CHAPTER 3

Shifting Perspectives?

*Acts of Thaddaeus*

A Greek recension of the Edessean legend adds several details to the story of the letter sent by Abgar to Jesus:¹ known as the *Acts of Thaddaeus*, it is dated between 609 and 944 (Andrew Palmer proposes the years 629–630).² The text

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¹ I will not dwell on the examination of the *Epistula Abgari*, a version of the Edessean story recorded in manuscripts of the twelfth century (*Codex Vindobonensis bybl. Caesar. theol. gr. 315; Codex Batopedianus 704*), since it does not add any relevant detail to the issue at hand. This version is deemed to be a late re-elaboration. Dobschütz reckons it to be a text drawn from the Syriac version in 1032 on orders of emperor Romanos III Argyros (“Der Briefwechsel zwischen Abgar und Jesus,” *Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie* 43 [1900], p. 463); according to Alain Desreumaux, it corresponds to a period in which it was important to reinvigorate the legend of the miraculous letter of Christ, a talisman against any aggression from the enemy: the thought reminds of the deed of the Byzantine general George Maniakes, who in 1031 re-conquered Edessa from the Arabs (*Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*, cit., pp. 145–146); Irma Karaulashvili proposed the existence of an older recension, dating from the sixth century (“The Date of the Epistula Abgari,” cit., pp. 85–111). The text can be found in R.A. Lipsius – M. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum apocrypha*, vol. 1, Leipzig, Mendelsohn, 1903, pp. 279–283, and – with the addition of a broad critical apparatus – in E. von Dobschütz, “Der Briefwechsel zwischen Abgar und Jesus,” cit., pp. 438–443; translation in M. Erbetta, *Gli Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento*, vol. 3: *Lettere e apocalissi*, Casale, Marietti, 1969, pp. 83–84. According to C. Walter, “The Abgar Cycle at Mateiê,” in B. Borkopp et alii (eds.), *Studien zur byzantinischen Kunstgeschichte. Festschrift für Horst Hallensleben*, Amsterdam, Hakkert, 1995, p. 224, here we have the earlier use of the word σταυρὸς in the Abgar legend.

² A. Palmer, “Les Actes de Thaddée,” *Apocrypha* 13 (2002), pp. 63–84. Against this hypothesis see P.A. Gramaglia, “I cimeli cristiani di Edessa,” cit., p. 49. Ernst von Dobschütz thought it possible for the *Acts* to date from shortly after 544, because he believed that they were an elaboration of the *Doctrina Addai* carried out after the siege of the city (*Christusbilder*, cit., p. 120), but this is no longer sustainable. For an introduction and English translation of the text, see A.N. Palmer, “The Logos of the Mandylion,” cit. Barbara Frale systematically confuses these *Acts* (in Greek) with the *Doctrine of Addai* (in Syriac) and ascribes to the latter phrases and expressions taken from the former (*La sindone e il ritratto di Cristo*, cit., pp. 79–81, 95, 98, 112). Andrea Tornielli follows in her steps and claims that “already in the *Doctrine of Addai* the Mandylion was defined with the rather unusual adjective *tetrádiplon*”; which is not true and in any case impossible, because *tetrádiplon* is a Greek word, while the *Doctrine* is written in Syriac (*Sindone. Inchiesta sul mistero*, Milano, Gribaudi, 2010, p. 49). Anna Benvenuti seems to believe that the *Acts* and the *Doctrine* are the same thing (*Il mistero della Sindone*, Florence, Giunti, 1998, p. 41).
is reported in a manuscript of the tenth century (*Parisinus graecus 548*) which in its turn derives from an archetype of the ninth century. The part devoted to the legend of Abgar’s image is clear and fairly faithful to the tradition, but supporters of the sindonological hypothesis, on the grounds of alternative meanings of some Greek terms, imagine a change in perspective: the *Acts of Thaddaeus*, they say, describe the image of Edessa as a portrait of the whole body of Jesus, not only of his face. This is my translation of the passage; see between brackets the translations suggested by the sindonologists:

Abgar ordered Ananias to accurately observe the Christ, what was his appearance, his age [*or: his height*], his hair and, in a word, everything. Then Ananias, having gone and given the letter, was carefully gazing at Christ, but was not able to grasp him. But as He who knows the heart noticed, He asked to wash himself. He was given a *tetrádiplon* and, having washed himself, He wiped [*or: took an impression of*] His face [*or: aspect*]. Having His image remained imprinted on the cloth, He gave it to Ananias [*...*]. Abgar, having received Ananias, cast himself down and worshipped the image [*...*], was cured of his disease.3

According to some sindonologists, this story shows that Jesus would have imprinted on the cloth the whole image of his body, thus fulfilling the desire of King Abgar.4 This statement, in my opinion, is based on far-fetched assumptions. Let us put aside for a moment the question of the *tetrádiplon*. Some sindonologists insist that the expression δψις (*or πρόσοψις*), normally translated as

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3 *Acta Thaddaei*, 2–4: παραγγείλας τῷ Ἀνανίᾳ ὁ Ἄβγαρος ἱστορῆσαι τὸν Χριστὸν ἃκριβῶς, ποίας εἴδες ἐστὶν, τὴν τε ἡλικίαν καὶ τρίχα καὶ ἀπλῶς πάντα. Ὁ δὲ Ἀνανίας ἀπελθὼν καὶ δοὺς τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἔγενε ἀπετύπωσον τῷ Χριστῷ, καὶ οὐκ ἠδύνατο καταλαβέσθαι αὐτὸν. Ὁ δὲ ως καρδιογνώστης γνοὺς ἔτησε νιψάσθαι καὶ ἔπεθεν αὐτῷ τετράδιπλον καὶ νιψάμενος ἀπεμάξατο τὴν δύνα αὐτοῦ. Ἑντοπώθησε δὲ τῆς εἰκόνος αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ συνθοι ἐπέθεκαν τῷ Ἀνανίᾳ [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...]. Ὁ δὲ δεξάμενος τὸν Ἀνανίαν καὶ πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας τὴν εἰκόνα [...].