The Story Concerning the King of Edessa

Documents of the Church of Edessa (2nd–5th century)

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Ancient Syriac Documents Relating to the Earliest Establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the Neighbouring Countries. From the History of the Church. The Story Concerning the King of Edessa. Now the story relating to Thaddæus was on this wise:— While the Godhead of our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ was proclaimed among all men by reason of the astonishing mighty-works which He wrought, and myriads, even from countries remote from the land of Judæa, who were afflicted with sicknesses and diseases of every kind, were coming to Him in the hope of being healed, King Abgar also, who was renowned among the nations on the east of the Euphrates for his valour, had his body wasting away with a grievous disease, such as there is no cure for among men. And when he heard and was informed of the name of Jesus, and about the mighty works which He did,—for every one alike bore witness concerning Him,—he sent a letter of request by a man belonging to him, and besought Him to come and heal him of his disease.

But our Saviour at the time that he asked Him did not comply with his request. Yet He deigned to give him a letter in reply: for He promised him that He would send one of His disciples, and heal his sicknesses, and give salvation to him and to all who were connected with him. Nor did He delay to fulfil His promise to him: but after He was risen from the place of the dead, and was received into heaven, Thomas the apostle, one of the twelve, as by an impulse from God, sent Thaddæus, who was himself also numbered among the seventy disciples of Christ, to Edessa, to be a preacher and proclaimer of the teaching of Christ; and the promise of Christ was through him fulfilled. Thou hast in writing the evidence of these things, which is taken from the Book of Records which was at Edessa: for at that time the kingdom was still standing. In the documents, then, which were there, in which was contained whatever was done by those of old down to the time of Abgar, these things also are found preserved down to the present hour. There is, however, nothing to prevent our hearing the very letters themselves, which have been taken by us from the archives, and are in words to this effect, translated from Aramaic into Greek.

Copy of the letter which was written by King Abgar to Jesus, and sent to Him by the hand of Hananias, the Tabularius, to Jerusalem:— “Abgar the Black, sovereign of the country,

to Jesus, the good Saviour, who has appeared in the country of Jerusalem: Peace. I have heard about Thee, and about the healing which is wrought by Thy hands without drugs and roots. For, as it is reported, Thou makest the blind to see, and the lame to walk; and Thou cleansest the lepers, and Thou castest out unclean spirits and demons, and Thou healest those who are tormented with lingering diseases, and Thou raisest the dead. And when I heard all these things about Thee, I settled in my mind one of two things: either that Thou art God, who hast come down from heaven, and doest these things or that Thou art the Son of God, and doest these things. On this account, therefore, I have written to beg of Thee that Thou wouldest weary Thyself to come to me, and heal this disease which I have. For I have also heard that the Jews murmur against Thee, and wish to do Thee harm. But I have a city, small and beautiful, which is sufficient for two."

Copy of those things which were written by Jesus by the hand of Hananias, the Tabularius, to Abgar, sovereign of the country:— "Blessed is he that hath believed in me, not having seen me. For it is written concerning me, that those who see me will not believe in me, and that those will believe who have not seen me, and will be saved. But touching that which thou hast written to me, that I should come to thee—it is meet that I should finish here all that for the sake of which I have been sent and, after I have finished it, then I shall be taken up to Him that sent me; and, when I have been taken up, I will send to thee one of my disciples, that he may heal thy disease, and give salvation to thee and to those who are with thee." To these letters, moreover, is appended the following also in the Aramaic tongue:—

"After Jesus was ascended, Judas Thomas sent to him Thaddæus the apostle, one of the Seventy. And, when he was come, he lodged with Tobias, son of Tobias. And, when the news about him was heard, they made it known to Abgar: "The apostle of Jesus is come hither, as He sent thee word." Thaddæus, moreover, began to heal every disease and sickness by the power of God, so that all men were amazed. And, when Abgar heard the great and marvellous cures which he wrought, he bethought himself that he was the person about whom Jesus had sent him word and said to him: When I have been taken up, I will send to thee one of my disciples, that he may heal thy disease. So he sent and called Tobias, with whom he was lodging, and said to him: I have heard that a mighty man has come, and has entered in and taken up his lodging in thy house: bring him up, therefore, to me. And when Tobias came to Thaddæus he said to him: Abgar the king has sent and called me, and commanded me to bring thee up to him, that thou mayest heal him. And Thaddæus said: I will go up, because to him have I been sent with power. Tobias therefore rose up early the next day, and took Thaddæus, and came to Abgar.

"Now, when they were come up, his princes happened to be standing there. And immediately, as he was entering in, a great vision appeared to Abgar on the countenance of Thaddæus the apostle. And, when Abgar saw Thaddæus, he prostrated himself before him. And astonishment seized upon all who were standing there: for they had not themselves seen that vision, which appeared to Abgar alone. And he proceeded to ask Thaddæus: Art thou in truth the disciple of Jesus the Son of God, who said to me, I will send to thee one of my

disciples, that he may heal thee and give thee salvation? And Thaddæus answered and said: Because thou hast mightily believed on Him that sent me, therefore have I been sent to thee; and again, if thou shalt believe on Him, thou shalt have the requests of thy heart. And Abgar said to him: In such wise have I believed on Him, that I have even desired to take an army and extirpate those Jews who crucified Him; were it not that I was restrained by reason of the dominion of the Romans. And Thaddæus said: Our Lord has fulfilled the will of His Father; and, having fulfilled it, has been taken up to His Father. Abgar said to him: I too have believed in Him and in His Father. And Thaddæus said: Therefore do I lay my hand upon thee in His name. And when he had done this, immediately he was healed of his sickness and of the disease which he had.

And Abgar marvelled, because, like as he had heard concerning Jesus, so he saw in deeds by the hand of Thaddæus His disciple: since without drugs and roots he healed him; and not him only, but also Abdu, son of Abdu, who had the gout: for he too went in, and fell at his feet, and when he prayed over him he was healed. And many other people of their city did he heal, and he did great works, and preached the word of God.

"After these things Abgar said to him: Thou, Thaddæus, doest these things by the power of God; we also marvel at them. But in addition to all these things I beg of thee to relate to me the story about the coming of Christ, and in what manner it was; and about His power, and by what power He wrought those things of which I have heard. "And Thaddæus said: For the present I will be silent; but, because I have been sent to preach the word of God, assemble me tomorrow all the people of thy city, and I will preach before them, and sow amongst them the word of life; and will tell them about the coming of Christ, how it took place; and about His mission, for what purpose he was sent by His Father; and about His power and His deeds, and about the mysteries which He spake in the world, and by what power He wrought these things, and about His new preaching, and about His abasement and His humiliation, and how He humbled and emptied and abased Himself, and was crucified, and descended to Hades, and broke through the enclosure which had never been broken through before, and raised up the dead, and descended alone, and ascended with a great multitude to His Father.

"Abgar, therefore, commanded that in the morning all the people of his city should assemble, and hear the preaching of Thaddæus. And afterwards he commanded gold and silver to be given to him; but he received it not, and said: If we have forsaken that which was our own, how shall we accept that of others?" These things were done in the year 340. In order, moreover, that these things may not have been translated to no purpose word for word from the Aramaic into Greek, they are placed in their order of time here. Here endeth the first book.

Source. English translation from the ***Ante-Nicene Fathers*** (edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe; New York, 1885–1896; public domain), trans-

lated by Benjamin Plummer Pratten, as transcribed by volunteers of English Wikisource. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Footnotes are left out. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it, and no modern English version has been made.

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