

# THE POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF THE ABGAR-ADD AI LEGEND:

## ABGAR THE BLACK AND EMPEROR TIBERIUS

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### ABSTRACT

*The Syriac Doctrina Addai, a historical novel, tells the story of the first evangelization of Edessa by the apostle Addai. He was sent to Edessa by Thomas, one of the Twelve, healed Abgar, the king, and other people, and preached the Gospel before all the inhabitants. The result was the conversion of both the king and all the Edessan people to Christianity. In the narrative frame, two exchanges of letters are included, one between Abgar and Jesus, a blatant forgery, and another, much shorter, between Abgar and Tiberius. The latter, also present in the Armenian version of the legend preserved by Moses of Chorene, contains interesting historical details. They perfectly fit in the historical situation of the mid-Thirties of the first century CE, when Tiberius was engaging in clever maneuvers in the Near East against the Parthians, as I demonstrated some years ago. The Abgar-Tiberius correspondence did not come down through the same tradition as the spurious Abgar-Jesus correspondence, and its source was early enough to be well-informed about the details of Tiberius's reign. This correspondence, as I shall argue here, may derive from a historical exchange, dictated by political—and not religious—motives, from which the legend of Abgar's conversion arose later on,*

*probably in the Severan age. At that time the Addai legend may have been first written down in a literary work, which will be the source of the first extant account of the Addai-Abgar story: that of Eusebius (early fourth century CE).*

I have thoroughly argued elsewhere<sup>1</sup> that the first extant account of the Abgar-Addai legend, that of Eusebius, is a composite of two or three layers. One of these contains the fictitious correspondence between Abgar and Jesus and—according to Eusebius—derives from a Syriac writing which was kept in the Edessan archives;<sup>2</sup> another layer, concerning Abgar the Black, betrays a highly encomiastic and probably local (Edessan) source.<sup>3</sup> If this source—as many clues, Moses of Chorene, and Barhebraeus suggest—was Bardaisan’s historical work on the Near East, it aimed at exalting—and perhaps defending—Abgar the Great, Bardaisan’s friend and king, by celebrating his predecessor the Black, allegedly the first Christian king of Edessa. If Bardaisan spread the Abgar-Addai legend, it is well understandable that by the time of the composition of the *Doctrina Addai* the newly established Edessan orthodoxy, whose views the *Doctrina* reflects, had become uncomfortable with the association of a “heretic” with the apostle

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<sup>1</sup> “The Earliest Representations of the Apostle Addai,” lecture at the 2010 SBL Annual Meeting, Syriac Literature, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> According to Andrew Carriker, *The Library of Eusebius of Caesarea* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 179-180, Eusebius is unlikely to have translated this material from the Syriac himself; it was one of his collaborators who translated the text, “perhaps even at Edessa, where the translator found the document.” Sebastian Brock, “Eusebius and Syriac Christianity,” in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), admits as a possibility that the Syriac text that is the source of Eusebius was composed several decades before 300 CE.

<sup>3</sup> R. Peppermüller, “Griechische Papyrusfragmente der *Doctrina Addai*” (*Vigiliae Christianae* 25 [1971]), 289-301 thinks that there may have been a version of the *Doctrina Addai* in Greek before Eusebius. I suspect that, if there was anything such, it was the Greek version of Bardaisan’s work on the Near East, since all works by him were soon translated into Greek by his disciples. It is probably the text from which Eusebius drew the first section of his Abgar-Addai account.

of Edessa. Hence the *Doctrina*'s insistence on Addai's *ante litteram* "orthodoxy."

But the legend of Abgar the Black's conversion to Christianity, which took literary form with Bardaisan—or, anyway, Eusebius's source—may have developed from a historical correspondence of this king: not that with Jesus, which is fictional, but that with the Roman emperor Tiberius, *concerning* Jesus. This correspondence, which originally had nothing to do with Abgar's supposed conversion, has left traces in the *Doctrina Addai*, Moses of Chorene, and in some Syriac *Transitus Mariae*.<sup>4</sup> Abgar wrote to Tiberius about Jesus' condemnation to death by Pilate and some Jews, not because he had "converted to Christianity"—as the legend goes, which arose perhaps in the Severan age—and still less out of "anti-Semitism," but for *political* interests, as I will argue. Eusebius reports the forged Abgar-Jesus correspondence, but not the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence, which indicates that the source of the latter is different from that of the former (i.e. the Edessan archival lore which was later incorporated in the *Doctrina* as well). The Abgar-Tiberius correspondence is an independent nugget within the rest of the *Doctrina*, and its source must be ancient, since the letters include exact details perfectly fitting the political landscape of the mid Thirties of the first century, when the emperor was maneuvering against the Parthians.<sup>5</sup> This was few years after Jesus' death and just upon the re-establishment of Abgar after a usurpation. Abgar needed Tiberius' support against his opponents. And Tiberius needed the allegiance of kings of vassal states close to Parthia (Tac. *Ann.* 6.31-37; 41-44<sup>6</sup>) such as Abgar, as he was occupied with plans against

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<sup>4</sup> These sources ought to be added to those studied by Edward Champlin, "Tiberius the wise" (*Historia* 57 [2008]), 408-425, which portrait Tiberius as the champion of the people against oppression by his own governors, the senate, and private citizens, a wise, pious and just ruler. On traditions of *Transitus Mariae* see now Simon Claude Mimouni, *Les traditions anciennes sur la Dormition et l'Assomption de Marie* (Leiden: Brill 2011).

<sup>5</sup> This is demonstrated by Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, *Possible Historical Traces in the Doctrina Addai?* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Manfred Baar, *Das Bild des Kaisers Tiberius bei Tacitus, Sueton und Cassius Dio* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1990).

the Parthians.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely what emerges from the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence.

Abgar in his letter to Tiberius ascribes to some Jews the responsibility for Jesus' execution. He could not act directly against those responsible, so he wrote to Tiberius, calling him his "lord," as a vassal king, and reporting Jesus' death and the darkness and earthquake that accompanied it.<sup>8</sup> Abgar was aware that Tiberius had already been informed,<sup>9</sup> probably by a report of Pilate's to him concerning Jesus, his condemnation, and his followers. Justin and Tertullian knew such a report,<sup>10</sup> which is also similar to what Josephus recorded in his *Testimonium* on Jesus. Tiberius, probably from Pilate, learnt of the condemnation of Jesus and those responsible for it: Caiaphas and Pilate (this has nothing to do with his "anti-Semitism"<sup>11</sup>). In his reply, he is pleased with Abgar's

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<sup>7</sup> On Tiberius' foreign policy see at least Wolfgang Orth, *Die Provinzialpolitik des Tiberius* (München: Dissertationsdruck Novotny, 1970); Barbara Levick, *Tiberius the politician* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976); David Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar* (London: Routledge, 1992); Robin Seager, *Tiberius* (2nd ed.; Malden: Blackwell, 2005); Ilaria Ramelli, "Edessa e i Romani tra Augusto e i Severi: aspetti del regno di Abgar V e di Abgar IX" (*Aevum* 73 [1999]), 107-143; ead., "Abgar Ukkama e Abgar il Grande alla luce di recenti apporti storiografici" (*Aevum* 78 [2004]), 103-108.

<sup>8</sup> These were registered by the first-century non-Christian Phlegon, *Chron.* XIII/XIV.

<sup>9</sup> "Although nothing is unknown to your majesty."

<sup>10</sup> On this report see Ilaria Ramelli, "Bardesane, l'apologia siriana 'di Melitone' e la *Doctrina Addai*," *Aevum* 83 (2009), 141-68.

<sup>11</sup> On Tiberius' attitude toward "the Jews" see at least Erich Gruen, "The Emperor Tiberius and the Jews," in *Laurea internationalis. Festschrift Jochen Bleicken*, ed. Theodora Hantos (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2003), 298-312: the murder of Germanicus was the cause of the persecution, not only of the Jews, but also of other Eastern cults, and served as an appeasement of the public opinion. Tiberius was not eager for this, but saw its usefulness. Gerhard Baudy, "Das Evangelium des Thamus und der Tod des 'grossen Pan': ein Zeugnis romfeindlicher Apokalyptik aus der Zeit des Kaisers Tiberius?" (*ZAC* 4 [2000]), 13-48, interprets the story in Plutarch *Def. or.* 17 (*Mor.* 419BE) concerning a certain Thamus who brought to Rome the news of the death of the great Pan as a reference to the prophecy of the death of Tiberius. Baudy sees this as one of several oracles which came from Jewish opposition to Rome, which desired the death of the emperor and the fall of Rome. The Thamus oracle might stem from Jewish-Christian groups who identified Thammuz with the risen Jesus.

allegiance<sup>12</sup> and confirms that Pilate informed his governor Albinus and he has just deposed Pilate, for having allowed the execution of a man who was worthy of veneration.<sup>13</sup> Indeed Lucius Vitellius, Tiberius' *legatus*, deposed Pilate by order of Tiberius (Josephus *AI* 18.89-90, 122). Tiberius also promises to "take legal steps against those who acted against the law"—indeed, through Vitellius, Tiberius deposed Caiaphas (Jos. *AI* 18.4.3)—but only after settling "the war with the 'children of Spain,'" and expresses again satisfaction at Abgar's "loyalty to me, and the covenant of faithfulness, yours and of your forefathers." From these letters, the author of the *Doctrina* picked up at least three elements—Abgar's loyalty to Tiberius, the "children of Spain," and the punishment of those responsible for the death of Jesus<sup>14</sup>—that are absent from Eusebius' narrative, and referred to them in other passages of the *Doctrina*. Eusebius lacks these elements because he didn't incorporate the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence in his account.

Abgar actually needed to display his loyalty to the emperor, also because he had just participated in the war between Aretas IV of Nabatea and Herod Antipas, as an ally of Aretas (Moses of Chorene *PH* 2.29.103),<sup>15</sup> between 29 CE and 35/36 CE, the time of the correspondence (*ibidem* 2.34). The war continued until 34 CE

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<sup>12</sup> "I received the letter of your loyalty to me, and it was read before me."

<sup>13</sup> Lucius Vitellius may have had Albinus as *cognomen*; or else Albinus is a reminiscence of procurator Lucceius Albinus, who governed Palestine and is associated to Vitellius (the emperor, son of Lucius Vitellius) by Tacitus, *Hist.* 2,58-59: after Albinus' death his province passed to Vitellius. Lucceius Albinus, at the very beginning of his procuratorship, deposed Ananus, the High Priest, who in 62 CE had James, the head of the Christian community in Jerusalem, stoned to death (Jos. *AI* 20,9,1). This may have produced a confusion with Albinus' predecessor who deposed Caiaphas, Ananus' predecessor. Both Caiaphas and Ananus were responsible for the illegal execution of Jesus and his "brother" James.

<sup>14</sup> In his first dialogue with Addai, Abgar professes his loyalty, and that of his forefathers, to the Roman emperor, the same as in his letter to Tiberius. Soon after the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence, it is declared that Tiberius settled the war that involved the "children of Spain" and punished "some Jewish leaders in Palestine" (see below).

<sup>15</sup> More on this in Ilaria Ramelli, "Aretas IV the Nabatean, Herod Antipas the Idumean, and Abgar Ukkama of Edessa," paper prepared for the ARAM conference on Edomites and Nabateans, Oxford July 2012, forthcoming. The historical sources on Abgar the Black are analyzed by Ramelli, "Edessa e i Romani."

(Jos. *AI* 18.109-150), and ended during Vitellius' mission in the Near East in 35-37 CE (*AI* 18.106): Vitellius gave up a punitive expedition against Aretas at Tiberius' death in 37 CE (*ibid.* 18.120-124). The war, with its possible negative consequences for Abgar as an ally of Aretas, was just before Abgar's epistolary exchange with Tiberius. At that time, according to Moses, Abgar's display of faithfulness was not believed by the Romans because Herod, Philip the Tetrarch, and Pilate were hostile to Abgar. Hence Abgar's appeal to Tiberius with emphasis on his own loyalty and an attempt to put Herod and Pilate in a bad light before the emperor. Abgar also states that, if he had marched against Palestine with his army, the Romans would have impeded him; in the light of his participation in Aretas' war against Herod, this statement makes even more sense. After tensions due to the Herod-Aretas war, Abgar's good relationship with Tiberius was probably favored by the prefect of Egypt, Flaccus, an intimate friend of both.<sup>16</sup> He was prefect in 32-38 CE during Vitellius' mission in the Near East and the Abgar-Tiberius exchange (35-37 CE).

A character that corresponds to Vitellius is absent from Eusebius' report, which omits the Abgar-Tiberius letters, but it is present in the *Doctrina* ("Albinus/Sabinus"), Moses ("Marinus"), and a *Transitus Mariae* ("Sabinus"), all documents that incorporate or echo the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence. This means that this Roman plenipotentiary was part, not of the Abgar-Jesus-Addai story, which focusses on Abgar's alleged conversion and includes the Abgar-Jesus forged letters, but of the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence, which reflects the political problems of the Near East in the years of Vitellius' mandate (Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.3ff.). Tiberius' *legatus Syriae* Lucius Vitellius (Albinus?) was certainly involved in the relationship between Abgar and the emperor.

The *legatus Syriae's* control over Palestine, as represented in the *Doctrina* and Moses—the sources that incorporate the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence<sup>17</sup>—reflects the historical reality of the age

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<sup>16</sup> This was suggested by Ramelli, "Edessa e i Romani," 128, and "Abgar Ukkama." Flaccus (known thanks to Philo's *In Flaccum*) was an intimate friend of Tiberius and obtained the government of Egypt, a possession of the emperor. Flaccus' friendship with Abgar is attested by the *Narratio de imagine Edessena*, 5, ascribed to Constantine Porphyrogenitus, which preserves very ancient material.

<sup>17</sup> Moses connects this correspondence to a 35-CE *senatus consultum* against Christianity, which the *Doctrina* does not mention. Moses' source is

of Tiberius, thus confirming that a very ancient and well-documented source is at the basis of the Abgar-Tiberius lore. Indeed, Palestine was under the *legatus Syriae* only before 70 CE. The source seems to go back to that epoch. The Abgar-Tiberius correspondence indeed derives from a source that was excellently informed about the details of Tiberius' Eastern politics around 35-37 CE. The mention of the "children of Spain" in Tiberius' letter, usually deemed an anachronism because interpreted as a reference to the Iberian Peninsula,<sup>18</sup> in fact confirms the accuracy and ancientness of the source of the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence. For the "children of Spain" are the Iberians of Caucasian Iberia (Georgia).<sup>19</sup> This further suggests that the Syriac letters incorporated in the *Doctrina* derive from Greek letters exchanged by Abgar and Tiberius. In Greek, Tiberius' letter had Ἰβηρες or Ἰσπανοί, which could refer to both the Western and the Caucasian Iberians; it was translated into Syriac "children of ܠܝܫܢܐ." This is a precise detail, which reflects the historical setting of the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence, because the Caucasian Iberians were used by Tiberius against the Parthians, precisely in 35-37 CE (Tac. *Ann.* 6.32-36), in the years of the Abgar-Tiberius letters. In that period Vitellius worked hard in Mesopotamia against Artabanus II, king of the Parthians, who also supported Arsaces, from whom Tiberius wanted to liberate Armenia (Tac. *Ann.* 6.31). Izates, king of Adiabene—who converted to a form of Judaism without circumcision (Jos. *AI* 20.2.4-5)—was a vassal of Artabanus, and interestingly was also an ally of Abgar the Black (Tac. *Ann.* 12.12-14), who thus proves to be deeply involved in the Eastern political

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Eusebius, but the latter didn't relate the *s.c.* with the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence, which he never reports. Moses relied on another source on the Abgar narrative, that is, Bardaisan's history of the Near East (*PH* 2.66). He might have drawn from here the connection between the Abgar-Tiberius exchange and the *s.c.* under Tiberius. Moses also read (*PH* 2.10) the historical work of Julius Africanus, who was directly acquainted with Bardaisan. Africanus dealt with Abgar the Great in his work; therefore, Moses may depend on him, too, for the link between the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence and the *s.c.* of 35 CE.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Sidney Griffith, "The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought in Edessa in the Fifth Century" (*Hugoye* 6/2 [2003]), §§ 1-46: 24.

<sup>19</sup> This was argued by Ramelli, *Possible Historical Traces*; new lexical analysis (Latin, Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian) in my "The Earliest."



scenario that worried Tiberius in those years. The emperor then used the Caucasian Iberian Mihrdat (*Mitbridates*) to conquer Armenia, reconciling him with his brother P'arsman (*Pharasmales*), king of the Caucasian Iberians (Tac. *Ann.* 6.32). Arsaces was killed deceptively and the Caucasian Iberians, who are mentioned in Tiberius' letter to Abgar, could thus occupy Armenia (Tac. *Ann.* 6.33). This mention of the Iberians in Tiberius' letter, in the context of the war, reflects a precise historical fact and reveals an ancient and reliable source. The Syriac redactor could not read Tacitus so to draw information from him; these exact historical details were already found in the original Greek correspondence between Abgar and Tiberius. Two other precise historical facts that are reflected in the correspondence are the depositions of Pilate and Caiaphas (Jos. *AI* 18.90-95).

In the Abgar-Tiberius epistolary correspondence those responsible for the execution of Jesus are identified with some Jews, but also with Pilate, the Roman governor, whose deposition by Tiberius is contemplated in these letters and their immediate context. In Abgar's letter ܠܝܫܘܐ does not necessarily imply an inclusive meaning, but can be read as follows: "some Jews who are under your [*sc.* Tiberius'] hand and live in the land of Palestine have gathered together/conspired and had the Messiah crucified," etc. The very notion of a plot implies a restricted number of people and fits very well Caiaphas and his party, and not all the Jews. At the end of his letter, Abgar invites the emperor to take steps, not necessarily "against the people of the Jews, who have done these things," in a general sense, but rather "against that conventicle/lobby/group [ܡܬܠܐ] of Jews that has done these things." One should also bear in mind that here the Syriac translates an original Greek. In his reply, similarly, Tiberius can be understood to say: "regarding what some Jews have had the audacity to do with the cross." And even more certainly, shortly after he says that he is ready to legally proceed against "those Jews who have not acted according to the law." This clearly refers, not to "the Jews" as a whole, but to those who plotted against Jesus. The very content of the letter confirms this restricted meaning, since Tiberius does not state that he intends to destroy the whole people, but that he intends to proceed legally and put to trial those responsible for acting illegally. Tiberius expresses this intention immediately after confirming that he had Pilate deposed, and seems to allude rather clearly to the deposition



of Caiaphas and some of his party as well. In the *Doctrina Addai*, soon after the quotation of Tiberius' letter, it is remarked that indeed, after the war that involved the Iberians, Tiberius "sent and put to death *some of the leaders* of the Jews [ܡܠܚܝܬܐ ܕܝܗܘܕܐܝܬܐ] who were in Palestine." Here it is very clear that, far from taking any action against the whole people, the emperor, through an agent, singled out those responsible for illegal deeds, which refers to the deposition of Caiaphas and some leader of his party. This corresponds to what Vitellius actually did by order of Tiberius, albeit the narrative speaks of execution rather than deposition. This is due to the narrative emphasis, but remarkably it is absent from Tiberius' letter, which speaks, not of executions, but of taking legal steps against those who acted illegally. This is what happened historically.

In the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence, the responsibility for the execution of Jesus is ascribed to both Pilate and some Jewish leaders of Caiaphas' party. This is very different from what is found in the rest of the *Doctrina Addai*—including the fictional Abgar-Jesus correspondence<sup>20</sup>—where "the Jews" in general are presented as responsible for the death of Jesus,<sup>21</sup> and at the same time Pilate is never held responsible for this or blamed in any way. The attitude of the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence is similar, not to the rest of the late *Doctrina*, but to several first-century documents that deal with the death of Jesus and were composed shortly after 35-36 CE, the time of the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence: the letter of Mara Bar Serapion to his son, Josephus' *Antiquitates Iudaicae*, and the canonical Acts of the Apostles. All stem from the last four decades of the first century or—at the latest—the very beginning of the second, and come from different religious backgrounds: Mara was a "pagan," Josephus a Jew, and the author of Acts a Christian. In Acts 2:22-23, Peter in a public speech in Jerusalem set in 30 CE,

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<sup>20</sup> Abgar's purported letter to Jesus highlights the will of "the Jews" to liquidate Jesus. Abgar in this letter does not even mention Pilate's or the Romans' responsibility, but invites Jesus to come to Edessa as a safe haven, far from "the Jews."

<sup>21</sup> For instance, when the apostle Addai has converted Abgar the Black and delivers a doctrinal speech before all the people of Edessa, he proclaims that Christ "is the God of the Jews, who crucified him." This is a general statement. "The Jews" as a whole in the *Doctrina* are more than once described as "crucifiers."

soon after Jesus' death and resurrection, ascribes the responsibility for Jesus' execution to both Pilate and the Jews.<sup>22</sup> The joint responsibility of Pilate and, more specifically, *some* Jews among the leaders—exactly as in the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence—is found again in Josephus: “Pilate condemned him [*sc.* Jesus] to the cross after the denunciation of our leaders.”<sup>23</sup> Probably shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, Mara bar Serapion, a Syriac upper-class Stoic,<sup>24</sup> ascribed the responsibility of the execution of Jesus, “the wise king of the Jews,” to the Jews, because he intended to read this episode against the backdrop of a *topos*: that of the unjust murder of philosophers (Socrates, Pythagoras, and Jesus), whose killers—whole peoples in all cases, and not only in the case of the Jews, so that “anti-Semitism” must be ruled out—are punished by God (“the Athenians” suffered famine and plague, “the Samians” were submerged by the sea, and “the Jews” lost their kingdom and were dispersed), but who survived in their intellectual and spiritual heritage (Socrates in Plato’s dialogues, Pythagoras in the statue of Hera, and Jesus in his new laws). Mara, as a prisoner of the Romans, knew that his letter

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<sup>22</sup> “Men of Israel [...] you had him nailed to a cross by means of impious people [*sc.* Pilate and the Romans] and had him killed.”

<sup>23</sup> Ilaria Ramelli, “Alcune osservazioni circa il *Testimonium Flavianum*” (*Sileno* 24 [1998]), 219-235, argues for the partial authenticity of the *Testimonium Flavianum*. Ulrich Victor, “Das *Testimonium Flavianum*: Ein authentischer Text des Josephus” (*Novum Testamentum* 52 [2010]), 72-82, argues for the total authenticity on the basis of religious historical considerations. Further arguments in Ilaria Ramelli, “Jesus, James the Just, a Gate, and an Epigraph,” in *Kein Jota und kein Häkchen des Gesetzes werden vergeben* (vgl. *Q* 16,17). *Das Gesetzesverständnis der Logienquelle auf dem Hintergrund frühjüdischer Theologie*, ed. Markus Tiwald (BWANT 200; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2013), 203-229.

<sup>24</sup> On Mara’s letter see Ilaria Ramelli, “Gesù tra i sapienti greci perseguitati ingiustamente in un antico documento filosofico pagano di lingua siriana” (*Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica* 97 [2005]), 545-570; eadem, *Stoici Romani Minori* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), 2555-2598; ead., “Mara Bar Serapion’s Letter: Comments on the Syriac Edition, Translation, and Notes by David Rensberger”, in *Mara bar Serapion in Context*, eds. Annette Merz–Teun Tieleman (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East, 58; Leiden, Brill, 2012), 205-231; Annette Merz–David Rensberger–Teun Tieleman, *The Letter of Mara Bar Serapion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming); David Rensberger, “The Letter of Mara Bar Serapion,” lecture at the Syriac Symposium, Duke University, June 2011, forthcoming.

would be read by the Romans; therefore, he wanted to display a pro-Roman attitude. This is why he expresses his confidence that the Romans will free his fellow-citizens of Samosata, and did not mention any Roman authority in connection with the execution of Jesus; this mention, moreover, would not have fit his schema of the subsequent punishment of the killers of philosophers. Josephus too, as a protégé of the Flavian dynasty, kept a pro-Roman position; this, however, did not prevent him from stating that it was Pilate, the Roman authority, who put Jesus to death, on the charge of *maiestas* leveled against him by Jewish leaders. The Acts of the Apostles as well are pro-Roman; though, they admit that Jesus was killed by “impious people,” the Romans, albeit under Jewish instigation. Likewise Abgar, in his letter to Tiberius, emphasizes his pro-Roman attitude and loyalty to the emperor. This, however, does not entail a denial of Pilate’s responsibility for the killing of Jesus in the Abgar-Tiberius exchange, just like in Acts and in Josephus. In the rest of the *Doctrina*, on the contrary, the responsibility for the death of Jesus is attached exclusively to the Jews, and not to some of them, but to the Jewish people as a whole.

This striking difference between the attitude toward the Jews that emerges in the Abgar-Tiberius letters and in the rest of the *Doctrina*, with the letters bearing much more resemblance to first-century documents than to the fifth-century *Doctrina*, further confirms that the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence has a source of its very own, and the exact historical details that it reflects indicate that it is an ancient and very well informed source. It must obviously be ruled out that the early-fifth-century author of the *Doctrina*—perhaps even Rabbula of Edessa, according to H.J.W. Drijver’s well-known hypothesis—produced this correspondence with the historical details it contains, but it must be hypothesized that he, or his source, found the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence as it is, or in a form similar to that which we read now. The author of the *Doctrina* possibly adapted to some extent what he found in his source, but the Abgar-Tiberius material is independent and much more ancient. The letters exchanged by Abgar and Tiberius were probably kept in the royal archives—in their original Greek and perhaps also in a Syriac translation, as a bilingual document—being part and parcel of the official documents of the Edessan sovereigns. These letters must be distinguished from the forged

Abgar-Jesus correspondence, which was originally composed in Syriac and was incorporated both in the account of Eusebius—who used a translation—and, later, in the *Doctrina Addai*.

Just as the legend of Seneca's conversion to Christianity probably arose from a letter subsequently added to the Seneca-Paul correspondence, whereas in the rest of the correspondence there is no trace of any "conversion" of Seneca,<sup>25</sup> likewise the probable origin of the legend of Abgar the Black's conversion to Christianity lies in a letter of his to Tiberius. In the Abgar-Tiberius correspondence there is no trace of a "conversion" of either Abgar or Tiberius, but their letters do deal with Jesus, his execution, and the situation in Palestine and the Near East in 35-36 CE, with strikingly exact historical details. In the correspondence nothing indicates a religious conversion of Abgar, but everything shows that he knew something about Jesus' ministry and crucifixion, what was also known to Mara in Samosata and to Josephus, and what was probably made known to Tiberius by Pilate. Abgar's letter also shows indignation at the unjust execution of a benefactor. Notably, Abgar's letter does not present Jesus as the Messiah, let alone the Son of God or God. Again, no trace of Christianity, not even of a "Jewish-Christianity" with a low Christology. The same indignation at the unjust execution of Jesus as a wise benefactor is shown by Mara, who likewise was neither a Christian nor a Jew.

Abgar's letter to Tiberius was not dictated by his alleged conversion, nor by other religious reasons, but rather by *political* reasons. For Abgar had excellent political reasons to put those responsible for Jesus' death in a bad light before the emperor. Caiaphas was an ally of Pilate and Herod Antipas; the latter's

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<sup>25</sup> See my "The Apocryphal Correspondence between Seneca and St. Paul," in *Novum Testamentum Patristicum – Apokryphensonderband*, Hrsg. Tobias Nicklas–Jean-Michel Roessli (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, forthcoming), and "The Seneca-Paul Pseudepigraphical Correspondence: A Reassessment," lectures at the SNTS General Meeting Berlin 2010, SBL Annual Meeting San Francisco 2011, and NYU November 2011, forthcoming as "A Pseudepigraphon inside a Pseudepigraphon? The Seneca-Paul Correspondence and the Letters Added Afterwards," in the *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha*. Account of new findings in "The Pseudepigraphic Correspondence between Seneca and Paul: A Reassessment," in *Paul and Pseudepigraphy*, eds. Stanley Porter and Gregory Fewster (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

brother, Herod Agrippa, conferred the high priesthood on a son of Caiaphas.<sup>26</sup> Pilate—a promoter of the imperial cult in Palestine<sup>27</sup>—never deposed Caiaphas; they were allies<sup>28</sup> and indeed were deposed together in 36 CE by Vitellius by Tiberius’ order. Moreover, according to Luke 23:12, after Jesus’ trial Herod and Pilate became friends; first they were hostile, but when Pilate sent Jesus to Herod—because as a Galilaean he belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction—and the latter sent Jesus back to Pilate, Herod and Pilate became friends. Abgar fought against Herod Antipas as an ally of Aretas, and both Pilate and Herod were hostile to Abgar and tried to discredit him before the Romans (Moses *PH* 2.39). Therefore, for Abgar, the Jesus affair was a good occasion to attack both Pilate and Herod, as well as their ally Caiaphas, putting them in a bad light before Tiberius qua involved in an unjust execution. Abgar’s letter to Tiberius about Jesus and those responsible for his execution was not at all dictated by any conversion to Christianity, or by other religious concerns, or by “anti-Semitism,” but for precise *political* reasons in very delicate historical circumstances.

Later, this correspondence in which Abgar wrote positively about Jesus favored the birth of the legend of Abgar’s—and Osrhoene’s—conversion. This legend was especially interesting in the time of Abgar the Great, a Christian or not hostile to a growing

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<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Agrippa precipitated the incidents in Alexandria in 38 CE that are reported by Philo’s *In Flaccum*. And Abgar, as I mentioned, was friends with Flaccus, whom Philo describes as hostile to the Jews. Abgar had political reasons to stress Jewish implications in the unjust execution of Jesus.

<sup>27</sup> Joan Taylor, “Pontius Pilate and the imperial cult in Roman Judaea” (*New Testament Studies* 52 [2006]), 555-582 collects evidence from Pilate’s coinage, the inscription from Caesarea (*AE* 1963, 104) which attests to Pilate’s dedication of a Tiberieum to the *dis Augustis*, and Philo, *Legat.* 299-305 on Pilate’s setting up shields associated with imperial cult in Jerusalem.

<sup>28</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *Caiaphas the High Priest. A reconsideration of the historical and biblical roles of one of Jesus’s chief antagonists* (University of South Carolina Press, 2011), studies the depictions of Caiaphas in the ancient sources, including the Gospels, and in later sources, and Caiaphas’ relations with the people and the Roman leaders, as well as with the Jesus problem. The Abgar-Tiberius correspondence within the *Doctrina* would be an interesting addition to the wealth of sources examined.

Christianity in Osroene.<sup>29</sup> It contributed to exalt Abgar the Great by celebrating the Black. Bardaisan, who was close to the royal court and friends with the Great, could use the royal archive and read the correspondence of the Edessan kings. Thus, he, or some other courtier or official, may have read the correspondence of Abgar the Black with Tiberius, creating from there the legend of the Black's conversion to Christianity. From Bardaisan's historical work, then, or Eusebius' first source—a local celebratory source which must be distinguished from that of the Abgar-Jesus fictional correspondence<sup>30</sup>—this legend passed on to Eusebius's history, enriched with the forged Abgar-Jesus letters that will be found again in the *Doctrina*, Moses, and other documents.

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<sup>29</sup> See Ramelli, "Edessa e i Romani" and *Bardaisan of Edessa: A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Interpretation* (Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), esp. 46-56, 70-107, positively received by Patricia Crone, s.v. "Daysanis," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (third edition; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 116-118.

<sup>30</sup> As I have thoroughly demonstrated in "The Earliest Representations."

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