THE ORIGINS AND EMERGENCE OF THE CHURCH IN EDESSA DURING THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES A.D.

BY

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Recent discoveries have underlined the importance of Eastern Christianity in the early centuries of the Christian era. For too long Church historians tended to look at the early Church through Western, i.e. Graeco-Roman, eyes. This was understandable inasmuch as the New Testament had been mainly concerned with the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem in a North West direction towards the capital of the Roman Empire, and most of the outstanding figures and literature of early Christian history appeared to be associated with the area around the Mediterranean seaboard. However early documents stemming from Syria, such as the Odes of Solomon and the Acts of Thomas, had long been known although it had proved difficult to fit these into a coherent history of Eastern Christianity. The discovery of the Gospel of Thomas, and the new light which it has thrown on Syriac Christianity, has re-opened this question. Our concern in this article is with early Christianity in Edessa, a city which became a major centre of the early Church deserving to rank with Rome, Ephesus, Alexandria and Antioch.

Edessa was the capital of the small principality of Osrhoene east of the Euphrates and it lay on the great trade route to the East which passed between the Syrian desert to the South and the mountains of Armenia to the North. The city’s inhabitants spoke Syriac, an Aramaic dialect akin to, but not identical with, that spoken in Palestine; and this dialect was the medium of commerce in the Euphrates valley. The city was a centre of literary culture long before the coming of Christianity and its

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1 W. Bauer in his celebrated book, Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzeri im ältesten Christentum (1934, 2nd ed. revised by G. Strecker 1964), held that the Church at Edessa was founded by followers of Marcion and that 'orthodox' Christianity did not arise in that city until the episcopate of Quna in the early fourth century. This theory must now be abandoned in the light of new evidence from Syriac sources. Bauer, with many other older Church historians, tended to regard Syriac Christianity as derivative and secondary to Greek Christianity.
earliest surviving documents have about them an ease and fluidity, perhaps reflecting traces of Greek influence, which is not lost in modern translation. The external history of Edessa was that of many another border state. When the Seleucid Empire was divided between Rome and Parthia Osrhoene lay on the frontier outside the confines of the Empire and within Parthian suzerainty. In Trajan's time c. 116 Edessa was stormed and sacked by the Roman General Lusius Quietus and this was the beginning of the end of its independence. The superior power of Rome exacted a reluctant homage and, after the conclusion of the Parthian war under Marcus Aurelius, forts were constructed and a Roman garrison stationed in the town of Nisibis. The princes of Osrhoene attempted, without avail, to shake off the yoke and eventually in 216 Abgar IX, King of Edessa, was sent in chains to Rome and his dominions reduced to a Roman province. It was during the century between Trajan's war and the final Roman conquest that Christianity gained in strength in Edessa.

When and from whence was Christianity planted in this Syriac city? Eusebius H. E. 1.13 records the story of Addai, one of the seventy-two disciples, who had come to Edessa from Palestine in response to a letter from King Abgar to Jesus. This legend is recorded in Syriac in a book called the Doctrine of Addai which was probably written c. 300 although it contains much older material. The details of the story need not detain us as they are obviously legendary. Thus Agbar IX (179–186) was the first Christian King of Edessa and in the Doctrine the background of his time is read back into the time of Jesus. However there is reason to think that Addai was a historical figure and that, as recorded in the Doctrine, he was a Jew from Palestine. When he came to Edessa we are told that he lodged at the house of Tobias, the son of one Tobias, a Palestinian Jew. It is significant that although the Jews of Palestine

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2 F. C. Burkitt, Early Eastern Christianity (1904) p. 7.
3 Dio Cassius 68.30.
4 Ed. G. Phillips (1876) p. 2ff. Eusebius H. E. 1.13 preserves the apocryphal correspondence between Jesus and Abgar which is also referred to in Peregrinatio Aetheriae 17.1 and which was known to be a forgery as early as Decretum Gelasianum 5.8 (T. & U. 38.4.57).
5 Doctrine pp. 5–6. Addai is likely to be a historical figure as had the Church, c. 300, been looking for a historical founder 'Judas Thomas', whose tomb was claimed for Edessa in the mid-third century, would have been the most likely candidate. F. C. Burkitt, J. T. S. 25 (1924) p. 130, equated Tatian with Addai (abandoning his 1904 view) on the grounds that the Doctrine of Addai p. 36 states that Addai brought the Diatessaron to Edessa. This conjecture is unlikely as philologically there is no equivalence between the two names and, in any case, the Doctrine contains strata of different dates.