

APOCRYPHA
LE CHAMP DES APOCRYPHES

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Littérature Apocryphe Chrétienne
(A.E.L.A.C.)

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1, 1990



La fable
apocryphe

I

BREPOLS



C'est simplement sans doute le résultat d'un assez long processus soi-disant naturel d'élimination quasi darwinienne. Les œuvres les plus adaptées à l'Église ont survécu. La littérature juive de l'époque du Second Temple était probablement beaucoup plus variée que ce qui nous en reste mais la majeure partie de cette littérature fut complètement délaissée par l'Église comme d'ailleurs par les Juifs eux-mêmes qui en avaient abandonné la totalité car elle ne convenait pas non plus au judaïsme talmudique.

qui nous reste, une littérature judéo-hellénistique qui aurait été repoussée par une censure chrétienne puisque Eusèbe cite bien Artapané où l'on peut trouver des détails qui ne correspondent pas aux idées des Pères de l'Église (*ibid.*, p. 34). A cela on peut répliquer qu'il n'y a, chez Artapané, qu'un seul détail qui pouvait gêner l'Église, à savoir que Moïse avait inventé et introduit de nombreux cultes dans la religion égyptienne, ce qui, d'ailleurs, n'était qu'un moyen pour consolider l'absolutisme du pharaon et qu'il ne s'agit là que d'une histoire concernant le jeune Moïse, élevé à la cour de Pharaon, comme un Égyptien païen, avant qu'il n'ait découvert sa véritable identité et avant la révélation divine (*cf.* Y. GUTMAN, II, 1963, p. 123-125; et GOODMAN lui-même [E. SCHÜRER *et al.*, III/I, 1986, p. 522-523]). En revanche, Artapané, quand il raconte que les portes de la prison de Moïse s'ouvrirent d'elles-mêmes pour lui permettre de s'enfuir, fournit un excellent prototype et précédent aux *Actes des Apôtres* qui rapportent qu'un ange vint sauver de la prison, de la même façon, les apôtres et, encore une autre fois, Pierre seul (*cf.* Y. GUTMAN, II, 1963, p. 130). Encore plus récemment GOODMAN (E. SCHÜRER *et al.*, III/I, 1986, p. 472, n. 4) a ajouté un autre argument à cette thèse « sceptique », remarquant que, s'il y avait eu d'autres textes juifs en grec, les Pères de l'Église auraient pu s'en servir dans leurs apologies et leurs instructions, de même que d'autres auteurs juifs auraient pu aisément les citer et il conclut : « Failure to use more than a handful suggests that only a few ever existed » (*ibid.*). A cela il faut répondre d'abord que cet argument repose sur la supposition gratuite que les textes en question auraient été vraiment attirants pour l'Église. Je soutiens justement le contraire. Car non seulement les textes perdus n'apportaient rien de particulièrement intéressant pour l'Église, mais plusieurs de ces écrits devaient très probablement contenir des passages qui étaient en contradiction avec ses théories, comme, par exemple, l'obligation d'observer rigoureusement des préceptes comme la circoncision, le shabbat, les lois alimentaires, etc. Par contre les textes préservés par l'Église contiennent effectivement plusieurs éléments utiles pour celle-ci (voir supra). Enfin, les autres auteurs juifs, comme Philon et Josèphe, ne citent aucun des textes judéo-hellénistiques même préservés et connus. Il n'y a donc pas à s'étonner qu'ils n'en citent pas d'autres non plus.

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APOCRYPHAL LITERATURE IN THE CULTURAL MILIEU OF OSRHOËNE

Lecturing about apocryphal literature in the cultural milieu of Osrhoëne is totally different from e.g. giving a paper on Albert Camus' literary oeuvre and the culture of French Northern Africa, or James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the intellectual climate at Dublin in the twenties. Although the difficulties of such investigations should not be underestimated, I have been confronted with so many questions and problems that a question-mark after the title of this paper would be more appropriate. Let me, therefore, first of all list some of those problems in order to give an impression of the specific difficulties involved in the study of apocryphal texts that originate in the Syriac-speaking area of Northern Mesopotamia, the tiny kingdom of Osrhoëne with Edessa as its capital.

What are the characteristics of the cultural milieu of Osrhoëne and are they different from those of other areas and cities in the Near East in the first three centuries A.D.? Do we possess sufficient sources for an adequate description of Osrhoëne's cultural pattern? Which apocryphal writings originate in that specific cultural milieu? What mental and religious outlook do they represent? Are they products of a gnosticising branch of Christianity or just the opposite, to mention only one of the current alternatives so hotly disputed in our discipline. Possible answers to these questions are crucial for any characterization of that cultural climate in East-Syrian, since Christian apocryphal treatises that may have been written there are the only literary sources for knowledge of its thoughtworld. The number of questions can be greatly multiplied, but the main problems are sufficiently clear and still unsolved.

Osrhoëne was a tiny kingdom in Northern Mesopotamia, whose capital Edessa was a Seleucid city. In 132 B.C. during the period of decline of Seleucid power a local dynasty of

Arab origin made Osrhoëne independent. From that time an *arabarchos* ruled the city and the surrounding area and successfully preserved its independence till 214 A.D., when the emperor Caracalla made it into a Roman *colonia*. A last descendant of the royal family may have ruled or at least been present till 242 or 248 A.D.¹ For almost four centuries the local rulers maintained the city's freedom and independence between the rival powers in the East and the West, between Rome and the Parthians, with astuteness and intelligence. This history is an excellent example of the *histoire à longue durée* that is so characteristic of the ancient Mediterranean world.

The palpable remnants of Edessa's ancient culture are scanty: some columns and capitals, mosaics and fragments of sculpture, about seventy old-Syriac inscriptions and a certain number of coins, supplemented by records of the era of the kings that are found in later Syriac literature together with some information about the detested pagan idolatry². Real written sources that date back to that period are very few: a letter of Mara bar Serapion to his son with philosophical rules and recipes for his behaviour, a vivid eye-witness account of a flood of the river Daisan that is to be found in the *Chronicon Edessenum* and a Syriac deed of sale dating back to 243 A.D. that was discovered at Dura-Europos³. In that deed of sale the archives of the city of Edessa are referred to as the place where important documents are kept. The author of the *ChronEdess* took at least some of his information from those particular archives which are also mentioned in the *Doctrina Addai*, the legend of the origin of at least part of the local Christian community. Eusebius explicitly refers to the Edessene archives at the place where he got

1. For Edessa's history see R. DUVAL, 1892; J.B. SEGAL, 1970: a list of Edessene kings can be found on p. 15; H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1977, p. 863-885.

2. See J.B. SEGAL, 1970, p. 9-61 and the plates; H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1972; H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1980.

3. Mara bar Serapion's letter in W. CURETON, 1855, p. 43-48; F. SCHULTHESS, 1897; *Chronicon Edessenum* (I. GUIDI, 1903) presents the story of the flood of 201 C.E. as first record; the Syriac *Deed of Sale* from Dura-Europos in J.A. GOLDSTEIN, 1966; H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1972, p. 54-57; cf. A.R. BELLINGER-C.B. WELLES, 1935.

his version of the Abgar legend⁴. Those archives contained royal annals, laws and decrees, copies of deeds and official correspondence, and if we consider the *DoctrAddai* a historically reliable document, the foundation act of the Christian church. The Edessene archives was connected with the royal chancery where the royal correspondence was conducted.

The local Edessene institution had its forerunners in the chanceries of the Seleucid empire which were modelled on similar offices in Achaemenid times. A high-ranking courtier, the *epistolographos*, was head of the chancery⁵. The information of the *DoctrAddai* on king Abgar's correspondence with Jesus of Nazareth that was conducted by Hanan the *tabularius* fits, in routine and pattern, the Royal Correspondence in the Hellenistic Period (C.B. Welles). As the hellenistic kings had done earlier, a copy of this correspondence was inscribed in stone and put in public view near Edessa where it was discovered in modern times⁶.

The royal court had a central function in local urban culture. In its archives it kept the memories of the past in royal annals. The *ChronEdess* preserved some traces and fragments of those chronicles. The local ruler brought philosophers and other scholars to his court like the hellenistic kings and the sovereigns of the Mesopotamian realms. Bardaisan (154-222

4. The story of the flood of 201 C.E. ends with the following sentences: « Haec acta regisque Abgari edictum conscripsere Maryahb bar Shemesh et Qayoma bar Magartat, notarii Edesseni: eaque in tabularium Edessenum intulere Bardin et Bolyad, ejusdem tabularii praefecti, utpote urbis commissarii (*Sharîrê*) ». The *Doctrina Addai*, (G. HOWARD, 1981), ends with the following statement: « As is the custom in the kingdom of King Abgar and in all kingdoms, everything which is said before him is written and placed among the records. Labubna, the son of Senaq the son of Abshadar, the scribe of the king, therefore, wrote the things concerning the Apostle Addai from the beginning to the end, while Hanan, the faithful (*Sharîrâ*) archivist of the king, set the hand of witness and placed it among the records of the royal books, where the statuses and ordinances are placed. The matters belonging to those who buy and sell are also kept there with care and concern »; cf. Eusebius, *HE* I,13,5; *Acts of Barsamya*, CURETON, 1864, p. 72.

5. Cf. C.B. WELLES, 1934, p. xxxvii sq.

6. See M.V. OPPENHEIM-F. HILLER von GAERTRINGEN, 1914, p. 817 sq.

A.D.) the Aramaic philosopher and astrologer and courtier of king Abgar VIII the Great is well-known. Sextus Julius Africanus who accompanied the emperor Septimius Severus to Edessa met him there and admired his skill as an archer⁷. In that time Edessa most likely had a kind of « school » where the young local aristocrats were educated and philosophy and rhetoric were taught⁸. The royal family had a prominent position among the local aristocrats, so we learn from the *DoctrAddai* that gives a description of the king and his nobles. There existed a kind of *patronus-clientis* relationship between the *arabarchos* and the members of noble families that is clearly depicted on a recently discovered Edessene tomb mosaic⁹. The king functioned as « lord and benefactor » of the local aristocratic families who in their turn honored the members of the royal family with public inscriptions, statues and columns. The same pattern of mutual homage marking a common high rank in the social body of the urban community existed at Palmyra and Hatra¹⁰. Syriac was the spoken and written language at Edessa and the neighbouring Osrhoëne area, although large groups of the urban population and surely the élite mastered Greek. Teaching and literary education, however, were offered in Syriac. Philosophical discussions were held in Syriac and philosophical treatises were written in Syriac, so that Greek *paideia* presented itself in Syriac disguise. Unlike the situation in Antioch and its surroundings, a linguistic frontier was not a cultural barrier dividing and separating the Greek-speaking élite from the Aramaic-speaking rank and file. Greek and Syriac functioned as languages that were equivalent to each other with the consequence that treatises originally written in Syriac were often immediately translated into Greek and the other way around. We may assume that a strongly developed sense of national pride gave that specific function of cultural

7. Text in *PG X*, col. 45; cf. H.J.W. DRIVERS, 1966, p. 167.

8. See E.R. HAYES, 1930; cf. H.-I. MARROU, 1948, p. 291sq.

9. H.J.W. DRIVERS, 1982; J.B. SEGAL, 1983, p. 107-110, is of the opinion that the pictured Abgar bar Ma'nu does not represent king Abgar the Great but a later member of the royal house, when the dynasty did not actually reign Edessa.

10. H.J.W. DRIVERS, 1982, p. 184sq.

vehiculum to the local Aramaic dialect¹¹. During the second half of the second century A.D. when Edessa reached the pinnacle of its political and cultural life, local coins had Syriac legends¹².

Although not a typical caravan-city Edessa was situated at a junction of important high-roads leading to India and China. An Indian embassy on its road to the emperor Elagabal passed by Edessa and informed Bardaisan about Brahmans, Indian laws of purity and cosmological concepts. He worked up all this information into a book on India that Porphyry knew of and from which he preserved some useful excerpts¹³. Even knowledge of China and Chinese culture was available at Edessa. For it was an important station on the ancient silk-road and many travellers and merchants passed by Edessa on their way to or from the Far East and often sojourned there for some days.

This survey consists of cultural relics often preserved by chance and of some stray records and notes — real cultural bric-à-brac. It can be supplemented with information about local dress and with scanty reports on pagan cults of Bêl, Nebo and Atargatis and the ancient Mesopotamian moon god Sin¹⁴. Taken as a whole, however, it is certainly not sufficient to sketch a coherent picture of Edessene culture. We do not know anything about historical traditions that shaped the Edessene national and cultural identity. Religious myths and Syriac literature from the prechristian period are totally unknown. We can only guess at social behaviour, at the prevailing value system and at what people talked about in public or private. For human culture is not a collection of artifacts and written texts, but first and foremost « a set of control mechanisms, plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call « programs »), for the governing of be-

11. Such is the case with Bardaisan's writings, cf. H.J.W. DRIVERS, 1966, p. 63sq; Eusebius, *HE IV*, 30, and with the apocryphal *AcThom*.

12. Cf. H.J.W. DRIVERS, 1980, p. 28-33, pl. XXXII, XXXIII, XXXIV.

13. Porphyry, *De Abst.* IV,17; Porphyry, *De Styge* = *FGH*, III,C, Fr.719; cf. H.J.W. DRIVERS, 1966, p. 173-176.

14. Sin was venerated as *Marelahê* = « Lord of the Gods » at Sumatar Harabesi sixty kilometers south-east of modern Urfa in the Tektik mountains, where a whole range of Syriac inscriptions attest to his cult; see H.J.W. DRIVERS, 1980, p. 122-145.

havior »¹⁵. These « control mechanisms » consist of « significant symbols », words, but gestures, sounds and images too that give meaning to human experiences and construct reality into a human, i.e. a cultural world. In a scholarly tradition that is different from anglo-saxon cultural anthropology we would use the term « mentalité »¹⁶.

Written sources are the primary means of obtaining any knowledge and understanding of « significant symbols » and mentalities of ancient cultures and societies. Partly in contrast with and partly in addition to traditional philology, new methods of text analysis have been developed in order to investigate texts as condensed meanings in a given social context. Words like contextuality and intertextuality were introduced into scholarly slang. For convenience and on purpose I will pass over the higher cryptology of structuralism, since I am not interested in the eternal, and therefore non-existent, structures of the human mind, but in utterances and forms of that mind in a specific social-historical situation. « Human thought is basically both social and public », because human nature or human mind does not exist independently of culture¹⁷.

Apocryphal writings that probably originate in Osrhoëne and Edessa are almost the only sources of possible insight into at least a segment of Edessene culture in the second and third centuries A.D. They reflect the reception of Christianity in various forms into different groups of the population, and, therefore, give an idea of their prevailing concepts. In the same way Bardaisan's works and doctrine reflect and give insight into the thoughtworld of the local philosophically trained aristocratic milieu. I will restrict myself to the *DoctrAddai*¹⁸, the *Acts of Thomas*¹⁹, and the *Odes of Solomon*²⁰

15. Cf. GEERTZ, 1973, p. 44; cf. for Geertz' concept of culture as « an ordered system of meaning and symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place », R.L. MOORE-F.E. REYNOLDS, 1984, p. 11-74.

16. See J. LE GOFF, 1974; G. DUBY, 1961; M. VOVELLE, 1979.

17. Cf. GEERTZ, 1973, p. 45.

18. G. PHILLIPS, 1876; G. HOWARD, 1981 reprinted Phillips' Syriac text and gave a new translation. The literary and historical problems connected with the *DoctrAddai* are complicated: cf. A. DESREUMAUX, 1983.

19. Syriac text of the *AcThom* in W. WRIGHT, 1871; see A.F.J. KLJN, 1962 and in particular F. BOVON, 1981, p. 223sq.

20. J.H. CHARLESWORTH, 1977; the *editio princeps* of J. RENDEL HARRIS-A. MINGANA, 1916-1920 remains indispensable.

which does not imply that these writings all reflect the same mentality and social context. It is possible that also the Pseudo-Clementine writings and the *Didascalia Apostolorum* are related to the Edessene milieu, but much is uncertain here²¹. The same holds true for the other writings under Thomas' name, although it seems highly likely that they also originate in Syriac-speaking Northern Mesopotamia, since they have much in common with the *AcThom* and the *OdSol*²².

The theme of conversion holds a prominent place in all these writings. Background, milieu, and motives of conversion are of paramount importance for our inquiry, since they may mirror what driving forces played a rôle and what values stood in high esteem. The milieu in which conversion is usually situated is the royal court and noble circles related to it. That milieu dominates and guarantees existing social values and hierarchy, and consequently also changes in that pattern. The royal court dominates the scene of the *DoctrAddai* and the apostle Judas Thomas, slave and twin of Jesus, destroys marriages and social relations mainly at royal courts and in noble families. The conversion of a king at the center of the whole society bears a special importance which throws new light on the often proclaimed revolutionary aspects and anti-social trends of Thomas' encratism.

The spiritual and intellectual climate of the Edessene royal court is, at least partly, reflected in the philosophy of the courtier Bardaisan. The Aramaic philosopher can be considered a typical representative of the élite and its cultural ideal that shape young men for a leading rôle in society²³. His view of man as a being that consists of body, soul, and mind and on those three levels is ruled by the laws of nature, by fate, and by freedom respectively is a special variant of the anthropology of Middle Platonism²⁴. But it is also a view that is characteristic of a ruling élite for which the superiority of mind and free will is essential to the exercise of power and to overcoming the revolt of the body and the

21. See R.H. CONNOLLY, 1929, p. lxxxvii sq.

22. That becomes clear from H.-Ch. Puech's impressive analyses of the main concepts in the *Gospel of Thomas*: H.-Ch. PUECH, 1978.

23. See P. BROWN, 1978a.

24. See A. DIHLE, 1979.

caprices of fate. Being involved with spiritual matters and with the divine world does not necessarily imply withdrawal from society and a quiet life of study and contemplation. On the contrary the concentration of cultural ideals in one man, the philosopher, places him as teacher and paradigm in the real center of society. The philosopher's presence at a royal court, as e.g. Bardaisan at Edessa and Longinus at Zenobia's court in Palmyra, is, therefore, not mere decoration or snobism of a barbarian monarch, but the representation of the central values of society in the center of power.

Conversion and asceticism that would imply a farewell to established social life is accordingly no part of Bardaisan's philosophical doctrine. The divine spirit, identified by him with God's *logos* or Christ, brings order into the chaos of matter and dwells in man. It directs him to do good and to control his physical existence and vicissitudes in life. That is the real ideal of the well-educated and wise aristocrat! Bardaisan's well-attested polemics with Marcion consequently has a much deeper ground than a mere theological dispute on the principles of creation at first sight would suggest. Two lifestyles come into conflict here. The cultural ideals of a ruling class will always make a stand against an ideology that in principle rejects the existing order as the deficient product of an envious evil God. Another well-known opponent of Marcionitism in the East and Bardaisan's contemporary, Aberkios was a man of upper-class literary education too²⁵. Key-words of Bardaisan's thoughtworld are harmony, order, freedom which taken together represent the cultural ideal of local Edessene élite.

Edessene apocryphal writings speak a totally different language and display a completely different mental outlook. The *AcThom* that are almost contemporaneous with Bardaisan have a royal court as main scene of action, but Judas Thomas is a stranger and outsider in that milieu. He is a slave and in the eyes of kings and nobles a sorcerer who ruins marriages and is considered a danger to established order²⁶. The keryg-

25. See W. WISCHMEYER, 1980.

26. Cf. the emotional scenes between Karish and king Mazdai and the apostle Judas Thomas : Karish said to Judas : « Get up, wretch and corruptor and enemy! » (WRIGHT, 1871, p. 236).

ma of the *AcThom* is radically encratic. Salvation is symbolized as a spiritual marriage with Christ the bridegroom and means a victory over all physical sexuality. It is a return to and regaining of paradise lost, of the pure and untainted human condition before the snake's fatal action. In that condition he was a totally a-sexual being, immortal and without any reason to be ashamed (cf. *Gen* 2,24-25). Man lost that condition, however, by wrongly using his free will, and consequently lost his immortality, his robe of light, also named his spirit. If man, however, keeps his body pure as a temple, the spirit in the form of Christ, returns to him, so that man can thus regain his original immortality and state of happiness and harmony. Then man becomes a son of God again like Christ, the only Son of God, born not of the will of the flesh, but of God, of the water and the Spirit (cf. *Joh* 1,13; 3,5). This anthropological-soteriological pattern goes back to Tatian in whose *Oratio ad Graecos* it is most clearly phrased²⁷. In the *AcThom* it is represented by Judas Thomas, Jesus' twin, who often changes places with his divine brother²⁸. In principle and in fact every man has this opportunity to become identical with Jesus, to become an immortal son of God again, if he strictly keeps to the radical *enkrateia*. In various images and symbols in the *AcThom* man is pictured as a king's son, who left his royal condition out of free will and went out to the evil world symbolized as Egypt. There he can regain his royal status and return to his parents' place if he overcomes the Satan and snatches the pearl²⁹. This kerygma is worded in a very sophisticated way in highly symbolical acts and stories that use and explain certain key-words and terms. In particular the first act of Thomas that is based on Christ's passion as recorded in the Gospel, is illustrative in this respect³⁰.

Unlike Bardaisan who, in or with his irenic and harmonious view of man, considers good man's true nature and

27. Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 5,1-3; 7,1-3; 11,2; 15,1; H.J.W. DRIVERS, 1984a, p. 7sq.

28. *AcThom* 11,34,45,57,147-53; H.-Ch. PUECH, 1978, p. 42sq.

29. For the interpretation of the much-discussed Hymn of the Pearl, cf. P.-H. POIRIER, 1981; I follow in main lines H. KRUSE, 1978.

30. Cf. J.A. DELAUNAY, 1974; J.M. LAFARGUE, 1985.

evil only a temporary disturbance of order and harmony, his fellow-citizens, who are responsible for the *AcThom*, take a more agonistic view. Man is permanently exposed to the powers of seduction against which he ought to fight. In that struggle Christ is not in the first place a divine teacher, as Bardaisan sees Him, but a divine helper, with whom man can identify provided that he creates room for Christ's Spirit in his physical being by keeping it pure. Then, but only then, can every man gain royal status, whereas kings and their nobles are exposed as poor defenders of a social order that is mere earthly appearance and does not have any value and subsistence *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Actually a complete inversion of social rôles is taking place here. A slave obtains royal status by his ascetical struggle and *enkrateia*. Royal kinsfolk give up their hereditary positions completely out of free will and cheapen themselves with a mean sorcerer, as Charis and king Misdaï call Judas Thomas. The *AcThom* demonstrate how that rôle inversion brings about a new social grouping that is at right angles to traditional antique society by uniting the upper class and the rank and file into one and the same ideal of humanity. For the majority of Edessene Christians this surely means that their ascribed status is considerably higher than their actual status³¹.

We must be very careful to look at a writing like the *AcThom* exclusively from a literary viewpoint. The mental out-look that comes to the fore in such a treatise is the expression of the specific way the author or the group that is responsible for these acts viewed the world and formulated their central values. In the very text of the *AcThom* there are no indications that can help us identify that group more precisely. Although the *AcThom* usually are labelled folk literature (Volksliteratur!) the sophisticated symbolic character of the text forbids such a labelling. The *Acts* must have been written and read in circles that had a thorough knowledge of Old and New Testament, and of traditions linked to it of theological and philosophical problems and disputes. We might think of the milieu of schooled labourers and merchants that constituted a substantial part of Edessa's mid-

31. Cf. J.G. GAGER, 1975; W.A. MEEKS, 1983.

dle-class³². Interest in theological and metaphysical questions is not exceptional in such circles³³.

The origin and background of this encratite ideal which the *AcThom* preach is not to be sought in Christianity, although Christianity shaped this ideal in its own way. Paul Veyne and Aline Rousselle have made clear along different lines how this specific relationship of man with his own body and with his or her partner's body originate in a gradual revolution in sexual morals that took place during the first two centuries A.D. In particular medical literature of that time gives a clear insight into what was at stake³⁴. The *AcThom* remain within the context of that more general and broader pattern of sexual morals in which in a marriage the male partner represents « le corps maîtrisé » and the female « le corps dominé ». A man, the apostle Thomas, preaches the ideal of virginity to women!

That ideal of virginity serves as « a program for the governing of behavior », a « discours » Foucault would say. The strong emphasis that is put on the function of the spirit in the process of realization of this program makes manifest that we have to do with « vertus intériorisées » that are preached, not practised or applicable to all members of society, but to a restricted number of special individuals, the so-called « covenanters », Christian saints, and Manichean *electi*³⁵.

The central place of the royal court in the *AcThom* — by

32. Cf. C. COLPE, 1979.

33. A good example in Cl. GEERTZ, 1983, p. 59sq, where he gives a description of an inland county-seat in Java: « ...in the midst of this depressing scene there was an absolutely astonishing intellectual vitality, a philosophical passion really, and a popular one besides, to track the riddles of existence right down to the ground. Destitute peasants would discuss questions of the freedom of the will, illiterate tradesman discoursed on the properties of God, common laborers had theories about the relations between reason and passion, the nature of time, or the reliability of the senses. And, perhaps most importantly, the problem of the self — its nature, function, and mode of operation — was pursued with the sort of reflective intensity one could find among ourselves in only the most recherché settings indeed », a description that would fit third-century Edessa!

34. P. VEYNE, 1978; A. ROUSSELLE, 1983.

35. Cf. H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1984b.

the way, the only apocryphal writing where that is the case! — connects them with the *DoctrAddai* which reports the conversion of Edessa's dynasty and aristocracy to the new faith. The *DoctrAddai* was written sometime during the last quarter of the third century as a propaganda tract of nascent Edessene orthodoxy against the claims of the local Manichean community of being the only true form of Christendom. The Christian apostle Addai whom Judas Thomas sent to Edessa is the foil of the Manichean missionary Addai whom Mani sent out and who preached all over the Mesopotamian area. Titus of Bostra wrote his *Contra Manicheos* a century later in order to refute Addai's treatises. Very soon the Greek text was translated into Syriac and is to be found in the oldest extant Syriac manuscript written at Edessa in 411 C.E.!³⁶ On the one hand the *DoctrAddai* presents itself as a record from the Edessene archives, where the royal correspondence was kept; at the other hand it is related to Manichean missionary propaganda which often was made at a royal court³⁷. It is not too far-fetched to assume that this particular literary form was chosen on purpose to give the *DoctrAddai* a maximum of status and effectivity.

It is noteworthy that the *DoctrAddai* polemizes extensively against Jews and pagans, whereas the *AcThom* do not carry on a controversy with other religions — again an exception among the apocryphal acts! The polemical tone is not, however, truly hostile, but more persuasive. Jews and pagans are summoned to convert to the only true religion and treated with a distinct esteem. Everything points to an origin of the *DoctrAddai* that is to be sought in a Christian group with a pagan background, on which Judaism exerted a strong attraction. When Christianity grew stronger at Edessa, hostility against the Jews became greater too³⁸.

The *DoctrAddai* does not preach an overt asceticism, but it is in doctrine of salvation and christological views very similar to the *AcThom*. We come across the same Spirit-

36. Cf. H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1983.

37. Cf. L.J.R. ORT, 1967, p. 50sq; 95sq; W. SUNDERMANN, 1974; H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1983, p. 179.

38. H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1985a.

Christology and the same view of Satan and seduction³⁹. Is any clear trace of asceticism missing owing to polemics with Manicheism for which the ascetic struggle was the only way of salvation? It is not easy to get a clear-cut idea of the milieu in which the *DoctrAddai* originates. It seems most likely that literate circles of e.g. higher-middle class Edessene citizens with a pagan background and strong bonds with local traditions and customs are responsible for this first-class literary fiction and forgery. Circles that were not part of local aristocracy, but certainly not at the other end of the social scale. Perhaps circles from which priests of the pagan pantheon were recruited taking into account the touching and dramatic story about the conversion of the priests Shavida and Abednebo. But much of this is mere guesswork, since accurate information is lacking.

The *AcThom* as well as the *DoctrAddai* clearly seek to join up with traditional patterns of Edessene society in which court and nobles played a paramount rôle. Conversions are situated, therefore, at the royal court, and initiatives in organizing the new faith are taken there. Therein the Christians display their tendency to gain an acknowledged place in the urban community and to find ways of dealing with other people. We see the same tendencies and characteristics during the third century in the Christian community at Dura-Europos, whose chapel with some frescoes and inscriptions was preserved and excavated in the thirties⁴⁰. The chapel functioned as a *baptisterium*, where the catechumens were baptized, and then took their places as neophytes in the community⁴¹. Baptism is the sacrament par excellence that symbolizes the entrance into new immortal life. It unites man with Christ his bridegroom and liberates him from Satan and his heir. Through baptism man participates in God's wisdom and knowledge, His power and will represented by Christ on earth. Through baptism Christ as Spirit will dwell in man's

39. Cf. *DoctrAddai*, ed. G. HOWARD, 1981, p. 41: « His (i.e. Jesus) body is the clean royal garment of his glorious divinity by which we are able to see his hidden Lordship. Therefore, we herald and proclaim this Jesus the Messiah, we glorify his Father with him, and we extol and worship the Spirit of his divinity... ».

40. C.H. KRÆLING, 1967.

41. Cf. O. PERLER, 1972.

frail body that is preserved in purity. With these and kindered terms baptism and its meaning is described as well in the *AcThom* as in the *DoctrAddai*.

If the preaching of the Gospel at Edessa caused a fundamental change in a traditional pattern of life and brought about new social groupings, the enormous effect of the combination of spoken word and ritual was the main reason. In particular a continuous repetition of the same themes in the homiletic passages of the *AcThom* and in the prayers that accompany the actual baptism intensifies that compelling effect. By means of such intense ritual and powerful words the « discours » of a new life is impressed upon people and another image of what a man is and can be is imposed on him with coercive force.

It is, therefore, not without foundation that the forty-two *Odes of Solomon* should be considered baptismal hymns, since they all center on the new life that the singer was given⁴². The Poet sings of the immortal paradisiacal life that he regained through Christ. The divine Spirit speaks through him, provides him with insight in God's eternal plans, protects him against enemies and guards him against error and sin. This union with Christ goes so far as to bring about a complete identification, so that the Poet sings words that you would expect from Christ. The singer becomes a son of God as Christ is the Son of God, in exactly the same manner as Judas Thomas appears as Jesus' twin brother and changes places with his divine *alter ego*⁴³. Besides that, the *OdSol* have various concepts and images in common with the *AcThom* and belong to the same ascetical trend in Syriac Christianity.

The *OdSol* contain an explicit polemic against the Marcionites, who are, however, never named. *Ode* 38 is directed against the claims of the Manicheans, whose community is labeled the corrupting and corrupted Bride and Bridegroom, who imitate the true marriage of Christ and His Bride⁴⁴. The

42. See e.g. *Ode* 3,5-11, ed. J.H. CHARLESWORTH, 1978; cf. H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1984a, p. 14sq.

43. See H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1985b.

44. H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1981; L. ABRAMOWSKI, 1984 sees here anti-Marcionite polemics too and pleads for an earlier date round 200 A.D.

OdSol should consequently be dated in the second half of the third century, when Manicheism was a strong rival in the religious melting pot of Edessa, and they are therefore contemporary with the *DoctrAddai* which also aims at the Manichees. The highly symbolical language of the *Odes* connects them with Ephrem Syrus' poetic oeuvre and with e.g. the baptismal catecheses of John Chrysostom. They are not baptismal hymns, but hymns of the baptized believers who are truly sons of God⁴⁵.

The *OdSol* represent a characteristic Syriac literary genre of highly poetical lyrical poetry with a didactic character. Bardaisan's hymns belong to the same genre like the hymns in the *AcThom*. Manichean and Mandaic hymns are offshoots of the same tree⁴⁶. These hymns create another identity in the singer and his hearers, they raise him to another level of existence, where he possesses divine wisdom and immortal life, and evil can do him no harm. Title, imagery, and religious concepts relate the *OdSol* with the *AcThom* and the *DoctrAddai*. The Poet is son of God, the eternal king, just as Jesus is God's son, and Solomon was great king David's son. The *OdSol* display thereby the same anthropological-christological pattern as the famous Hymn of the Pearl, which paraphrases the kerygma of the *AcThom* in a condensed form. The *Odes* belong to the tradition of Wisdom literature and contain elements of Middle Platonism like those which come to light in the *Sapientia Salomonis* and especially in the Syriac version of it⁴⁷. Like the *AcThom* and the *DoctrAddai* they mirror the thought world of a literate élite which had a central place in Edessene Christianity at the end of the second and through the third century C.E.

With minor differences all these writings reflect more or less the same milieu, where strong emphasis was put on the function of the human and divine Spirit as the only means of returning to an original condition of immortality and close-

45. H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1985b, *passim* : a new investigation of the many parallels between the *OdSol* and Ephrem's poetical oeuvre would be rewarding.

46. See in particular T. SÄVE-SÖDERBERGH, 1949, mainly devoted to a study of the *Psalms of Thomas*, p. 163sq; P. NAGEL, 1980, p. 15-27.

47. H.J.W. DRIJVERS, 1986.

ness to God. Man is taught and helped to regain that condition, his original royal status. Such a view of man and world has nothing to do with gnosticism and its negative view of matter and creation. On the contrary, man is able to restore the original god-given condition of the world. Like Bardaisan these groups oppose the Marcionites. They also polemicize against the Manicheans, who in their turn oppose Bardaisan's views⁴⁸. Notwithstanding their strong *enkrateia* they remain within the existing social context. Men and women give up sex, not their social position!

Edessa was known in antiquity as the Athens of the East, and apocryphal literature that was produced there confirms that designation. It shows a considerable philosophical influence and accords a central place to the spirit in the process of salvation which comprises an ascetic lifestyle in combination with obtaining knowledge and insight into the divine plan of the world. That literature has a special flavour and displays something of the world-wide relations which Edessa as cultural center sustained. But it also represents local cultural values centered at the royal court. It is absolutely not gnostic, but strongly opposes gnostic groups and ideologies like Marcionites and Manicheans. It is, therefore, not amazing that images and religious concepts in third-century apocryphal literature laid the basis for further developments in the fourth century, and are closely related to Ephrem's theology and poetry. Edessa's most famous church father vehemently opposed Marcionites, Manicheans, and Bardaisanites, as our apocryphal authors did a century earlier.

The apocryphal literature of the early phase of Edessene Christendom thus developed into what in later times was considered orthodoxy. Throughout that development Edessene religious and theological literature, apocryphal and « canonical », mirrors the vital powers of a strong and persistent local philosophical and literary tradition, also called the « School of Edessa ». It did not develop in splendid isolation, untouched by hellenism as one scholar once put it, but in continuous exchange of ideas with in particular Antioch. It is

48. Mani opposed Bardaisan's views in his *Book of Mysteries* of which al-Biruni preserved some parts in his book on India, cf. H.J.W. DRIVERS, 1966, p. 204sq.

the best proof of the strength of hellenistic culture in symbiosis with local religious and cultural traditions, which gave birth to that rich and intriguing phenomenon, Edessene apocryphal literature.