

LETTERS OF CHRIST AND ABGARUS

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M.R. James-Translation and Notes
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Introduction

Our earliest Greek text of these -which are found in many forms- is that given by Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History (i. 13), extracted, as he says, by him from the archives of Edessa relating to Abgar and translated from Syriac word for word:

A copy of a letter written by Abgarus the toparch to Jesus, and sent to him by means of Ananias the runner, to Jerusalem.

Abgarus Uchama the toparch to Jesus the good Saviour that hath appeared in the parts (place) of Jerusalem, greeting. I have heard concerning thee and thy cures, that they are done of thee without drugs or herbs: for, as the report goes, thou makest blind men to see again, lame to walk, and cleansest lepers, and castest out unclean spirits and devils, and those that are afflicted with long sickness thou healest, and raisest the dead.

And having heard all this of thee, I had determined one of two things, either that thou art God come down from heaven, and so doest these things or art a Son of God that doest these things.

Therefore now have I written and entreated thee to trouble thyself to come to me and heal the affliction which I have. or indeed I have heard that the Jews even murmur against thee and wish to do thee hurt. And I have a very little city but (and) comely (reverend), which is sufficient for us both.

The answer, written by Jesus, sent by Ananias the runner to Abgarus the toparch.

Blessed art thou that hast believed in me, not having seen me.

For it is written concerning me that they that have seen me shall not believe in me, and that they that have not seen me shall believe and live. But concerning that which thou hast written to me, to come unto thee; it must needs be that I fulfil all things for the which I was sent here, and after fulfilling them should then be taken up unto him that sent me.

And when I am taken up, I will send thee one of my disciples, to heal thine affliction and give life to thee and them that are with thee.

Later texts add a promise that where this letter is, no enemy shall prevail: and so we find the letter copied and used as an amulet. It was regarded naturally as the palladium of Edessa, but was also thought to act as a protection to individuals.

The letters form an integral part of the story of the mission of Thaddaeus and conversion of Edessa, and part

of that legend is that Jesus gave the messenger of Abgarus a handkerchief miraculously imprinted with the picture of his face. Into all this we cannot enter.