄μ̄ε̄σο̄μ̄ ε̄ρ̄ω̄η̄ ε̄ροϋ̄η̄
 οϋ̄ϋ̄ε̄ ε̄ϋ̄ω̄η̄ϋ̄ε̄ ε̄ροϋ̄η̄ ε̄π̄μ̄ᾱ ε̄τ̄μ̄μ̄αϋ̄
 ψ̄ᾱε̄νε̄ϋ ο[ϋ̄ϋ̄ᾱῑ ϋ̄η̄]οϋ̄ϋ̄ε̄ρ̄η̄η̄η̄ ϋ̄
11. ε̄η̄ ο̄νο̄μᾱτᾱ τοϋ̄ πᾱτρο̄ς̄
 καῑ τοϋ̄ ῡῑοϋ̄
 καῑ τοϋ̄ ᾱγ̄ιοϋ̄ [π̄η̄ᾱ] ϋ̄

Verso: ... η̄η̄η̄ η̄ῑω̄ πᾱϋ̄λοϋ̄ ᾱπο̄ με̄γᾱλο̄κ̄τη̄μᾱτο̄ς̄
 τοϋ̄ ε̄ξ̄ω̄ρ̄η̄θ̄η̄τοϋ̄πο̄λ̄ῑτοϋ̄ η̄ο̄μοϋ̄

- l. 7. εϋρ̄π̄μ̄εεϋε ψ̄αε̄νε̄νεϋ] Leid.: εϋερ̄π̄μ̄εεϋε η̄ψ̄αε̄νε̄ϋ
 η̄ῑτ̄ε̄νε̄ᾱ] Leid.: ϋ̄η̄ῑτ̄ε̄νε̄ᾱ
 τ̄η̄ροϋ] om. Leid.
- l. 8. η̄τᾱῑς̄ρᾱῑ] Leid.: η̄ε̄τ̄ᾱῑς̄ρᾱῑ
- l. 9. ε̄τοϋ̄η̄ᾱτ̄ω̄σε̄] Leid.: ε̄τοϋ̄η̄ᾱτ̄ω̄σε̄
 η̄τε̄η̄ᾱμ̄ῑε̄] Leid.: η̄ε̄τ̄η̄η̄ᾱμ̄ῑε̄
 η̄ε̄νε̄ρ̄ε̄τ̄α] om. Leid.
- l. 10. [ε̄]ρ̄ω̄[η̄]] Leid.: ε̄ρ̄ω̄η̄ε̄
 ε̄ϋ̄ω̄η̄ϋ̄ε̄ ε̄ροϋ̄η̄ ε̄π̄μ̄ᾱ] cfr. Crum, A Coptic Dictionary, p. 777;
 Leid.: ε̄ϋ̄ω̄ρ̄ ε̄ροϋ̄η̄ ε̄π̄το̄πο̄ς̄
 ψ̄ᾱε̄νε̄ϋ] Leid.: αϋω̄ η̄ψ̄αε̄νε̄ϋ
 ϋ̄η̄οϋ̄ϋ̄ε̄ρ̄η̄η̄η̄ ϋ̄] Leid.: ϋ̄η̄οϋ̄ϋ̄ε̄ρ̄η̄η̄η̄ ϋ̄ᾱμ̄η̄η̄
- l. 11. ε̄η̄ usque ad Vers. η̄ο̄μοϋ̄ inclus. om. Leid.; explicit
 Leid.: ϋ̄ε̄π̄ῑστο̄λ̄η̄ μ̄π̄ε̄η̄χο̄ε̄ῑε̄ ῑε̄ η̄ε̄ϋ̄ε̄ ψ̄ᾱαϋ̄κᾱρο̄ς̄
 ϋ̄ᾱμ̄η̄η̄.

Translation.

Recto:

7. in eternal memory and honour (τιμή) and blessing
of all the generations (γενεά)
who shall come after you in your whole country (πατρία)
8. and they shall hear it unto the end of the world!
I, Jesus, I have written this letter (ἐπιστολή)
with my own hand. The place
9. where you will fix this manuscript
there shall be no power (δύναμις) of the adversary
(ἀντικείμενος)
nor (οὐδὴ) shall any activity (ἐνεργεία)
10. of the impure (ἀκάθαρτος) spirit (πνεῦμα) be able to
come near
nor (οὐδὴ) fall upon that place.
Farewell in peace (εἰρήνη) for ever!
11. In the name of the Father
and the Son
and the Holy Ghost

Verso: one, son of Paul from Megaloktema in the
nome of Oxyrhynchus.

In the above mentioned study in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* the Letter to Abgar was edited from a Leyden-manuscript, manuscr. Anastasy No. 9, Cat. Leemans I, 385, and in the critical apparatus were given all the variants from the Coptic versions of the same text, which at that time were known. The Ryl. Copt. Suppl. No. 50 is published above and in the footnotes the variants from the Leyden text are indicated. For all other variants I refer to the article in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*.

About forty to sixty years ago the literature under the titles Letter to Jesus Christ from King Abgar of Edessa and Letter to King Abgar of Edessa from Jesus Christ occupied the interest of more scholars than now. The bibliographies on apocryphal literature or on patrology testify to this with their long—but not always complete—lists of publications of texts and translations or studies and articles on this subject¹. It is understandable, especially when it is remembered that this was the time of the discoveries of many variants of these letters, found in papyri or parchment or as inscriptions. After the discoveries and the following publications of the texts came a flood of shorter or longer studies dealing with this subject, but later on this stream of papers ebbed away.

Our earliest Greek text of these letters is the one we have in Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica*, I, 13, 5—22. Eusebius here tells us that he had got it copied and translated from the Syriac documents in the archives in Edessa. There is no doubt that Eusebius regarded the letters as authentic, but already Augustin denied the authenticity of the letters².

There have been scholars who regarded the letters as true and authentic, e. g. J. Nirschl who declared that: "Der Briefwechsel des Königs Abgar mit dem göttlichen Heilande kann als ein historisches Factum angesehen werden, und ebenso die Bekehrung dieses Königs und Edessa's durch den Apostelschüler Addäus, indem die Einwendungen, die man dagegen gemacht

¹ J. Quasten, *Patrology*, I, p. 140—143, 1950. Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, I, 1959, p. 322—329. Aurelio de Santos Otero, *Los Evangelios Apocrifos*, Madrid 1956, p. 707—709.

² *De consensu evangelistarum*, I, 7, 11.

hat, sich als haltlos erwiesen haben"¹. The question which has been discussed among scholars has not so much been the authenticity, which nearly all have denied, as it has been the question of the original language in which this correspondence was first written: Syriac or Greek.

To this problem about the original language is added that about the origin of the Christian church in Edessa. According to Gutschmid the first Christian king of Edessa was King Abgar IX Bar Manu, who reigned from 179 to 214 (or 216), a friend and protector of *Bardesanes*; the king who is mentioned in the letters as in *Doctrina de Addai* is called Abgar V. Ukama who according to Gutschmid reigned 4 B.C.—7 A.D. and again 13—50 A.D. When did the legend arise? The usual answer to this question is, that it must have happened in a period when Christianity in Edessa was consolidated and the church there tried to show its age and originality through a correspondence between a king of Edessa and Jesus. Another question, however, remains: were the letters originally written in Greek or in Syriac? Schwarts (*Zeitschrift f. die Neutest. Wissenschaft*, 4, 1903, p. 65) declared that the testimony of Eusebius about a Syriac original was false and that the text was originally written in Greek. A. Stüleken (*Hennecke, Neutestamentliche Apokryphen, Handbuch*, 1904, p. 155) regarded a Syriac original as not unlikely.

The interesting thing concerning our present text, Ryl. Copt. Suppl. No. 50, is not new material to a solution of such problems², but the *purpose* for which the text has been used. To show this a short description is needed.

¹ J. Nirschl, *Der Briefwechsel des Königs Abgar von Edessa mit Jesus in Jerusalem, oder die Abgarfrage*, Mainz 1896, p. 336.

² For new material I refer to the text Papyrus Gothenburg no. 21, published by Hjalmar Frisk in his *Papyrus grecs de la Bibliothèque Municipale de Gothenbourg* 1929, p. 42. This text H. I. Bell suggested was a version of the Letter to Abgar (*Classical Review*, XLIII, 6, p. 237) a suggestion which was followed by Herbert C. Youtie in two articles in *Harvard Theological Review: A Gothenburg Papyrus and the Letter to Abgar*. *Harvard Theological Review* XXIII, 1930, p. 299—302. *Gothenburg Papyrus 21 and the Coptic Version of the Letter to Abgar*. *Harvard Theological Review* XXIV, 1931, p. 61—65. Another Coptic version is published in W. E. Crum and Hugh G. Evelyn White, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes*, New York, 1926, II, p. 11.

The text is in Sahidic and written on a very dark, wooden tablet. The measures of the wooden tablet are: length 44 cm, breadth 11 cm, thickness 1 cm. Since the characters are written on wood it is not possible from a paleographical point of view to state with any certainty from what date the present handwriting is. The manuscript has on one side 11 lines, each with 70—76 letters, but in the edition here each line is divided up into three for technical reasons. On the other side is the signature of the scribe. From line 10 on the first page the text is in Greek. It seems as if the back where the scribe's signature is—now very unclear—has been filled with writing, but it is not possible to read the very weak traces of characters.

W. E. Crum who in 1920 wrote a short review¹ of the collection of Coptic manuscripts which Rendel Harris bought and to which collection this manuscript belongs, wrote about this text (p. 501): "A wooden tablet (11 × 44 cm) bears yet another copy of the Letter of Christ to Abgar Whether this, like the copies of more portable form, was intended as an amulet, may be doubted".

Crum, however, did not mention that the wooden tablet at the bottom of the long side, circa 1 cm. from the border is pierced by two holes, which clearly indicate that the tablet has been fixed somewhere. Now the text in line 9 has: "The place where you will fix this manuscript . . .". This in connection with the following vow which is given in line 10, that on this place "there shall be no power of the Adversary nor shall any activity of the impure spirit be able to come near, nor fall upon that place . . ." seems clearly to indicate a magical use of the manuscript. There can be no doubt that the tablet has been used as an amulet.

The addition with the promise that "where you will fix this manuscript . . . etc." is found in many variants of this text, mostly smaller texts, written on parchment and portable. This text, indeed, on a wooden tablet, 11 × 44 cm., has not been portable, but there are examples enough which show that the Letter

¹ Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, vol. V, Manchester 1920, p. 497—503).

to Abgar was used as phylacterion. The best known example is probably that which was published by E. von Dobschütz in 1900, a Greek inscription on the door of a house in Edessa (5. century). But we have several other examples e. g. Coptic inscriptions in a church near Faras in Nubia. This fact allow us to say that our text on the wooden tablet was once used as a phylacterion.

But as the correspondence was known in many translations—this use as an amulet has also been widespread, especially in the western and northern parts of the ancient world. We have translations into Latin, English and Nordic. It was known in England about 1000 A.D. where Ælfric Grammaticus wrote a poetical translation, and on Iceland where the abbot Nicolaus from Þverá 1157 mentioned it. Cureton wrote in 1864 in *Ancient Syriac Documents* (p. 154) that he had personally seen the text used as phylacterion on a doorpost in farms in Shropshire.

Our text then is a single testimony of an old tradition which became widespread and lived nearly until our days. William Cureton wrote quite rightly in his *Ancient Syriac Documents*, that the belief in the protecting power of this letter of our Lord did not prevail in the East only, for we find, that it appeared at a very early period in the British Isles,¹ and Cureton then published the letter from our Lord to King Abgar² from an old manuscript containing a service book from Saxon time. The manuscript is: British Museum, Royal MS., 2 A, XX f. 12, where this text is placed in a dominant place, just after the preceding Lord's Prayer and the Apostolic Creed. This text is finished with the promise:

“Si quis hanc epistolam secum habuerit,
securus ambulet in pace».

¹ William Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents Relative to the Earliest Establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the Neighbouring Countries*. London 1864, p. 154.

² William Cureton, *op. cit.* p. 154.

and the wodden tablet, that it had been *fixed* somewhere and used as a phylacterion.

It is interesting to see that not only was the text spread over the world from the East to the far West and North, but that it was used in the same way in a house in Edessa in the 5th century as a phylacterion as it was used later on in the Western parts of Europe, where it was kept until modern time.