Neither Pseudo-Athanasius nor Palaea: Historia de Melchisedech as a Part of the Slavonic Abraham's Cycle

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Abstract

The Story of Melchizedek (*Historia de Melchisedech*) has been handed down in various languages, especially in Greek and Old Slavonic, and there are already editions of several versions of this apocryphon. In the German edition by Christfried Böttrich (2010) three Slavonic versions have been also considered. These are the so-called Pseudo-Athanasius version, a section of the so-called Historical Palaea, and the short "prolog" version in the Eastern Slavonic tradition. However, it has gone unnoticed in the context of the Western debate that many Southern Slavonic miscellanies (*sborniki*) contain two versions which are different from all three of them. Both these versions form an integral part of the Slavonic Abraham Cycle, a collection of Jewish-Christian apocrypha, which has received too little attention in the Western scholarship. The article tries to make first steps towards a correct placement of these Southern Slavonic versions within the tradition of the Story of Melchizedek.

Keywords

Historia de Melchisedech – Palaea Historica – Slavonic Abraham's cycle

1 Introduction

The story of the hermit Melchizedek and his meeting with Abraham (*Historia de Melchisedech*) is a text with an extremely complex history. It exists in several versions, of which the two most well-known have come down to us 1) in the form of a separate legend often ascribed to Athanasius of Alexandria, which cannot be dated exactly, and 2) as a part of the *Palaea Historica*, a Byzantine paraphrase of the Old Testament history attributed to the 9th or 10th century.¹

The subject of this article is the later development of this legend. It is mentioned in the scholarship much less frequently since these two versions are preserved only in the Church Slavonic and were translated so far only into modern Bulgarian.² Melchizedek's story was transmitted as a part of so-called Abraham's cycle³ – a series of apocryphal stories of Abraham's life that can be considered as a kind of apocryphal Vita. The two editions differ both from the

- 1 J. Dochhorn, "Die Historia de Melchisedech (Hist Melch). Einführung, editorischer Vorbericht und Editiones praeliminaries," *Le Muséon*, 117 (2004), pp. 7-48; Ch. Böttrich, *Geschichte Melchisedeks* (JSHRZ 2/2), Gütersloh, 2010; P. Piovanelli, "The Story of Melchizedek, with the Melchizedek Legend from the Chronicon Paschale," in: *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, eds. R. Bauckham, J.R. Davila, and A. Panayotov, Grand Rapids, 2013, pp. 64-84; W. Adler, "Palaea Historica ("The Old Testament History"): A new translation and introduction," *ibid.*, pp. 585-672, there pp. 613-618 about Melchizedek (chapters 31.4 to 40.2 in this edition; a new edition of Palaea's Greek text by W. Adler is in preparation).
- 2 N. Načov, *Тиквешки ръкопис*, Sofia, 1892, pp. 406-413; П.А. Лавров, *Апокрифические тексты*, St. Petersburg, 1899, pp. 71-80. Modern Bulgarian translation: *Стара българска литература*, ed. D. Petkanova et al., vol. 1: *Апокрифи*, Sofia, 1981, pp. 88-98. What can be regarded Armenian versions of the Abraham's cycle should be taken separately, see M.E. Stone, *Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Abraham*, Atlanta, 2012, especially pp. 127-177 (a version of *Historia de Melchisedech*: pp. 160-165, 175-177).
- 3 É. Turdeanu "La Palaea Byzantine chez les Slaves du Sud et chez les Roumains," in: *Apocryphes slaves et roumains de L'Ancien Testament* (SVTP, 5), Leiden, 1981, pp. 392-403; repr. from *Revue des Études Slaves*, 40 (1964); D. Bogdanović and A. Miltenova, "Апокрифният сборник от манастира Савина XIV в. във сравнение с други подобни южнославянски ръкописи," *Arheografski Prilozi*, 9 (1987), pp. 7-30; F. Badalanova and A. Miltenova, "Апокрифният цикъл за Авраам във фолклора и в средновековните балкански литератури," *Ethnographical problems of peoples's culture*, 4 (1996), pp. 203-251; A. Miltenova, "The Apocryphal Series about Abraham," in: *Studia Caroliensia: Papers in Linguistics and Folklore in Honor of Charles E. Gribble*, eds. R.A. Rothstein, E. Scatton, and C.E. Townsend, Bloomington, Ind., 2006, pp. 189-208; M. Skowronek, "Pseudokanoniczny cykl o patriarche Abrahamie (w kontekście słowiańskich kodeksów o treści mieszanej)," *Południowosłowiańskie zeszyty naukowe: Język – Literatura – Kultura*, 5 (2008), pp. 153-166.

Greek and from the short Slavonic “Prolog” version, which has its own history.⁴ Although the focus will be on the texts dealing with Melchizedek, some attention will be also given to different parts of Abraham’s cycle as well as to the series as a whole.⁵

In the Palaea Historica, Melchizedek’s life story starts quite abruptly which feels like a seam – despite a dialogue between Abraham and God, introduced to make the transition smoother (the Palaea used for this dialogue obviously the same material transferring it from the second part of *Historia de Melchisedech* and making out of it a frame). There can be no doubt that the author, or rather the compiler, was familiar with Pseudo-Athanasius’ account of Melchizedek’s life and, after some changes done, incorporated it into his work.⁶ However, differences between these two main Greek versions of *Historia de Melchisedech* are quite significant. A closer look at divergences even suggests that the Pseudo-Athanasius’ version, at the time it was turned to a part of the Palaea’s narrative, might have looked differently. So that, at least, *the life story of Melchizedek* (the first part of the Melchizedek’s tale) and *the story of the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek* (its second part), while talking about their later transmission by the Palaea, should be considered separately. The latter might have earlier versions which could have been used,⁷ while *the life story of Melchizedek* in the Palaea is to be seen rather as a direct “remake” of a legend preserved in the text attributed to St. Athanasius.⁸ In this case, the

4 Ch. Böttrich, “Die Geschichte Melchisedeks (*HistMelch*) im slavischen Kulturkreis,” in: *The Old Testament Apocrypha in the Slavonic Tradition*, ed. L. DiTommaso and id. (TSAJ, 140), Tübingen, 2011, pp. 159–200, there 173–174 and 181 (bibliography).

5 Editions of Palaea used here are 1) Greek original: *Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina, Pars prior*, ed. A.V. Vassiliev, Moscow, 1893, pp. 188–292; 2) First Slavonic translation: *Книга бытия небеси и земли (Палея историческая). С приложением Сокращенной палеи русской редакции*, ed. A.N. Popov, Moscow, 1881; 3) *Palaea Historica: The Second Slavic Translation. Commentary and Text*, ed. M. Skowronek (Series Ceranea, 3), Łódź, 2016. To the editions of Abraham’s cycle see Nr. 2.

6 Already Mikhail N. Speranskiy (1863–1938) proceeded on this assumption, see M.H. Сперанский, “Русские памятники письменности в югославянских литературах XIV–XVI вв.,” in: *Из истории русско-славянских литературных связей*, Moscow, 1960, p. 80, n. 56; idem, “Югославянские тексты «Исторической Палеи» и русские ее тексты,” *ibid.*, p. 119, n. 35. It should be also considered that some earlier features may be present in the text of the Palaea, see Dochhorn, “Historia,” p. 42.

7 For two coptic texts see Dochhorn, “Historia,” pp. 23–27, for an early Byzantine inscription from Ankyra (possibly 6th century) see *The Greek and Latin Inscriptions from Ankara*, eds. S. Mitchell and D. French, vol. 2, Munich, forthcoming.

8 About these two parts of the legend see S.E. Robinson, “The Apocryphal Story of Melchizedek,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 18 (1987), pp. 26–39.

whole Palaeian narrative would be a compilation that does not use only the text known as a Pseudo-Athanasius version, but also other accounts marked in the first place through their Jerusalemic location.

The first translations of the Palaea into Slavonic language were made, according to Mikhail N. Speranskiy, in Bulgaria, from where they spread throughout Russia in the 12th-13th centuries and later were used – back from Russia – in the Southern Slavic countries. At some point, two new translations appeared in Serbia and Bulgaria.⁹ Slavic scribes, however, did not always strive to just copy their prototypes; they sometimes also tended to “improve” the text, as we can see it in the 16th century manuscript Sev. 43 RSL (Moscow).¹⁰ Similar methods (mostly abbreviations and permutations) might have led to emergence of Abraham's cycle at some earlier point of time.

Melchizedek's life story, his first meeting with Abraham, as well as their further “cooperation” constitute, maybe, the most suggestive part in the Palaea's account of Abraham's life regarding its changes on the way from the Palaea to the apocryphal cycle. We will track that changes in the both Slavic editions. Our theses are as follows: 1) The first version of Abraham's cycle is to be considered as a reworking of the Palaeian material with Abraham as a main character. 2) The second version is based primarily (maybe, even entirely) on the first. 3) The rewriting took place, possibly, already in the Greek realm, i.e., at least, the first edition of the cycle about Abraham could have been translated from Greek. Thus, we agree in the first two points with Émile Turdeanu, concurring in the third with his opponents. In all these cases, we will try to provide more detailed arguments than it has been done so far.¹¹

9 Сперанский, “Югославянские тексты,” pp. 141-142. The second (Serbian) translation was published only recently, see n. 5.

10 Сперанский, “Русские памятники,” pp. 79-83; idem, “Югославянские тексты,” pp. 117-123.

11 Speranskiy, see n. 6 above. Johannes Reinhart obviously adheres to a similar opinion on this subject if one can judge from his short assessment about “excerpts from the Palaea,” see J. Reinhart, “Die älteste Bezeugung der Historischen Paläa in slavischer Übersetzung (Cod. Slav. Vindob. Nr. 158),” *Prilozi za književnost, jezik, istoriju i folklor*, 73 (2007), pp. 45-75, especially pp. 56-57, where he is comparing precisely the incipit of *Historia de Melchisedech* in the first version of Abraham's cycle with the incipits of the two Slavonic translations of Palaeian texts about the same character.

2 The Legend about Melchizedek and Abraham in the First Edition of the Slavonic Abraham's Cycle and in the Palaea Historica

While the Palaea Historica is a continuous narrative about Old Testament events (or the “old times”, τὸ παλαιόν) Abraham's cycle is a chain of normally five, maximum six short stories which are episodes of Abraham's life (short stories are called *εὐαγγέλιον*, “sermon”).¹² Comparing the first edition of the cycle to Abraham's chapters in the Palaea, it is easy to observe that the apocryphal series is almost exclusively based on the Palaea¹³ as both Émile Turdeanu and Johannes Reinhart, as well as – at least, with regard to the Melchizedek's story – Mikhail Speranskiy contend.¹⁴ The material reduced to the chapters in the Palaea / sections in Abraham's cycle talking about Melchizedek, we can register the following similarities which demonstrate with certainty that the Palaea and the first edition of Abraham's cycle can be by no means considered independent:¹⁵

1. Immediately before Abraham's trip to Mount Tabor, he is told to have taken tithes from the king Chettaios (Greek: Χετταῖος, Slavonic: Хеттѣй or Хеттѣй).¹⁶

12 They can also stand separately in manuscripts or appear in smaller groups (see below, §4), although they were written originally as a unity. Especially, the sixth episode (“Death of Abraham”) stands often quite far away from the other parts of the cycle in the manuscripts or even is absent (Badalanova and Miltenova, “Апокрифният цикъл,” p. 205). However, in several manuscripts (ms. 109 from the Mount Athos, published by Lavrov; ms. 29 of Savina monastery, Montenegro, the earliest known text of the first edition, see Bogdanović and Miltenova, “Апокрифният сборник,” pp. 9–10; ms. 794 TSL/RSL Moscow, see *ibid.*, p. 23) the series is complete (the doubts of Skowronek – *ibid.*, p. 157, n. 22 – are therefore unsubstantiated, as the table in Bogdanović and Miltenova, *ibid.*, p. 23 already showed).

13 Except the sixth story, “Death of Abraham,” which is not a part of the Palaea, s. note above. This is also the reason why “Death of Abraham” won't be dealt with in this article.

14 For Turdeanu see *id.*, “Palea Byzantine,” pp. 398–403, for Reinhart see n. 11, for Speranskiy see n. 6.

15 The list may be incomplete, but it is large enough for our purposes. See comparisons between the versions of Pseudo-Athanasius and the Palaea in earlier publications: Doehorn, “Historia,” pp. 40–42; Böttrich, *Geschichte Melchisedeks*, pp. 11–15.

16 Replacing of the Egyptian king Pharaoh of Genesis 12:10–20. This replacement as such in both the Palaea and Abraham's cycle clearly witnesses against the independency of these two traditions.

2. Not only one but repeated appearances of Melchizedek throughout the narrative: his advices and blessings.¹⁷
3. The very similar beginning of the sermon (αλοβο) “On Melchizedek” and that of the respective chapter in the Palaea – reference to Heb. 7:3.
4. Melchizedek (Melchi) goes to Galilee twice.¹⁸
5. Seventy cows for sacrifice (not seven nor hundred as in the second edition of the cycle).
6. It is Melchizedek whom his father is going to sacrifice, not his brother.
7. The mother tells Sedek (Melchizedek’s brother) to warn Melchizedek, who asks him to bring his clothes back to the city.
8. Melchizedek is praying on the mountain opposite the city (not on Mount Tabor), there are two different mountains in the story.
9. Melchizedek is dwelling on the northern side of Mount Tabor eating grass and drinking water.
10. Mount Tabor is literally called “Mount of Tabor” (ὄρος Ταβύριον, гора Таборская or other *adjective* forms depending on the manuscript), not just Tabor (Pseudo-Athanasius’ version knows only the *substantive* form Θαβώρ).
11. Melchizedek stays for forty years on the mountain, not just for seven.
12. Along with clothes (and a razor) Abraham brings bread and wine to Melchizedek so that they can share a meal immediately on Mount Tabor.
13. Melchizedek refuses to do what Abraham tells him unless Abraham speaks to God.
14. Melchizedek receives tithes from Abraham – just as Abraham himself got tithes from the king Chettaios (cf. Heb. 7:9).
15. Melchizedek doesn’t stay on Mount Tabor after his meeting with Abraham.
16. Abraham praises God because of his visit to Melchizedek in the end.

But is it imaginable that in the apocryphal series we have the original version that the Palaeian author used to build up his Melchizedek story?¹⁹ Arguments

- 17 Only the Palaea made recurrent appearances of Melchizedek throughout Abraham’s chapters possible; in the legend of Pseudo-Athanasius there was no place for that because the narrative there is simply too short (ends before either Isaac or Ishmael are born).
- 18 Obviously, a place on the Mount of Olives is meant, not the real Galilee in the north of Palestine, see Anonymus de locis Hierosolymitanis in PG 133:980a (end of ch. 5), directly before the mention of Abraham meeting Melchizedek (beginning of ch. 6)!
- 19 Thus, the point of view of M. Skowronek, “On Medieval Storytelling. The Story of Melchizedek in Certain Slavonic Texts (Palaea Historica and the Apocryphal Cycle of Abraham),” *Studia Ceranea*, 4 (2014), pp. 171–191, see p. 188 and n. 83. Skowronek does not

that follow, show that Melchizedek in the cycle (as it is also the whole apocryphal series about Abraham) is a later reworking of the Palaeian material, and not other way around.

Most notably, the first edition of the cycle differs from the Palaea Historica in so far as it omits the motifs of *circumcision* (which should be approved by Melchizedek in the Palaea) and of *sacrificing to God* (on Mount Tabor), which both have roots in the Jewish (or biblical in the literary sense) tradition. It is hardly probable that these motifs would have been “restored” in the Palaea, especially the Melchizedek’s participation in the circumcision of Abraham, which is not in the Book of Genesis either.

Furthermore, the cycle omits the big *sacrifice of children*, which motif was clearly present in its Vorlage because Melchizedek hears a loud crying from the city. The reason for this crying in the Palaea is the imminent immolation of the great number of children. In the cycle it is not the case, but all the people seem to weep only for Melchizedek, and it is quite strange in the context: even if they were so distressed about him, it should be already clear to this moment that he was alive. Melchizedek’s appeal to God here doesn’t look quite justified either: where do his tears come from if neither his brother (Pseudo-Athanasius version) nor plenty of children (the Palaea) are going to be killed?

The later features, on the contrary, are more explicit in Abraham’s cycle. So, in the Palaea, the purely Christian motif of the *Eucharist* is not clearly articulated neither lexically nor by narrative means;²⁰ it looks more like Abraham and Melchizedek would simply have a meal together. In the cycle Melchizedek is explicitly communicating, not just eating bread, while Abraham is not sharing bread nor wine with him.

The interest in Muslims (the descendants of Ishmael, “Ismaelites”) is increasing from the Palaea to the cycle: even the Tatars are found in here who were not known in Europe before the 13th century, while the Palaea was written clearly earlier in the time. This is an important dating feature which seems to exclude the possibility of Abraham’s cycle arising before that time.²¹ Remarkably, in the first edition of the cycle all the manuscripts of “How Sarah Taught Abraham” have the same explicit with the Tatars (ТАРТАРЕ or ТАТАРЕ)

say whether only the first edition, in her opinion, is earlier than the Palaea, or also the second.

20 The Greek verb μεταλαμβάνω used by the Palaea has both the meaning “share a meal” and “receive Holy Communion.” In the second Slavonic translation the verb пригласитица is not used (as it is in the first): there is *вкусити* (just “eat”) instead; see Skowronek, *Palaea Historica*, p. 79.

21 Pace Miltenova, who dates the first version around 1000 CE: Badalanova and Miltenova, “Апокрифният цикъл,” pp. 204–205, see also Skowronek, “Pseudokanonický cyklus,” p. 153.

mentioned at the first place among the “Ismaelites”. In all known manuscripts of the second edition, on the contrary, the Tatars are pushed into second place by the Turks (татарци). Most likely, it is due to the Ottomans getting stronger at the time this later recension appeared. Turdeanu is probably right when he dates the first of the “abridged versions” (*versions abrégées*, as he calls the two editions of the cycle), to the 13th or 14th century.²²

Melchizedek’s native city *Salem*, that is already present in the Book of Genesis (ch. 14), turns into *Jerusalem* in the cycle (could it be other way round?).

The mutual blessing of Abraham and Melchizedek is obviously a later motif than the unilateral, which coincides in the Palaea with Gen. 14. Melchizedek’s blessing in the cycle’s Vorlage refers not only to Abraham but also to Abraham’s seed: he receives it as a “patriarch” *in spe*. What we have in the first edition, looks like the cycle would take a step further: “And Melchizedek blessed Abraham and *made him patriarch*”. The characterization of Melchizedek as “the first prophet” (a voice from heaven promises that to Melchi in God’s name) also seems secondary; this will become even more important in the second edition where the nomination becomes function.

3 The Story of Abraham Meeting Melchizedek in the Two Slavonic Editions of Abraham’s Cycle: How One Relates to Another

There is a kind of consensus between researchers that the first version of Abraham’s cycle was revised, and the second – a clearly later and, in a certain sense, more advanced version – emerged because of this revision process. To have a complete picture, it is, maybe, even more important, though, to submit material showing the close connection between the two first, before there will be presented arguments that prove the priority of the first edition.

Here are resemblances which attest a relationship of dependency between the two editions:

1. The sermon “How Sarah Taught Abraham” is present in both cycle versions while there is no such section in the Palaea.
2. In both versions, Abraham is ordained patriarch by Melchizedek.
3. Both texts call Melchizedek “the first prophet”.
4. The main output of Melchizedek’s meeting with Abraham in both editions is the Communion of Melchizedek.

²² Turdeanu, “Palea Byzantine,” p. 398.

5. The words from heaven to Melchizedek (Melchi) in his life story (no divine invocation in the Palaea).
6. As to the whole cycle as an entity, one can see that all the Palaeian motifs which are not present in the first edition are omitted in the second as well (such as the story about the Well of Oath, circumcision of Abraham and his house etc.).

It is clear now that the two Slavonic versions of the *Historia de Melchisedech* share a considerable number of features absent in all other texts of the same tradition. To prove this thesis, it wouldn't be difficult to adduce more examples from other parts of Abraham's cycle as well.²³

Now here are some reasons why the second edition should be considered as one that depends on the first and should be regarded as its revision and improvement:

1. The story of Ishmael's birth is moved backwards (toward the beginning of Abraham's cycle) in the second edition – maybe, it is its most conspicuous feature comparing the order of events in the first and in the second Abraham's narrative. The change could be easily explained as an attempt to eliminate a chronological discrepancy: indeed, in the first version, Isaac's birth is mentioned *before* Ishmael is born; as a result, Isaac must be born for the second time in the story about Hagar's expulsion – an evident break of continuity and narrative logic violation.
2. In the first edition of the cycle, Melchizedek is only briefly introduced as a prophet: in the second, "prophet" becomes a part of Melchizedek's name Abraham must call to prove that he comes from the "God the Creator" (it is also Melchizedek's compositional function in the sermon on "How Sarah Taught Abraham" – he prophesizes about two sons of Abraham, which prophecy comes to fulfilment with Ishmael's birth in the end), and it is Abraham himself who ordains Melchizedek to perform this role.²⁴
3. The geography of the first version is pretty the same as in the Palaea, while the second edition undertakes some significant changes and clari-

23 The short stories or "sermons", which the cycle consists of, are far more stable than the sections of the Palaea, cf. the comparison between the Greek text of the Palaea and different Slavonic translation of it by Speranskiy, "Югославянские тексты," pp. 123-129. The incipits and the explicits of a part of the "sermons" are similar in the two editions of the cycle.

24 Cf. above, p. 5

fications: Galilee is replaced with Bethany, undoubtedly close to Jerusalem; Mount Tabor is located not far from Jericho (i.e. also closer to Jerusalem) etc.

4. The title of the section “Correction about Sarah” (Исправление в Сарѣ), which appears only in the manuscripts of the second version, can be interpreted in the literal sense, i.e. as a *correction of the first edition*. The latter says nothing about marriage of Abraham but just mentions it (for it wasn’t said anything about it in the Palaea either).
5. In the first version there was, after all, a sort of justification for Melchizedek that he could hear the loud crying from the city (here about himself, *глаголю и мълвоу за себѣ*): which is because his father planned to sacrifice him publicly. In the second edition, on the contrary, the father wants to burn his son in the oven – apparently at home, and no one in the city knows anything about it. Thus, the crying can be only explained here by the fact that the text is based on the first edition.
6. While the Tatars (“antiheroes” of the 13th century) stand at the top of the list of the “Ismaelites” in the manuscripts of the first edition, in the second they are, as already mentioned, pushed back by the (Ottomanic) Turks conquering the Byzantine Empire and the Balkans in the 14th and 15th centuries.

All these and similar considerations confirm the view of the consequent transformation of the legend about Melchizedek, firstly, on the way from the Palaea to the first edition of Abraham’s cycle, and then to the second edition.²⁵

4 From the First Version to the Second

In the composition of the first cycle in Lavrov’s manuscript, Melchizedek’s story (*Sermon on Melchizedek*, *Слово за Мелхиседека*) follows immediately after the first *Sermon on the Righteous Abraham*. The third in order is the *Sermon on the Holy Trinity*, followed by the *Sermon on How Sarah Taught Abraham*. Apocrypha *Sermon on Isaac* and *Sermon on Abraham’s Death* conclude the series. With some Palaeian material let out, we may say that the order of the episodes in the cycle remains the same as it was in the Palaea – with the only exception: the story of Ishmael’s birth in the “How Sarah Taught Abraham” is

25 It could be, however, that some later editor turned once more to the Palaeian text trying to improve coherency in the Abraham’s narrative as a whole: there is some evidence of such editorial procedures in the second cycle. Even so, this would not destroy the assumption of the first edition being its main Vorlage.

moved forwards comparing to where it was in the Palaea, from a place that by far precedes the narrative “On the Holy Trinity” to this very sermon.

As we tried to demonstrate, some editorial process must have led to the formation of the second Abraham’s cycle based on the first. Now a few words are to be said about how this revision could be traced – at least, tentatively – by means of the available textual witnesses. The focus will be on the order of the sermons in the miscellanies with mixed content that include the first cycle.

As just mentioned before (note 12), not all miscellanies containing the first version of the cycle have the same order as the ms. 109 of St. Paul monastery published by Lavrov. Existence of such manuscripts as ms. 29 of Savina monastery in Montenegro (by the end of the 14th century) confirms the assumption that the cycle was originally “cut out” of the Palaea as a complete series retaining the Palaeian order almost untouched.²⁶ In some later manuscripts²⁷ there are other texts, mostly apocrypha, that were inserted in between the parts of the cycle whilst the order of the Abrahamic sermons was also (slightly) changed. A comparison between these manuscripts²⁸ shows that *there were several options* to change the order of events in the first version, which seemed insufficient to readers and scribes primarily because of inconsistency in the births of Ishmael and Isaac, but also because of the Melchizedek’s story, which felt in Abraham’s cycle from the very beginning out of place.²⁹

In fact, the most significant compositional change that eventually evoked the rearrangement of the cycle has to do with Melchizedek. We can trace this process using Slavonic manuscripts, whereas, remarkably, there was hardly any attempt done to examine Greek textual witnesses containing some isolated texts (excerpts of the Palaea?) related to him.³⁰ Thus, it is still possible that, at least, partly the revision might have taken place still in the Byzantine realm.

26 Thinking of a close dependency of the first cycle on the Palaea – how little material was let out by the author, mostly the same order of events, all the similarities listed above – it seems quite plausible that this order of sermons would be the most natural and original one, according to how they once were formed out of the Palaea for first time.

27 Among them ms. 433 from the National Library in Sofia (16th c.), ms. Slav. 149 from the National Library in Vienna (16th c.) and ms. 100 from the Library of the Orthodox Church in Belgrade (17th c.), see Skowronek, “Pseudokanoniczny cykl”.

28 Especially important is the table in Bogdanović and Miltenova, “Апокрифният сборник,” p. 23; see also Skowronek, “Pseudokanoniczny cykl,” p. 166.

29 Even if some different texts had been inserted inbetween the Abrahamic sermons before they changed the order, it was still clear that they were parts of the same story of Abraham’s life.

30 National Library in Vienna, hist. gr. 63 and theol. gr. 200 (no. 26 and 27 in the list of Dochhorn, “Historia de Melchisedech,” pp. 20–21).

In the centre of Abraham's cycle stood from the beginning on the narrative on the Holy Trinity, where it was prophesied that Isaac would be born. As a fulfilment of this prophecy, Isaac's birth happened in the end of the sermon. As already mentioned, the problem was that Ishmael had not been born yet, so that the birth of Isaac must be repeated twice to make the next story "How Sarah Taught Abraham" possible (Isaac's quarrel with Ishmael, Ishmael's exile). In this "narrative catastrophe" (Isaac is born – Sarah is told pregnant – Isaac is born, in the parts 3 and 4 of the cycle) Melchizedek plays a significant role insofar as Abraham visits him thrice: after the birth of Isaac ("On the Holy Trinity"), after Sarah told him to have a child with Hagar, and after the birth of Ishmael (both latter in "How Sarah Taught Abraham"). If compositional changes in the cycle were needed, Melchizedek's story was the right place to make them – in other words, it was *de facto* *Melchizedek's story* that should be told differently. As we will see, the second edition of Abraham's cycle took this opportunity.

It doesn't mean, however, that the *Historia de Melchisedech* itself had to be revised in the first place. Further Abraham's visits in the cycle comparing to Pseudo-Athanasius version were *additional* (introduced by the Palaea) and not a part of the legend itself. Like in the Palaea, in the first edition they are told apart of the legend (which is in the second sermon, *Слово за Мелхиседека*), scattered throughout the narrative. That's why, to solve the problem, some Slavic scribes, who were editors at the same time, choose just to transfer Melchisedech's story without revision. The collocation table of Anissava Miltenova³¹ shows that later manuscripts of the first edition move the sermon "How Sarah Taught Abraham" up to the second place, after the story about Abraham, Sarah and the king Chettaios.

Because of this rearrangement, Abraham and Sarah dwell in Kanaan and still have one problem, namely that they have no children – and there was no encounter with Melchizedek so far (*Слово за Мелхиседека* is transferred forward). Sarah gives her husband an advice to have a child with Hagar; he initially hesitates to follow but, in the end, Ishmael is born. The next story "On Isaac" remains where it was, just as it is normal for the first edition, but "On the Holy Trinity" and "On Melchizedek" are both pushed to the end of the apocryphal series.

This change, though, was not a perfect solution either, because – if only the order changes – Abraham wants Melchizedek's advice at some point (he never heard about him before!), and he doesn't learn anything about him once he meets him. When, speaking in evolutionary terms, the first cycle starts looking

31 Bogdanović and Miltenova, "Апокрифният сборник," p. 23.

like that (around 1500 CE), the second edition probably arises, where *the whole Melchizedek's story* drifts back to the second place – now as a part of the “On How Sarah Taught Abraham”; from now on there is no a separate sermon “On Melchizedek”. The text undergoes some important changes as well. The editor merges quite convincingly the two trips of Abraham to Melchizedek into one: Abraham makes his first trip just because he needs an advice in Hagar's matter and at the same time he learns the life story of the hermit. The sermon “How Sarah Taught Abraham” is now the section where Melchizedek's legend is told, which, for the first time, ceases to feel like an insertion as it was the case in the Palaea and in the first edition of the cycle. Now it is quite naturally subdued to the logic of Abraham's story, the transition becomes seamless.

This new creation, “How Sarah Taught Abraham” of the second Abraham's cycle – at the place and with the former sermon “On Melchizedek” included in it, – had a mixed content that can be described as the first part of the old “How Sarah Taught Abraham” (up to the story of Isaaks childhood and Ishmael being chased into the desert with his mother; the rest, which remains in the second cycle on its place, gets bigger and receives a new separate title: “On Ishmael”) combined with the revised and shortened “On Melchizedek.” From the latter, among other reductions, the final agreement between Melchizedek and Abraham is cut off. Instead, Ishmael is born in the end as a fulfilment of the Melchizedek's prophecy (quite on the right place in the story, before the Holy Trinity narrative). Once more Melchizedek appears in the second cycle in the sermon “On Isaak”: Abraham takes Isaac with him to Melchizedek to get his blessing in the night following Isaak's engagement with Rebekka.

5 In What Language(s) were the Two Versions of Abraham's Cycle Written?

In the absence of Greek manuscripts, there are different opinions on the issue, whether the two Slavonic versions were originally Greek or Slavonic. Anissava Miltenova assumes that the cycle and the Palaea do not depend on each other and, therefore, not only the latter but also the former surely existed in Greek; she concedes, however, that the second version appeared in Slavonic language.³² Émile Turdeanu wouldn't agree with that since for him the development from the Palaea to the cycle (and then from its first edition to the second) took place

32 Badalanova and Miltenova, “Апокрифният цикъл,” pp. 204-205. About the difficulty with dating suggested there see n. 21.

in the Slavic realm.³³ Małgorzata Skowronek seems not to exclude either of these possibilities.³⁴ Johannes Reinhart speaks rather confidently about the first version of the cycle as a translation, when citing the incipits of the Melchizedek narrative: he states that both the beginnings of the two Slavonic versions of the Palaea and that of the corresponding sermon in the first edition of Abraham's cycle represent various *translations from Greek*.³⁵

This question certainly requires deeper analysis. Observations presented here don't come a priori neither from the Greek nor from the Slavic assumption on the origin of Abraham's cycle.

5.1 *Georgios Choumnos on Melchizedek*

What we know for sure is that the Palaea Historica was in use in Byzantine as well as in the Slavic realm and underwent changes in both. One of the most remarkable texts reflecting this process in Greek is the poem of the similarities Cretan author Georgios Choumnos (second half of the 15th century).³⁶ Although Choumnos' work is poetry – it is composed in the so-called “political verse” (iambic verse of fifteen syllables that was very popular in Byzantium) – and its language is vernacular Greek (close to the modern Greek), Choumnos follows faithfully the Palaea Historica in composition and often even lexically. At the same time, his account of Abraham's story shows certain with the exposition in cycles whereby they both converge against the Palaea, which could also be of importance to the question, whether Abraham's cycle existed in Greek or not.

Confining ourselves to the “Melchizedekian” section of the poem (verses 781 to 960), we can note the following points where both Choumnos' poem and Abraham's cycle diverge from the Palaea:

1 Direct Speech in the Story of Melchizedek

As it has been said before, the story of Melchizedek's departure to Mount Tabor stands separately in the compiled work of the Palaea and looks more like the inserted novel based on the text close to the so-called Pseudo-Athanasian version of *Historia de Melchisedech* (see above). This paratactic character of the composition becomes even more clear in the first edition of the Slavonic cycle: the beginning frame here is done away with, i.e. the instructions given to Abraham by God, which are repeated one more time as he accomplishes the

33 Turdeanu, “Palaea Byzantine,” pp. 398–403.

34 Skowronek, “Pseudokanoniczny cykl,” p. 153.

35 Reinhart, “Älteste Bezeugung,” pp. 56–57.

36 G.A. Mégas, *ΚΟΣΜΟΓΕΝΝΗΣΙΣ. Ανέκδοτον στιχούργημα του 15' αιώνος*, Athens, 1975.

task and are used by the Palaea's author to insert Pseudo-Athanasius' narrative into his work. The first sermon ends with the story about Abraham and the king Chettaios; Melchizedek's life story (the second sermon, "On Melchizedek") is told just as it is common in the legend. In the second edition of Abraham's cycle, as we have seen, the composition changes. *Historia de Melchisedech* is placed after Melchizedek meets Abraham, and all the procedures that follow are listed in different order in comparison to how it was in the Pseudo-Athanasius' version (and in the Palaea). But there is something more than that: the author uses direct speech, so that Melchizedek himself tells Abraham his story. Remarkably, Georgios Choumnos in his poem does the same thing, so in both accounts Melchizedek and his narrative is situated much better within Abraham's story.

However, before jump to conclusions, we must consider cases like the manuscript RSL Sev. 43 of the Palaea, mentioned above, where the Serbian scribe goes in the same direction.³⁷ It is obvious that the presentation greatly benefits from this grammatical and stylistic change, and it would be quite understandable that more than only one editor working on the Palaeian material choose to change the text this way.³⁸ The switch to the first person (and Melchizedek's monologue as a result) can not, therefore, be a decisive argument that would prove existence of some other source beside the Palaea shared by both Choumnos and the second version of the Slavic cycle.

2 Exclusion of the Motif of Lots from the Melchizedek Story

Both Slavic editions of Abraham's cycle differ from the previous versions of the apocryphon about Melchizedek as a hermit by the fact, that they don't see any need either in casting lots about who – mother or father – will choose a son for the sacrifice (Pseudo-Athanasius) or directly between the two, which one is to be sacrificed (the Palaea). Georgios Choumnos' narrative shows the same.

This change is clearly "post-Palaeian", since the motif is justified only in the Pseudo-Athanasian version. In the Palaea lots become obviously superfluous (here it is the mother, who loses, so the father can simply do what he is up to) which makes possible for the lots to be eliminated in the future. But just for this very reason, it also could be that different authors (editors) would have omitted this motif independently, and this common feature for itself doesn't

37 M.N. Speranskiy assumes that it was the scribe himself who used direct speech here making "autobiography from a biography" (Сперанский, "Югославянские тексты," p. 119).

38 Indeed, the same can be observed in the Armenian "Story of Terah and of Father Abraham," which is closer to the Pseudo-Athanasius version than to the Palaea, see Stone, *Armenian Apocrypha*, pp. 162-165 (cf. also *ibid.*, p. 176).

indispensably suggest any unknown common source for the Slavic cycle and the Cretan poem.

3 The Motif of the Dawn in the Story of Melchizedek Coming to Believe in One God

In the Palaea, the son of the king of Salem – the future Melchizedek – starts believing in one God at night, when only the stars and the moon shine but *there is no sun* in the sky. In both Abraham's cycle and the Greek poem, on the contrary, the scene takes place at the break of dawn, so that God manifests himself also as the creator of his brightest luminary. Like in the two previous cases, this agreement of Choumnos and the Slavic tradition against the Palaea can have, though, a quite simple explanation: different authors might have wished that God showed himself in his full glory, i.e. as the creator of *all* luminaries. It could make more sense then, that they all would be seen in the sky at the same time – which is only possible at dawn when the sun rises, and the moon and the stars turn pale (precisely this depiction we find in Choumnos, verses 825-826). Since there is no exact coincidence between the texts, it is possible that their authors contributed independently of each other.

4 Omission of the Material of Genesis 14

The Palaea retells, along with the apocryphal legend about Melchizedek, also the canonical story of “the king of Salem”. It is the last time Melchizedek appears on the stage (ch. 46 Adler). The two Slavic editions of Abraham's cycle and the Greek poem, all omit this material. However, this negative coincidence cannot be considered decisive either: it could just have been done to keep the narrative coherent. Indeed, the coherence – as it might have become clear to different authors (editors) independently – is disturbed in the Palaea, for the figure of Melchizedek in the canonical version (a king) is very different from the same character in the apocryphal legend (a hermit).

Nevertheless, despite all doubts, these arguments must have some cumulative value. The question, whether it was a Greek protograph of the Slavic Abraham's cycle Georgios Choumnos had at his disposal, requires detailed examination: there are more coincidences between his representation and that of the Slavic editions of the cycle than it was possible to show here, so they can't be ignored. It seems likely that, at least, in some cases they cannot be explained only by the assumption, different authors just had similar intentions.³⁹ But here it wouldn't be a right place to go through all such examples.

39 Especially impressive in this connection is the mention of “running” in the story about Ishmael and Isaac and their conflict. In the Cretan poem is said: Κ' ἐγένετον ἑπτὰ χρόνων τὸ

5.2 *Greek Traces in Abraham's Cycle*

The problem of a Greek protograph of Abraham's cycle has another aspect, namely, that what can be called *Grecisms* in the apocryphal series. There are many of them both in the Palaea and in the two versions of the cycle which aren't always the same, and this makes the research especially promising.

When comparing the text on Melchizedek in the manuscript published by Lavrov to the Greek Palaea in Vassiliev's edition, on the one side, and to the two Slavonic translations of the Palaea, on the other side, we see that the cycle is not based neither on the first nor on the second Slavonic translation. It uses quite often different lexemes even in those cases when both translations agree with each other. On places where the Greek Palaea didn't undergo any significant changes in the cycle (such as abbreviations or additions), the text of Lavrov's manuscript is close to the Greek. This suggests that there might be an intermediary text between the Greek Palaea and the first Slavonic edition of Abraham's cycle, which would be some *Greek reworked version of the Palaea*.

Here are some examples. The word for the *oxen flock* from which Melchi should bring oxen for the sacrifice is βουκόλιον (or βουκόλια) in the Greek Palaea. In the first Slavonic translation it corresponds to волы (lit.: "oxen"), while the second translation uses ὕρεδα ("flock"). At the same place the cycle has волонница, a calque of the Greek βουκόλιον.

When Melchizedek's brother goes to meet him on his way back to Salem, Melchizedek sends his clothes to the city. In the Palaea we find here two different words for "clothes" which both come from the Ancient Greek: ἐσθής and ἱματισμός. The Slavonic translations don't contain any Grecisms here, they use just a common Slavonic word ѡдѣжда (одежда).⁴⁰ In the first edition of the cycle a similar word ѡдѣянія is used, but only once. For the second "clothes" it has a vernacular Greek word ροῦχα (ροῦχα).⁴¹

These constellations show possibly that the Vorlage of the first cycle was a later version of the Palaea written perhaps in a non-standardised mixed Greek. Along with a Greek reworked version of the Palaea as an intermediate text, though, there could be another possible solution which would explain a different choice of words in cases like these: some early Post-Palaeian form of

τέκνον τοῦ Ἀβραάμῃ // καὶ μετ' αὐτὸν τὸν Ἰσμαήλ ἡβέλησε νὰ δράμῃ (Mégas, *ΚΟΣΜΟΓΕΝΝΗΣΙΣ*, p. 97), which both the Palaea and the first version of the cycle lack. The manuscripts of the second edition have, however, similar indications *ИЗМАНАЪ БЕЖАШЕ* or *ИЗМАНАЪ ЛАЗЪШЕ* (ΛΑΖΑШЕ), without any additional explanation. Is it, at least, here that some unknown source comes into play?

40 In the second Slavonic translation it is used only one time instead of two.

41 It is also used by Georgios Choumnos at the same place, see Mégas, *ΚΟΣΜΟΓΕΝΝΗΣΙΣ*, p. 81 (v. 861).

Abraham's cycle, that was originally written in Greek, could equally explain the discrepancies between the Slavonic cycle and the two Slavonic translations of the Palaea.

6 Conclusion

The basic works of Jan Dochhorn and Christfried Böttlich to the *Historia de Melchisedech* assume the existence of the two main versions of this legend: Pseudo-Athanasius and the Palaea Historica. When it comes to its presence in the Slavic realm, they consider mostly the Slavonic translations of these two. At the same time, in the Paleoslavistics this legend is also known as a part of the so-called Abraham's cycle. In this paper, we tried to show that both editions of the Abraham's cycle eventually have the Greek Palaea Historica as their source. They are not based, as far as we can see, on its two known Slavonic translations but maybe not on the known Greek version of the Palaea either. It is more likely that some reworked Palaea, written in Byzantine between the 10th and the 13th centuries was used as a Vorlage. The use of Grecisms among others may suggest that. Some proof could also be found in the between the cycle and contemporary comparison texts of the same tradition, like the poetical work of Georgios Choumnos.

Judging by the number of manuscripts, the apocryphal series about Abraham – especially in its first edition – was very common in the Slavic world from the 14th-15th centuries on. Its popularity, the place it takes in miscellanies, the existence of, at least, two versions – because of all this, it should be certainly given more attention in the research. The Palaea Historica was one of the most well-known paraphrases of the Bible in the Byzantine world, but its “abridged versions,” as late as they may be, represent an important move within this ancient tradition. They illustrate – in the Melchizedek's story and beyond – the processes that took place in the parabiblical literature of the late Slavic Middle Ages. Study of the Old Testament Parabiblica would be incomplete without taking them into account.