Introduction

“Orthodoxy” and “heresy”: we all know what enormous importance is attached to these two concepts for the history of our religion. Usually, however, investigation of this subject tends to focus upon the later epochs. The period of Christian origins is, as a rule, passed over rather briefly. Of course, the “errors” combatted in the earliest literature of Christianity are described and investigated from various points of view, with this or that result. But this is usually done with implicit, or even explicit, assent to the view that any such divergence really is a corruption of Christianity.

But if we follow such a procedure, and simply agree with the judgment of the anti-heretical fathers for the post-New Testament period, do we not too quickly become dependent upon the vote of but one party—that party which perhaps as much through favorable circumstances as by its own merit eventually was thrust into the foreground, and which possibly has at its disposal today the more powerful, and thus the more prevalent voice, only because the chorus of others has been muted? Must not the historian, like the judge, preside over the parties and maintain as a primary principle the dictum audiatur et altera pars [let the other side also be heard]? When one side cannot, because of anxiety, confusion, or clumsiness, gain proper recognition, is it not the obligation of the judge—and, mutatis mutandis of the historian—to assist it, as best he can, to unfold its case instead of simply submitting to the mental agility and firmness, the sagacity and loquacity of the other? Does either judge or historian dare to act as though whatever cannot be read and understood by everyone as part of the public records never existed, and thus is unimportant for passing sentence?
ORTHODOXY AND HERESY IN Earliest Christianity

In our day and age, there is no longer any debate [2] that in terms of a scientific approach to history, the New Testament writings cannot be understood properly if one now looks back on them from the end of the process of canonization as sacred books, and prizes them as constituent parts of the celestial charter of salvation, with all the attendant characteristics. We have long since become accustomed to understanding them in terms of their own time—the gospels as more or less successful attempts to relate the life of Jesus; the Pauline letters as occasional writings, connected with specific and unrepeatable situations, and having spatial as well as temporal limitations to their sphere of authority. We must also approach the “heretics” in the same way. We need to understand them also in terms of their own time, and not to evaluate them by means of ecclesiastical doctrine which was developing, or which later became a ready-made norm.

We can determine adequately the significance the “heretics” possessed for nascent and developing Christianity only when we, insofar as it is possible, place ourselves back into the period in which they went about their business, and without hesitation cast all our preconceived ideas aside. We must remain open to all possibilities. What constitutes “truth” in one generation can be out of date in the next—through progress, but also through retrogression into an earlier position. The actual situation in this region may not obtain in that one, and indeed, may never have had general currency.

Perhaps—I repeat, perhaps—certain manifestations of Christian life that the authors of the church renounce as “heresies” originally had not been such at all, but, at least here and there, were the only form of the new religion—that is, for those regions they were simply “Christianity.” The possibility also exists that their adherents constituted the majority, and that they looked down with hatred and scorn on the orthodox, who for them were the false believers. I do not say this in order to introduce some special use of language for the investigations which follow, so that “orthodoxy” designates the preference of the given majority, while “heresy” is characterized by the fact that only the minority adhere to it. Majority and minority can change places and then such a use of language, which would be able to represent this change only with difficulty, would easily lead to obscurities and misunderstandings. No, even in this book, “orthodoxy” and “heresy” will refer to what one customarily and [3] usually understands them to mean. There is only this proviso, that we will not hear the two of them discussed by the church—that is, by the one party—but by history.

In order to exclude from the outset all modern impressions and judgments, I will proceed from the view concerning the heretics and their doctrines which was cherished already in the second century by the ancient church, and will test its defensibility in hopes of discovering, by means of such a critical procedure, a route to the goal. The ecclesiastical position includes roughly the following main points:

1. Jesus reveals the pure doctrine to his apostles, partly before his death, and partly in the forty days before his ascension.

2. After Jesus’ final departure, the apostles apportion the world among themselves, and each takes the unadulterated gospel to the land which has been allotted him.

3. Even after the death of the disciples the gospel branches out further. But now obstacles to it spring up within Christianity itself. The devil cannot resist sowing weeds in the divine wheatfield—and he is successful at it. True Christians blinded by him abandon the pure doctrine. This development takes place in the following sequence: unbelief, right belief, wrong belief. There is scarcely the faintest notion anywhere that unbelief might be changed directly into what the church calls false belief. No, where there is heresy, orthodoxy must have preceded. For example, Origen puts it like this: “All heretics at first are believers; then later they swerve from the rule of faith.”

This view is so deeply rooted, and so widely held, that it applies even to such personalities as Mani, who is supposed to have been a presbyter of the church and a valiant warrior against both Jews and pagans, but then left the church because he took it as a personal offence that his students received such scanty recognition (see below, 39). In general, it is an opinion of orthodoxy that only impure motives drive the heretic from the church—and indeed, this must be so if

1. Commentary on the Song of Songs, 3 (to Cant. 2.8): omnes enim hereticorum primo ad credulatorum venire, et post hoc ab omnibus fidelibus et doctis venire declinant (ed. W. A. Baehrens, CCS 33 [1925]; ET by R. P. Lawson, ACW 25 [1957]). See also the fragment from Origen on Proverbs (to 2.16), ed. Lommatsch 13,228 (PG 13, 281f.). Tertullian speaks similarly at the end of Prescription against Heretics 36 in his analogy of the wild olive (or fig) tree (= heresy) which springs from a cultivated seed (= orthodox doctrine).
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the evil-one is at the bottom of it all. Already Hegesippus, who was in Rome around the year 160, asserts that after the martyr’s death of James the Just, Thebutis had begun to corrupt the church, which until then had been a pure virgin, [4] through false belief, because he had not succeeded James as the leader of the Jerusalem community (EH 4.22.4-6). We hear similar things about Valentinus (below, 39 n. 91, and 123), Marcion,² and Bardesanes (below, 38 f.).

(4) Of course, right belief is invincible. In spite of all the efforts of Satan and his instruments, it repels unbelief and false belief, and extends its victorious sway ever further.

Scholarship has not found it difficult to criticize these convictions. It knows that the ecclesiastical doctrine was not yet present with Jesus; likewise, that the twelve apostles by no means played the role assigned to them out of consideration for the purity and revealed nature of ecclesiastical dogma. Further, historical thinking that is worthy of this name refuses to employ here the correlatives “true” and “untrue,” “bad” and “good.” It is not easily convinced of the moral inferiority attributed to the heretics. It recognizes there the same embarrassed, and thus artificial, claim that emanated from Jewish Christianity when it asserted that Paul had sued for the hand of the high priest’s daughter and, when it was denied him, began to rage against Torah (Epiphanius Her. 30.16).

Sooner or later, however, a point is reached at which criticism begins to be productive. For my tastes, it all too easily submits to the ecclesiastical opinion as to what is early and late, original and dependent, essential and unimportant for the earliest history of Christianity. If my impression is correct, even today the overwhelmingly dominant view still is that for the period of Christian origins, ecclesiastical doctrine (of course, only as this pertains to a certain stage in its development) already represents what is primary, while heresies, on the other hand, somehow are a deviation from the genuine. I do not mean to say that this point of view must be false, but neither can I regard it as self-evident, or even as demonstrated and clearly established. Rather, we are confronted here with a problem that merits our attention.

In this way, the subject of my book is defined more precisely, and I am left free to bypass much else that also could be treated under

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the title I have selected. For example, I do not intend to present once again a description of the tenets of the ancient heresies, but I presuppose that they are well known, along with many other things. We live in a time that demands concise discussion, and repetition of what already has been presented in a suitable manner [5] should not be tolerated. Therefore, he who opens this book in hopes of finding therein a convenient synopsis of what fellow-scholars already have contributed to this or to that aspect of the theme will be disappointed.

As we turn to our task, the New Testament seems to be both too unproductive and too much disputed to be able to serve as a point of departure. The majority of its anti-heretical writings cannot be arranged with confidence either chronologically or geographically; nor can the more precise circumstances of their origin be determined with sufficient precision. It is advisable, therefore, first of all to interrogate other sources concerning the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy, so that, with the insights that may be gained there, we may try to determine the time and place of their origins. I have chosen to begin with Edessa and Egypt so as to obtain a glimpse into the emergence and the original condition of Christianity in regions other than those that the New Testament depicts as affected by this religion.

2. [Epiphanius Her. 42.1.8; see also Tertullian Prescription against Heretics 30 and Against Marcion 4.4, and the Edessene Chronicle 6 (below pp. 14 ff., 50).]
Edessa

After the breakup of the kingdom of Alexander the Great, Mesopotamia, including the region in which Edessa lay, came under the control of Seleucus I Nicator. He reorganized an extant settlement there, Osroë, by mixing the population with westerners who spoke Greek, and gave it the Macedonian name Edessa. In the second half of the second century B.C.E., as the Seleucid kingdom disintegrated in the wars with Parthia (145-129), insubordinate despoteseized power for themselves in Edessa and its environs (i.e., in the Osroëne), as was true elsewhere in Mesopotamia (Diodorus Exc. Escur. 25), at first under Parthian dominion. Thereafter, they came under the Armenian banner in the time of Tigranes, and then the Roman through Lucullus and Pompey. With the assassination of Caracalla, which occurred in Edessa in 217 C.E., the local dynasty finally came to an end, after various preliminary interludes, when the Osroëne was incorporated into the Roman Empire.

The Greek influence did not have a long or profound effect here. According to the Chronicle of Jacob of Edessa, who lived in the seventh century, the Greek part of the population was so greatly diminished already by the year 150 of the Seleucid era (= 133 B.C.E.)


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that they allowed the native population to have a king from their own midst. The rulers—strictly speaking, they were not kings but toparchs, even though the coins occasionally also call them [7] “king” (basileus) —even at that time bear predominantly Arabic or Aramaic names: ‘Abdu, Ma’anu, Bukr, Abgar, Wa’il. Moreover, the old Semitic designation of the city is revived at the expense of “Edessa”—it is called Urhai, modern Urfa (see below, n. 11). There is a corresponding lack of Greek inscriptions for the first centuries of the common era. The native princes use Syriac inscriptions on their coins, Roman gold pieces, which were in circulation in the area from the time of Marcus Aurelius, of course have Greek legends, as do the coins which name the emperor along with a local prince. Only Abgar IX (179-214), the Roman mission, prefers a Greek inscription even for himself alone. This represents only his own attitude, not the national orientation of his subjects.

When we ask how and when Christianity gained influence in this region, it is unnecessary to begin with a survey of the sources—which are in Syriac, Greek, and a few in Latin. Instead, for the sake of convenience, we will combine the information concerning the sources with the evaluation of them and with the collection of discernible data made possible thereby.

The story of King Abgar V Ukkama (= the Black), who ruled from 9-46 C.E., and his relationship to Jesus is well known. It is found in its oldest form in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History (= EH) 1.13, who first tells the story, then introduces the documentation, so as to return once again to the story. The king, who has heard of the miraculous healings performed by Jesus, appeals to him by letter, acknowledges his deity, and begs to be freed from the illness that afflicts him. At the same time, in view of the hostility of the Jews, he offers his own home city to Jesus as a safe dwelling place. Jesus answers

4. So Gutschmid and others such as F. Haase; but H. Leclercq, following M. Babelon, designates him as Abgar VIII—DACL 4 (1921): 2065 ff. (esp. 2065.7).
6. [See also Bauer’s treatment of this subject in Hennecke-Scheele, 1: 437 ff. On Edessa Christianity in general, see most recently J. B. Segal, Edessa: “The Blessed City” (Oxford and New York: University Press, 1970).]

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likewise in writing. He blesses the king for believing without having seen. He must decline the invitation, since he has to fulfill his calling and his earthly life in Palestine. But after his death and ascension a disciple will come who will heal the king and will bring life to him, as well as to his people. Then this actually took place. [8]

Eusebius makes the transition from his account (EH 1.13.14) to the verbatim reproduction of the two letters as follows (13.5): “There is also documentary evidence of these things, taken from the record office at Edessa, a city which at that time was still ruled by a king. For in the public documents there, which also contain the experiences of Abgar among other events of antiquity, these things have been found preserved from his time until the present. But there is nothing like listening to the letters themselves, which we have taken from the archives, and which translated literally from the Syriac are as follows.”

After reproducing the letters (13.6-10) Eusebius continues: “To these letters the following is appended, in Syriac” (13.11). There follows (13.12-21) the account of how after the ascension “Judas, who is also called Thomas” sends Thaddaeus, one of the seventy disciples, to Edessa. There he heals Abgar and many others, and is requested by the “toparch” (13.13; cf. also 13.6) to tell him about Jesus’ life and works. Thaddaeus declares his willingness, but he wants to do so on the following day before the entire populace. Thus all the citizens of the city are summoned (13.20). Still, nothing more is said about the projected apostolic sermon, but the account concludes with the statement: “These things took place in the year 340 [of the Seleucid era = 29/29 C.E.]” (13.22). Finally the whole thing ends with the words of Eusebius: “Let this useful story, translated literally from the Syriac, stand here in its proper place” (13.22).

The account of the conversion of Edessa, which we have just presented from Eusebius (EH 1.13; cf. 2.1.6-8), can in no way and to no extent be traced back as a report that is earlier than the beginning of the fourth century, when Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History originated. On the other hand, toward the end of that century or the beginning of the next, the report underwent further development, which reached a culmination of sorts in the so-called Doctrina Addai, a Syriac book which was written in Edessa around the year 400. [7] In it the material

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known from Eusebius reappears, albeit to a considerable measure expanded, among other things, by a detailed account of the activity of the apostolic emissary 8 in Edessa, who preaches, baptizes, and builds the first church. [9]

In surveying this information from the earliest history of Christian Edessa there naturally occurs to us what had been said above xxiii about the ecclesiastical way of thinking. The decisive role that is attributed to Jesus and his apostle is viewed quite ecclesiastically. Indeed, the stronger the ecclesiastical coloring is applied, the more powerfully does doubt assert itself as to the truth of what is stated. In this instance we are in the happy position of not having to investigate the doubts individually. In the twentieth century the conviction has quite generally prevailed that 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.

That the latter is legitimate is at present the almost universally acknowledged scholarly view. Thus one may point, for example, to the figure of Tobias, who according to Eusebius, lives in Edessa and mediates the contact between Thaddeus and Abgar (EH 1.13.11 and 13). From this, one could deduce the historical fact that Christianity in Edessa had ties to Judaism there. Still, this conclusion is quite tenacious in view of the fact that Eusebius says nothing at all about the Judaism of Tobias, but it is left to the reader to draw from the name itself the necessary conclusion as a basis for all the rest.

Much more significant is the wide currency gained, especially through the work of the historian A. von Gutschmid, by the view that it was not Abgar V, the contemporary of Jesus, but in fact a later prince by the same name—Abgar IX (179-214)—who first turned Christian and thereby helped this religion to erupt. 9 Nevertheless, the

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8. Here he is called Addai, not Thaddeus as in Eusebius.
9. Gutschmid, Osröene, pp. 1 ff. [See also, e.g. H. Lietzmann, A History of the Early Church in 4 vols. (ET by B. L. Woolf from the 1933-44 German; London: Lutterworth, 1937-53; reprint New York: Meridian paperback, 1961), 2: 260 (=German p. 266), in conscious disagreement with Bauer. (The date 250 in the ET is a typographical error for 260.)]

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grounds for accepting a conversion of this later Abgar appear to me to be overrated, while the counterarguments are not given enough consideration. [10] We must still give serious attention to the fact that without exception the ancient authors who speak of a Christian King Abgar of Edessa mean that one with whom Jesus is supposed to have been in correspondence. The possibility of this ninth Abgar has been uncovered by modern scholarship only as a substitute for the conversion of the fifth Abgar, which at present no one can seriously accept any longer.

The only support for the modern view is, after all, a passage from the Book of the Laws of the Countries, one of the oldest monuments of original Syriac prose, a product of the school of Bar Daïan (whom the Greeks call Barbedes), from the beginning of the third century. Chapter 45 reads: "In Syria and in Urhâ 11 the men used to castrate themselves in honor of Tanatha. But when King Abgar became a believer, he commanded that anyone who emasculated himself should have a hand cut off. And from that day to the present no one in Urhâ emasculates himself anymore." 12 Thus we have reference to a Christian King Abgar by an Edessene author at the beginning of the third century. Since, on the basis of what is known, Abgar V does not qualify, one may now think of the ninth Abgar, who probably would have been an early contemporary of that author.

But does a person use the expression "from this day down to mine" to speak of his contemporary? Is not one who speaks in this way looking back to a personality who lived much earlier? But this observation, which serves to shake the opinion that the text refers to Abgar IX, by no means leads to the view that one must now refer it to Abgar V and suppose that the Abgar legend already existed in some form at the time when the Book of the Laws of the Countries was written. For that book really offers no guarantee for the presence

10. H. Gomperz opposes the idea that Abgar IX was converted to Christianity in an essay "Hat es jemals in Edessa christliche König gegeben?" in the Archäologisch-epigraphischen Mitteilungen aus Österreich-Ungarn, 9 (1890): 154-157. Also sceptical is F. Haase, Alchtristische Kirchengeschichte nach orientalischem Quellen (Leipzig, 1925), pp. 84 ff.
11. Urhâ is the Aramaic name of the city called Edessa by the Macedonians. The old name later regained its prevalence and still is reflected in the modern name Urfa (see above, 2). [Greek text Eusebius Pr. Comp. 8.10 10 reads Osröene.]
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of Christianity within the Edessene royal household, be it earlier or later. The Syriac text from which we have proceeded can not be trusted. The earliest witness for the text of that [11] ancient Syriac writing under consideration is not a codex in that language, but is Eusebius, who has copied the Book of the Laws in his Preparation for the Gospel 6.10. When he comes to speak of the customs in Edessa, he is in close enough agreement, for the most part, with the Syriac text; but the explanation referring to the faith of the king—that is, the words “when he became a believer” in the passage cited above— cannot be found in Eusebius (6.10.44). But since he knew of a King Abgar of Edessa who had become a believer, as is clear from the Ecclesiastical History (see above, 2 f.), and since he had absolutely no reason to eliminate the words which would have been helpful to the Christian cause, the only remaining conclusion is that he did not find them in his source; and the Syriac text doubtless is indebted for them, as an appended postscript, to someone who knew the Abgar legend. If this sort of person heard of such a measure taken by a King Abgar, a measure which from his point of view must have seemed directed against paganism, to what else could he attribute it than the Christian faith of the famous prince Abgar? Actually, the decisive stand of an ancient ruler against castration requires no Christian motivation. From the time of Domitian, the pagan emperors proceeded with ever sharper measures against this offense. 13

The rest of what is adduced in support of a Christian king of Edessa appears to me to be entirely without importance. The Christian Sextus Julius Africanus, who around the year 200 spent some time at the Edessene royal court, once refers to his contemporary Abgar as “a holy person.” 14 This is not to be exploited as a Christian confession, and is understood quite correctly by Eusebius in his Chronicle for the year 2235 of Abraham (probably 218 C.E.), when he says: [12] “Abgar, a distinguished man, ruled over Urha, as Africanus relates.” Also from Africanus derives the report of Epiphanius, who, in the description of the heresy of Bardanes, he characterizes the contemporary Edessene ruler Abgar as a “most pious and reasonable person” (anq̢̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃̃
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this point of view also, the Christianity of her royal spouse is rendered somewhat doubtful.

Finally, it is to be remembered that Dio Cassius tells of the extraordinary cruelty of this very Abgar. Thus at least in his case, the Christian faith cannot have had a very deep effect.

The purpose of this criticism is to contest the assumption that the presence of a Christian prince and of a state church for Edessa around the year 200 is in any way assured. But also, apart from the problem of the ruler, the existence of ecclesiastically organized Christianity in Edessa at this time cannot be asserted with any confidence, no matter how frequently and from what impressive quarters this is constantly repeated. If we examine the sources for the earliest history of Christianity in Edessa, it will appear to us that in his Ecclesiastical History, which went through four editions in the years 311/12 to 324/25, Eusebius ought to be able to give us the best information. The learned bishop even lived in Palestine, not excessively distant from the region with which we are concerned, and he also understood Syriac, the language spoken there. But an investigation of what the “father of church history” knows, or at least communicates, concerning the situation in the Mesopotamian neighborhood before and during his epoch—apart from the impossible Abgar story—discloses a result that is disturbing for its poverty. I enumerate:

a) EH 4.2.5: Trajan has cleared Mesopotamia of the Jews. Eusebius knows this from the Greek historians who tell of Trajan’s reign.

b) EH 7.5.2: A letter of Dionysius of Alexandria to the Roman bishop Stephen (235-257) is quoted, in which, among the Oriental churches which earlier were divided and now are united, there are also listed quite summarily “Mesopotamia, and Pontus and Bithynia” (Mesopotamia Pontos te kai Bithynia).

c) EH 9.1.2.1: Under Diocletian the Christians in Mesopotamia, in contrast to other provinces, were hung by the feet over a slow fire.

There is nothing much of significance there. But up to this point we still have not examined [14] the passage that always is adduced in order to prove that already in the second century there must have been ecclesiastically organized Christianity of a not-inconsiderable size in Mesopotamia.


d) EH 5.23.4: At the time of the Roman bishop Victor (189-99), gatherings of bishops took place everywhere on the matter of the Easter controversy, and Eusebius still knows of letters in which the church leaders have set down their opinion. In this connection, the following localities are enumerated: Palestine, Rome, Pontus, Gaul, and then the “Osroene and the cities there.” The phrase “and the cities there” is as unusual as it is superfluous. Where else are the Osroene bishops supposed to have been situated except in the “cities there”? But what speaks even more decisively against these words than this sort of observation is the fact that the earliest witness for the text of Eusebius, the Latin translation of Rufinus, does not contain the words “as well as from those in the Osroene and the cities there.” This cannot be due to tampering with the text by the Italian translator, for whom eastern matters are of no great concern. In those books with which he has supplemented Eusebius’ History, Rufinus mentions Mesopotamia and Edessa several times (11.5 and 8 at the end; see below, n. 24). Thus the only remaining possibility is that in his copy of EH 5.23.4 he found no reference to the Osroene, but that we are dealing here with a grammatically awkward interpolation by a later person who noted the omission of Edessa and its environs.

The author of the Ecclesiastical History is not well informed about Mesopotamia; this verdict may be rendered without apology. He does mention Julius Africanus and makes excerpts from his Chronicle, but without mentioning Mesopotamia or Edessa on such occasions. For him, Bardesanes belongs quite generally to the “land of the two rivers”; he has not learned anything more specific about him (EH 4.30.1). And by his own admission, it is only by hearsay that he is acquainted with the gospel in use by the Christians of that area in his own time, the so-called Diatessaron (4.29.6). This indicates to me that ecclesiastical Christianity cannot have been flourishing in Mesopotamia at that time, at least not in a form congenial to Eusebius. Apparently, he never felt the temptation to examine these areas in person, and he was able to secure only a few literary items of information about them. [15]

And for this reason alone he could fall victim to a forgery like the Jesus-Abgar correspondence. What then is the situation? Eusebius