Extrait de : Bulletin de l'AELAC 8 (1998), p. 17-19.

Étude

The place of King Abgar in the scheme of Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History

par
Andrew Palmer

The first book of the Ecclesiastical History by Eusebius of Caesarea is devoted to Christ Himself, to His pre-existence and divinity, to His presence in prophetic utterances of the Old Testament, to the nature of His teaching and to the time of His appearance among men. It treats of certain historical matters concerning the royal house of the Jews, the royal descent of Jesus, Herod's attempt to destroy Him as a child, the rule of Pilate and of the High Priests of Jesus' time, John the Baptist and the disciples of Jesus. The thirteenth chapter, which closes the first book, is about King Abgar the Black, ruler of Edessa, the capital of Osrhoene, and his Aramaic (or Syriac) correspondence with Jesus; after translating Abgar's letter and Jesus' reply, Eusebius translates the account of the mission of Thaddaeus to Edessa and the conversion of King Abgar and his subjects.

By placing King Abgar at the end of Book One, Eusebius gives him great prominence in his history of the universal Church. When he resumes the thread of his own narrative at the beginning of Book Two, he says that he is returning to Holy Scripture, from which he has digressed. In this way he draws attention to the privileged status of this non-scriptural episode. He indicates that his secular source — the archives of the former kingdom of Edessa — supply a necessary addition to the New Testament. The reader is also surprised to be reminded that the source is a secular one. If it contained a transcript of a letter in Jesus' own hand, surely that, at least, has the status of Holy Scripture. Indeed, not even a quotation of Jesus' *ipsissima verba* in the Gospel could equal the authority of a document which He Himself had penned. The story of Abgar is treated as a supplement to Holy Scripture, and, implicitly, almost as superior to Holy Scripture by virtue of Jesus' letter; besides, whereas Holy Scripture is briefly summarised in Books One and Two, the story of Abgar is translated word for word. This, combined with its narrative function, which is to crown Book One, brings it more sharply into focus that what precedes it and what follows it and makes it shine out like a jewel.

The justification for giving such pride of place to this story is that it mirrors in a simple narrative the long and complex History of Salvation. King Abgar's letter stands for the Law and the Prophets. Any King is a law-giver, like Moses, and this King, like David, recognises Christ without having seen Him in the flesh. He knows nothing, as yet, of Jesus' teaching; but he is inspired to believe that He is «either God come down from heaven or a Son of God». The letter in which Jesus replies to Abgar (implicitly as one king to another, in Aramaic, the language, before Greek, of royal diplomacy throughout the Middle East) stands for the Gospels, in which Jesus speaks in His own Person, blessing those who believe in Him, calling Holy Scripture to witness, predicting, in veiled terms, His Passion and Ascension into Heaven, and promising that His Apostles will spread healing and life further afield (even into a kingdom of the Gentiles). The journey of Thaddaeus to Edessa and his doings there stand for the Acts of the Apostles; and his teaching concerning the Incarnation and the Resurrection stands for the doctrine of all the Apostles. The legend of King Abgar is like a miniature version of the whole Bible; and it intimates something of great moment concerning the subsequent history of the Christian movement, namely that Christianity, contrary to all expectation, is destined to be the religion of the rulers of this world.

Eusebius began his History by speaking of the majesty of Christ. The name, he goes on to show, is a mark of kingship, because the kings of Israel were anointed. After speaking of King David, he quotes Genesis 49:10 in the Septuagint version: «A ruler shall not fail from Judah nor a leader from his loins until he come, for whom it is reserved.» He sees the fulfilment of this prophecy in the fact that Jesus was born at a time when the Jews were ruled by foreigners, by King Herod and by the Roman Emperor. Herod tried to kill Jesus because the Magi led him to the belief, correct in a way, that He was born to supplant him as the legitimate King of the Jews. At this point Eusebius considers Jesus' genealogy, just as one would do in examining the title to the throne of someone who had literally become king. He goes on to speak of Pilate and of his master, the Emperor Tiberius, whom he calls the successor to «universal sovereignty». The Greek is τὴν καθ' ὅλων ἀρχήν, a phrase which contains the embryo of the adjective «Catholic». Finally, he quotes the testimony of Josephus, a Jew, to Jesus' title as «the Anointed One». Josephus' refe-

rence to the steadfastness of Jesus' disciples and the continued existence of the «Christian People» provides a transition to the Apostles and so, swiftly, to King Abgar.

Sovereignty, divine and human, is a major theme of Book One and a vital factor in the History of Salvation. The prominence given to the Syriac story about the first Gentile king to be converted with his people ties in well with this theme. With the echo of that phrase about the «Catholic sovereignty» of the Roman Empire ringing in his ears, the reader of this story could hardly fail to see the parallel with the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity. If it is true, as Timothy D. Barnes («The Editions of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*», *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 21 [1980], p. 191-201) argues, that Book One of the Ecclesiastical History was written and published long before the conversion of Constantine, this parallel is quite uncanny. It would make Eusebius a virtual prophet of the future course of history. In a time when the Church was persecuted by the Roman Emperor it would have made better sense to emphasise the divide between the heavenly kingship of the One who said «My kingdom is not of this world» and the transitory empire of the Romans. Rather than suppose that Eusebius could have anticipated the abolition of this divide, I believe that the prominence of the story of Abgar in Book One supports the argument for a later date put forward by Andrew Louth («The Date of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*», *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 [1990], p. 111-123), who has other cogent grounds for believing that it cannot have been published before A.D. 313.

If Book One was published in or shortly after A.D. 313, the way it was composed would suggest that Eusebius immediately saw the extraordinary potential of Christian kingship and adapted his theological vision of history to accommodate it. In this new light, the story of Abgar, which had either been unknown to him before, or seemed insignificant (he does not seem to have included it in his earlier Chronicle), suddenly became the ideal vehicle for his message. It legitimises Christian kingship by giving it a charter, as it were, from Christ Himself — something difficult to find in the Gospels. It also lends another kind of legitimacy to Constantine's religious policy: that of precedent. Against those, whether Christian or pagan, who might criticise Constantine for making Christianity a kind of state religion, the example of Abgar argues that this is neither revolutionary nor strange. Eusebius elsewhere takes care to argues that there is nothing revolutionary or strange about the faith taught by Christ. One function of the end of Book One of the Ecclesiastical History, then, is to legitimise Constantine's annexation of the name and the symbol of Christ's victory over death to the secular purposes of imperial power.

The other political function of the story might redeem Eusebius in the eyes of those who would say that he «sold out» to secular power. By showing Constantine a reflection of himself in the mirror of King Abgar's conversion, Eusebius encouraged him, without presuming directly to offer him advice or correction, to cultivate a more exact resemblance to that image. The hint Eusebius may have hoped to convey to the Emperor was that he needed an «apostle» at his side to teach him the full meaning and implications of the Christian faith which he had so suddenly (and laudably) adopted under the strong impression of the effective power of Christ. Translated into contemporary terms, this would mean that the Emperor should appoint a bishop as his adviser. Perhaps Eusebius was angling for the post. He didn't get it ! But the position acquired by Hosius of Cordoba at the court of Constantine was not unlike that of Thaddaeus at the court of Abgar. And in the following millennium the theory of government at Constantinople was that the Emperor and the Patriarch acted as a team, reflecting the justice and the mercy of God.

It is not possible to say for certain whether Constantine acted on the advice so tactfully conveyed to him through a story by the bishop of Caesarea. What we can say is that the story of King Abgar continued to be used in Byzantium as a vehicle by which to convey ideas about Christian Kingship. Working backwards, we may single out Constantine Porphyrogenitus, who rewrote the legend in 945, making Constantinople the new Edessa and himself, by implication, the new Abgar and so claiming for the capital city the protection which Jesus (according to a development of Eusebius' story) had promised to the city of Abgar. Then Heraclius, who, as I think, must have inspired the Acta Thaddaei, a seventh-century rewriting of the story, which omits the promise of protection (because Edessa had fallen), but introduces the miraculous image of Christ on a cloth (the mandylion), similar to the Camuliana, which Heraclius set at the head of his armies. It is interesting that the Apostle in the *Acta Thaddaei* resembles Heraclius as much as the King, which chimes in with Heraclius' pretention to be «high priest of the whole world» (George of Pisidia).

Before Heraclius, there had been attempts to manipulate the reigning Emperor by means of the legend, but it would take another long argument to show this. I conclude, therefore, with the last of St Ephraim's *madroshe* on faith, which may have inspired Socrates, the Church historian

to portray Valens, the Arian Emperor, implicitly, as a kind of anti-Abgar, attacking the walls of the «Blessed City»:

The governor
opposed the Jews:
his placard stayed.
Now governors
implacably
opposed to us
attack the faith.
The Crown is blameless:
priests plant stones
and rulers trip.

Instead of prayers
for Royalty,
which Priesthood owes,
to free mankind
from conflicts, priests
taught rulers war
against their own;
now kings besiege
the cities which
belong to them.

Attune the priests
and rulers, Lord,
and in one Church,
let priests for rulers
intercede !
Let rulers spare
their cities' walls !
Let inward peace
surround us like
an outer wall !