

Dear reader,

This is a scan of an article which the author has published with Zondervan (HarperCollins). It is made available on the IxTheo repository by permission of the publisher. The publisher retains copyright. By stipulation of the publisher, the work is to be used for non-commercial, educational purposes only

Original publication:

Katharina Heyden

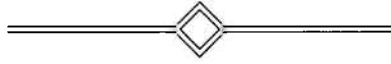
The Legend of Aphroditian. In: Edwards, Christopher J. (ed.), Ancient Literature for New Testament Studies. Volume 9: Early New Testament Apocrypha, pp. 115–127
Grand Rapids:Zondervan 2002

© 2002 Zondervan / HarperCollins. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



CHAPTER 7

THE LEGEND OF APHRODITIAN



KATHARINA HEYDEN

1. INTRODUCTION

The Legend of Aphroditian is an imaginative narration about the magi who came to adore the newborn Christ and his mother Mary in Bethlehem (cf. Matt 2:1–12). In its first part, it describes the appearance of a star and a revelation in a temple of Hera in Persia. In the second part, it illustrates the magi's journey to Judah and their encounter with Mary along with her child in Bethlehem. Thus, the Legend belongs to the group of apocryphal childhood narratives. A rich manuscript tradition indicates the popularity of the Legend in the medieval Byzantine as well as Slavic worlds.

1.1 An Unknown Author in Western Syria

The author of the text remains unknown. In Greek and Slavic traditions, the Legend is attributed to a certain Aphroditian. This attribution goes back to the sixth-century work *De gestis in Perside*.¹ A few manuscripts mention an *Afrikanos* as the author of the narrative. However, this presumably traces back to a misunderstanding of the Greek abbreviation Αφρ in some manuscripts and does not point to the second-century Christian historiographer Julius Africanus. Philip of Side, the compiler of a Christian universal history in Constantinople in the fifth century,² is mentioned as the author in some manuscripts, although he is most likely not the inventor but the transmitter of the Legend of Aphroditian.

The story presents itself as a faithful copy of a report, which is “inscribed upon the golden tablets and laid up in the royal temples” (Leg. Aphr. 1.1; ὡς γὰρ ἐν ταῖς χρυσαῖς ἀγκυλάραις κεκόλαπται καὶ κεῖνται ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς βασιλείοις). But there can be no doubt about its fictional, not to say fantastic, character, which is to be recognized by the fact that a temple of Hera in Persia is historically impossible.

The place of origin is probably western, Greek-speaking Syria. The early reception of the text as a table reading at the patriarch's court on Christmas in Antioch, as well as a close

1. This disputation romance presents a competition between Hellenes, Christians, Jews, and a Zoroastrian magician at the court of the Sassanids. In this, Aphroditian, an educated Greek philosopher, is arbitrator and king's court chef (see Eduard Bratke, *Das sogenannte Religionsgespräch am Hof der Sassaniden*, TU NF 4/3 [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899]; Katharina Heyden, *Die “Erzählung des Aphroditian”: Thema und Variationen einer Legende im Spannungsfeld von Christentum und Heidentum*. Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 93 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009]).

2. See Katharina Heyden, “Die christliche Geschichte des Philippos von Side. Mit einem kommentierten Katalog der Fragmente,” in *Julius Africanus und die christliche Weltchronistik*, ed. M. Wallraff, TU 157 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 209–43.

connection to the cult of the goddess Dea Syria in Hierapolis/Mabbug, points to this.³ Another reference to Syria as the place of origin can be found in the second part of the Legend. There it is told that a gifted slave made a portrait of Mary with the child, which was set up in the temple of Hera after the magicians returned to Persia. This has its parallel in the Doctrine of Addai, which was probably composed in fifth-century Syria. It adds the motif of the portrait of Jesus made by Hannan, which was brought by the sick King Abgar to Edessa, where it was set up in the royal palace according to the so-called Legend of Abgar.⁴

1.2 Apologetic-Missionary Intention

The unknown author of the Legend of Aphroditian appears to draw his inspiration from his knowledge of the cult in Hierapolis. But with what intention did he do this? Are we dealing with a satirical parody of a pagan author or rather with a Christian apologetic-missionary text linked to the cult of Dea Syria? This question cannot be answered with ultimate certainty. However, it is more likely that the Legend originated and was received in Christian circles. This is indicated most strongly by the concluding statement of the magi, in which they make a clear confession to Christ, claiming: "We know that Christ has become our Savior" (Leg. Aphr. 9.2; οἶδαμεν Χριστὸν σωτῆρα ἡμῶν γενόμενον). But already on the basis of the programmatic first sentence, "To Persia Christ was known from the beginning" (Leg. Aphr. 1.1; Ἐκ Περσίδος ἐγνώσθη Χριστὸς ἀπ' ἀρχῆς), it stands to reason that the Legend wants to illustrate when and how Christianity came to Persia. At the same time, the Legend testifies to respect for Persian wisdom in proclaiming Christian truth. However, the text shows no knowledge of real Persia. Furthermore, it was originally written in Greek and therefore cannot have been addressed to a Persian readership. Rather, it seems to be directed to an audience that has a great affinity to pagan culture and cult. Its purpose is to show by means of popular literature that Christianity can fit into paganism and at the same time surpass it. This story and such intentions are quite plausible in the border area between the Roman and Persian Empires, which was a melting pot of cultures and cults.⁵

1.3 Pre-Constantinian Origin?

While uncertainties abound, the parallels to the cult of Hierapolis are possibly indications of the Legend's date. The *terminus ante quem* is the formation of *De gestis in Perside*, which probably falls into the period between the sixth and seventh century. But this text indicates that the Legend was already read in the *Historia Christiana* of Philip of Side written in the 420s, and it is unlikely that Philip, who processed a lot of source material, invented the story himself. The parallels to the cult of Dea Syria could be traced to an origin in the second or third century, the heyday of the sanctuary of Dea Syria in Hierapolis. This early date is supported by the close similarities with the epitaphs of Abercius from the early third century, in which the motifs of spring, fish, and food occur in a similar way as in the Legend (see below). In addition, the interest in Jesus's childhood and the discussions about his divinity were intense at this time, as apocryphal writings like the Protevangelium of James, as well as other sources, show.⁶ But it remains questionable whether the intensity of Marian devotion, as expressed in the Legend of Aphroditian, is already conceivable in

3. See below in more detail.

4. See ch. 20 in this volume.

5. Cf. Touraj Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).

6. For the Protevangelium of James, see ch. 9 of this present volume.

the second or third century. Overall, it cannot be excluded that the Legend of Aphroditian, similar to the Doctrine of Addai, was composed in the fourth or fifth century, using older, pre-Constantinian material, especially in the first part of the text.

It is impossible to assign the Legend of Aphroditian to a specific theological school. It is most plausible that the Legend combines elements of various theological ideas and doctrines in an epoch, which might be called a “laboratory of Christian theology.”⁷

1.4 Creative Reception

The Legend refers to a rich and fascinating history of transmission and reception. The *De gestis in Perside*, mentioned above, passes down the oldest written version of the Legend. Therein, the Legend is told by the Hellenic arbiter Aphroditian and is crucial for the confirmation of Christianity by “Hellenic oracles.” A scholion on *De gestis in Perside* ascribes the Legend to the *Historia Christiana* of Philip of Side, in which it was perhaps part of a book titled “Hellenic Oracles” (Χρησιμώδαι ἑλληνικαί) and was thus available to the author of *De gestis in Perside* as a source.⁸

The medieval manuscript tradition of *De gestis in Perside* already indicates a particular interest in the Legend. Eight of the forty-four known Greek manuscripts of *De gestis in Perside* only pass on this part of the text. The narrative seems to have gradually emerged from the context of *De gestis in Perside* in the manuscript tradition. In the eighth century, John of Damascus included the Legend in a sermon, *De nativitate domini*, as a pagan prophecy for the birth of Christ.⁹ Two magnificently illuminated manuscripts from the Macedonian Renaissance in Constantinople exist due to the Legend: Codex Esphigmenou 14 and Codex Taphou 14.¹⁰ These also contain miniatures of the Legend.¹¹ In the twelfth century at the latest, the Legend was transmitted separately in Byzantium.

In the Slavic tradition, the Legend was widely used in various versions, which is reflected in ninety-two manuscripts known to date.¹² Different closing sentences show editorial redactions with image-friendly, liturgical, or dogmatic emphases. The so-called Pre-Mongolian translation was possibly produced in Bulgaria as early as the tenth century and is now available in fifty-eight manuscripts. The so-called South Slavic translation, which is extant in thirty-four manuscripts, is based on a Serbian translation of an original Greek translation made in Constantinople, or on Mount Athos, in the fourteenth century at the latest. Until the sixteenth century, the Legend was in regular liturgical use in the Slavic world on Christmas. In the collective codices, it is indicated as a reading at the end of the service or as a table reading in monasteries and private houses for December 25th.

Later, the Legend was again received in other Slavic writings, for example, in a christological adaptation by the Ladder of Jacob, in which various elements of the Legend are

7. Christoph Marksches, “Alte Kirche,” *RGK* 1:353.

8. Heyden, *Die “Erzählung des Aphroditian”*, 171–225.

9. Bonifatius Kotter, ed., *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, Volume 5: Opera Homiletica et Hagiographica*, PTS 29 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988).

10. Both date from the second half of the eleventh century.

11. See Heyden, *Die “Erzählung des Aphroditian”*, 67–93, and fig. 5–49; cf. Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, “L’illustration du cycle des Mages suivant l’homélie sur la Nativité attribuée à Jean Damascène,” *Muséon* 100 (1987): 208–18.

12. Alexander G. Bobrov, *Апокрифическое Сказание Афродитиана в литературе и книжности Древней Руси. Исследование и тексты* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1994); Pauline Bringel, “Interprétation et réécritures dans la tradition manuscrite du Récit d’Aphroditien,” in *Entré Actes. Regards croisés en sciences humaines. Réalités et représentations: les pistes de la recherche. Actes du 1er Colloque international des jeunes chercheurs en sciences humaines et sociales de Strasbourg, 10 et 11 mai 2004*, ed. Laurent Angard (Strasbourg: Université Marc Bloch, 2005), 285–96.

taken up in the mode of prophecy and presented to a fictitious Jew as proof of the biblical announcement of the incarnation. It states, for example: "But when he comes, the idols, who are angry, stone and any sculpture, will make their voices sound for three days. There they will tell those wise men to also recognize the future on earth, and they will find their way to him through a star."¹³ In an anonymously transmitted "Speech on the Star of Hera,"¹⁴ elements of the story are linked to biblical motifs, such as Balaam's prophecies (Num 22–24), as well as to Neo-Platonic philosophical ideas. These traces of reception bear witness to the great popularity of the Legend in medieval Russia. The Persian Aphroditian was also highly regarded in the rising Russia of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He appears in a series with other pagan and biblical authorities as a prophet of Jesus's birth on the bronze doors of Blagoveshchensky Sobor and Uspensky Sobor, the two most important cathedrals on the Kremlin.

In the sixteenth century, the monk Michael Trivolis, alias Maksim Grek (1470–1556), who immigrated from Athos, triggered a debate in opposition to the popular Legend. Maksim's polemic, "On the Accusation and Conviction of the False Thinking Persian Aphroditian,"¹⁵ with which he tried to curb liturgical use, was part of a comprehensive literary and political campaign for the "Greekization" of the Russian Church. His attack against the Legend had different consequences. From some codices the corresponding pages were removed with reference to the "lying character" of the writing. In others, Maksim's objections were recorded as marginals. Nevertheless, and at the same time, the story was included in the *Great Reading Menologia* compiled by the Moscow metropolitan Makarij in 1554, in which Russia's literary heritage was to be fixed and thus legitimized as the heir to the lost Byzantium.

Little is known about the reception of the Legend in the Latin West. The similarity in name between Ἀφροδιτιανός and *Affrodisius*, prefect of the Egyptian city of Sorinen, in which, according to the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew 22–24 (written not earlier than in the seventh century), the statues of the gods fell down in the temple when Mary and Joseph entered the city with the newborn child, is probably one trace of reception.

Finally, academic research on the Legend of Aphroditian began at the end of the nineteenth century, mainly driven by Russian¹⁶ and German¹⁷ scholars of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule ("history-of-religions school") who were particularly interested in relations to pagan cults in the first part of the Legend. The Legend's significance for New Testament studies and the history of early Christianity is still largely undiscovered.

2. SUMMARY OF CONTENT

The Legend is not an extensive writing. Its language and content allow it to be divided into two parts of approximately equal length. The following structure and headings correspond to those of Katharina Heyden's translation in *New Testament Apocrypha* edited by Tony Burke and Brent Landau.¹⁸

13. Ladder of Jacob 4.37–75 (translation mine). On this work, see Christfried Böttrich and Sabine Fahl, eds., *Leiter Jakobs*, Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit, Neue Folge 1/6 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2015).

14. Слово о звезде Ираны. Edition and introduction by Jurij K. Begunov, Новонайденное апокрифическое "Слово о звезде Ираны," *Zeitschrift für Slawistik* 28 (1983): 238–57.

15. Вобров, *Апокрифическое*, 138–49.

16. Pavel E. Schegoljev, "Очерки истории отреченной литературы. Сказание Афродитиана," *Известия отделения русского языка и словесности Императорской Академии наук* 4 (1899): 148–99; 1304–344.

17. See the works by Schwartz, Bratke, and Usener in the bibliography at the end of this essay; cf. Adolf von Harnack, *Zur Abercius-Inschrift*, TU 12/4b (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1895).

18. Katharina Heyden, "The Legend of Aphroditianus: A New Translation and Introduction," in *New*

First Part: The Miracle in the Persian Temple of Hera

1. Introduction. The first part tells of a miracle in the temple of Hera at the time of the birth of Christ. The Persian king, who remains unnamed, arrives at the temple built by King Cyrus to have his dreams interpreted.

2. The miracle of the dancing statues. The priest, Proupippos, welcomes the king with the words: “Rejoice, because Hera is pregnant.” He then tells the king about the events in the temple during the night: the images of the gods had danced and sung “because Hera was loved by Zeus.” Therefore, her name was no longer Hera, but Urania (Οὐρανία, i.e., “Queen of Heaven”). However, a dispute arises between the female and the male images of the gods about Hera-Urania. The female statues make fun of her, saying that a carpenter did not impregnate Hera but Pege (Πηγὴ, i.e., “Fountain,” or “Source”). But the male gods instruct the (apparently jealous) female gods that Hera-Urania can also be called Pege, because “as a water source she is also a source of spirit, which contains a fish that feeds the whole world with its flesh.”

3. The appearance of the star above the statue of Pege. While the images of the gods still quarrel, the Persian king attends another miracle in his temple: a shining star appears above the statue of Hera-Pege, a heavenly voice announces the birth of a savior, and a crown of precious stones is found on the head of Pege. As a result, the other images of the gods fall down before her.

4. Interpretation of the miracle by the wise men of Persia. The king then orders the wise men of his kingdom, who interpret the events in the following way. Pege is the daughter of Karia of Bethlehem, who will bear a king in Judah. The prostration of the gods before Pege is a sign that the end of the worship of the images of the gods has come with this birth.

5. The apparition of Dionysus. In the evening, the god Dionysus appears in the same temple, confirms the interpretation of the Persian scholars, and sings a hymn of submission to Hera-Pege together with the other images of the gods.

6. The Persian king sends the magi to Judah. Impressed by these miraculous events, the king sends magi with gifts to Judah, while a star leads the way.

Second Part: The Narration of the Magi

The second part is designed as a self-report of the magi about their journey and encounter with Mary and the child.

7. The conversation between the magi and the Jews. Arriving in Jerusalem, they announce to the “leaders of the Jews” the birth of the Messiah and the annihilation of the synagogues. An attempt at bribery with gifts to prevent the magicians from spreading this message fails. A meeting with the “King of the Jews,” unnamed until then, is also briefly mentioned.

8. The magi in Bethlehem. In Bethlehem, the magi find Mary with the help of the star. They question and then worship her. The report also contains a description of Mary’s appearance—perhaps the most ancient description we have of Mary—and a note that a slave had painted a portrait of Mary and the child, which had been placed in the Persian temple of Hera-Pege after the magi returned home. The child, who is “almost two years old,” sits on the floor and laughs and jumps when the magicians give him gold, take him in their arms, caress him, and boast. In some versions, among others by John of Damascus,

a conversation among the magi about the Christ's "polymorphism" follows. The magi discover that he had appeared to one as a newborn, to the other as a young adult, to the third as an old man.

9. The departure of the Magi. In the evening, an angel appears in the residence of the magi and warns that Herod is pursuing them. Therefore, they flee home on their strong horses. The Legend ends with a confession and an accusation formulated in the second-person plural: "We know that Christ is our Savior. But you resist him by your way of life, you slander his preaching at every hour."

An Image as a Link

The two parts of the Legend can be clearly distinguished from each other by the change of location and persons, but they are also connected by certain motifs, so that their original common bond is beyond question. The most important link is the portrait of Mary and the child, painted by a slave in Bethlehem, that the magi, upon their return, affix to the temple where the star appeared and the fall of the idols took place (καὶ ἀνετέθη ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ, ἐν ᾧ ἐχρηματίσθη). The apologetic point of this short remark is that the fallen Persian-Hellenistic statues of the gods are replaced by the image of the mother of God with the newborn Christ.

3. INTERPRETIVE ISSUES

Apart from the uncertainty concerning time, place, and authorship, the content and interpretation of the Legend of Aphroditian also provide puzzles. The most scholarly attention has been paid to the description of the star miracle in the Persian Temple of Hera and to the identification of Hera with Urania and Pege in the first part of the Legend. Eduard Bratke, using the parallels to Lucian of Samosata's treatise *De Dea Syria*, convincingly demonstrated that the depiction of the cult and the description of the images of the gods are probably inspired by the cult of Dea Syria in Hierapolis/Mabbug. He interpreted the story of Aphroditian as an ironic Christian replica of Lucian's writing and as an apologetic transformation of the very popular cult of the Astarte-Kybele of Hierapolis.¹⁹ However, Lucian's writing itself is already a parody of the religious excesses of his time, and an ironic refraction would only harm the apologetic intention of a Christian author. If one considers other literary and archaeological sources for the cult of Hierapolis,²⁰ it can be concluded that the parallels to Hierapolis are not of literary but of factual character.

At the center of the sanctuary of Hierapolis stood the statues of Zeus and Hera, the latter uniting the characteristics of many female goddesses and being named accordingly with different names (Atargatis, Aphrodite, Athena, Artemis, Rhea, Selene). According to Lucian, a belt also identified her as "Queen of Heaven" or Urania (Οὐρανία). On her head, surrounded by rays of light, was a tower-shaped crown, and at night a fire-colored gemstone above her filled the temple with light. As food, the priests offered the goddess a fish from a nearby spring every day, because a special relationship to this animal was attributed to her. The other images of the gods in the temple, including those of Apollo and Dionysus, moved and gave oracles of their own accord. There was also a throne of Helios. All these

19. Bratke, *Das sogenannte Religionsgespräch am Hof der Sassaniden*, 177–78.

20. See Paul-Louis Van Berg, *Répertoire des sources grecques et latines: Corpus Cultus Deae Syriae*, Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain 28 (Leiden: Brill 1972); Sabine Fick, "Hierapolis/Bambyce (Membidj)," in *Religionsgeschichte Syriens: Von der Frühzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. P. Haider, M. Hutter, and S. Kreuzer (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1996), 210–16; J. L. Lightfoot, *Lucian, On the Syrian Goddess: Edited with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

elements and motifs also appear in the Legend of Aphroditian. The author of the Legend may have known the cult of Hierapolis firsthand.

3.1 Christian Persianism

There can be no doubt that the existence of a Hera temple in the Sassanid palaces is an impossibility. But why, then, did the author transfer the events to Persia and not leave them in Syrian Hierapolis? The reason probably lies in the fact that he was keen to locate the origin of the wise magi in Persia. For Romans of this time, Persia was, on the one hand, the military archenemy, and on the other hand, the epitome of the origin of old wisdom. King Kyros, to whom the construction of the Hera Temple is ascribed in the Legend of Aphroditian, was regarded as the ideal ruler with a tolerant religious policy. In the first centuries, religious movements came from the Orient to the West, such as the Mithras cult and Manichaeism. The programmatic first sentence of the Legend—"To Persia Christ was known from the beginning, for nothing escapes the learned lawyers of that country, who investigate all things with eagerness"—testifies to an esteem for Persian wisdom and scholarship, which is quite typical of this period for Romans interested in religion. Thus, the Legend of Aphroditian fits into late antique "Persianism."²¹

3.2 Mariology: Hera-Urania-Pege

What kind of Marian conception and veneration is associated with the connection to the goddess Dea Syria and the description of the magi's encounter with Mary? The report of the priest Proupippos on the events in the temple (2–3) are decisive in this respect. He tells the Persian king that over the whole night the images in the temple continued dancing, both the males and the females, saying to each other, "Come, let us rejoice with Hera," and to the priest, "Prophet, come and rejoice with Hera, for she has been loved. She has come to life again and is no longer called Hera, but Urania ('Queen of Heaven'). For the Mighty Helios ('Great Sun') has loved her." This leads to a dispute between the female images and the male ones about the right understanding of that holy wedding of Hera and Helios. The males claim, "That she was rightly called Hera, we admit. But her name is Myria ('Thousandfold'), for she bears in her womb, as in the sea, a vessel burdened with a myriad. And if she is also called Pege, let it be understood thus: a fountain of water continuously sends forth a fountain of spirit, containing a single fish, which is taken with the hook of divinity and which sustains with its own flesh the whole world, dwelling there as though in the sea."

This discussion between the female and the male images of gods may reflect christological-Mariological disputes of the Legend's own time.

The Greek goddess Hera, who mythically regained her virginity through a bath after each meeting with Zeus, was identified in Hellenistic times with different mother deities, and in Hierapolis she was identified with Atargatis, Artemis, and Rhea, among others. The fact that she is given the epithet Urania ("Queen of Heaven") is perhaps already a consequence of the identification with the Syrian Atargatis, who, for her part, has a close relationship to springs and to fish.²² The female deities seem to want to protect Hera, the mother of the gods par excellence, from being devalued by the claimed pregnancy by referring to the apparently lower goddess Pege. But in their response, the male deities offer an interpretation for the epithet Pege, which helps her even more to fame (see below).

21. See Rolf Strootman and Miguel John Versluys, eds., *Persianism in Antiquity* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 2017).

22. Heyden, *Die "Erzählung des Aphroditian"*, 264–65.

3.3 Christology I: The Eucharistic Fish

The connection of the Pege with the fish “which sustains with its own flesh the whole world” contains a complex of motifs, which is also testified by the epitaphic poem of Abercius of Hierapolis. It was composed in 215 or 216 CE and is transmitted both epigraphically and literarily.²³ The epigram reports on the deceased’s long journeys, including to Syria, and then continues:

¹² I had Paul [...] Faith everywhere led me forward,

¹³ and everywhere provided as my food a fish

¹⁴ of exceeding great size, and perfect, which a holy virgin drew with her hands from
a fountain

¹⁵ and this it ever gives to its friends to eat,

¹⁶ it having wine of great virtue, and giving it mingled with bread.²⁴

The close parallels to the etiology for the Urania-Myria-Pege in the Legend of Aphroditian are obvious. They were first noticed by Adolf von Harnack but interpreted in a misleading way as pagan testimonies to the cult of Hierapolis.²⁵ Their significance lies rather in the Christian eucharistic use of the fish symbol. In both texts, the fish (ἰχθύς) is offered by a fountain (πηγή) that is also declared a virgin. But while in the Abercius inscription the virgin and fountain are identified with the faith, πίστις, in the Legend she stands for Mary, the mother of Jesus. The fish established itself very early in ancient Christianity as a symbol of Christ, not least because of the popular acrostic: Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτὴρ—Jesus Christ Son of God, Savior.²⁶ In the epigram of Abercius, as well as in the Legend, it is used as a eucharistic symbol, emphasizing the large size of the fish and its universal power. The way of fishing, however, is different: In the Abercius inscription, the virgin takes the fish alone with her hands. In the Legend, however, the fish is taken with the hook of divinity. According to Gregory of Nyssa, the “fishhook of deity” (τὸ ἀγκιστρον τῆς θεότητος) symbolizes the divine nature of Jesus, which is veiled by his humanity so that he can redeem the world as God-Man (Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica* 24). This is a concise symbolic declaration concerning Mary, by which the divinity of her child is wrapped in human flesh and thus becomes the redeemer of humanity.

3.4 Christology II: The Carpenter

The second key christological passage in the Legend of Aphroditian is related to the carpenter. In their explanation of the events, the male gods say, “You have well said: ‘She has a carpenter’ [τέκτονα ἔχει ἐκείνη]—but the carpenter whom she bears does not come from a marriage-bed. For this carpenter who is born, the child of the chief carpenter, has built the triple-constructed celestial roof with most wise skills [ὁ τοῦ τεκτονάρχου παῖς, τὸν

23. See Vera Hirschmann, “Untersuchungen zur Grabinschrift des Aberkios,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 129 (2000): 109–16; Reinhold Merkelbach, “Grabepigramm und Vita des Bischofs Aberkios von Hierapolis,” *Epigraphia Anatolica* 28 (1995): 125–39.

24. Παῦλον ἔχων ἐποχον. Πίστις πάντῃ δὲ προῆγε / καὶ παρέθηκε τροφὴν πάντῃ ἰχθὺν ἀπὸ πηγῆς / πανμεγέθῃ καθαρὸν, ὃν ἐδράξατο παρθένος ἀγνή / καὶ τοῦτον ἐπέδωκε φίλοις ἔσθην διὰ παντός / οἶνον χρηστὸν ἔχουσα κέρασμα διδοῦσα μετ’ ἄρτου.

25. Harnack, *Zur Abercius-Inschrift*; see the critics in Heyden, *Die “Erzählung des Aphroditian”*, 243–46.

26. See Franz-Josef Dölger, *Ichthys: Der heilige Fisch in den antiken Religion und im Christentum*, vol. 2 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1922); Gedalyahu Stroumsa, “The Early Christian Fish Symbol Reconsidered,” in *Messiah and Christos: Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity*, ed. I. Gruenwald, S. Shaked, G. Stroumsa, *Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum* 32 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 199–205.

τριούστατον οὐράνιον ὄροφον ἔτεκτόνησε πανσόφους τέχναις], establishing this threefold inhabited dwelling by the Logos [τὴν τρικάτοικον ταύτην στεγότητα λόγῳ πῆξας]” (Leg. Aphr. 2.3).²⁷

The reference to the profession of Joseph put forward by the female gods has been raised by both Jewish-Christian groups and pagan apologists against the emerging worship of Jesus as God (see Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.27; Origen, *Cels.* 6.34). Here the carpenter is applied to God as the heavenly Father of the newborn king: The child is descended from the divine carpenter, the master builder of the world. Trinitarian terms and allusions, such as “built the triple-constructed celestial roof” (τὸν τριούστατον οὐράνιον ὄροφον ἔτεκτόνησε) and “establishing this threefold inhabited dwelling by the Logos” (τὴν τρικάτοικον ταύτην στεγότητα λόγῳ πῆξας), reinforce the statement, and a proximity to Sabellian modalism can be detected.²⁸

Elsewhere, there are other, more clearly orthodox expressions of Christology. Thus, the designation of Jesus as “Son of the All-Ruler, who is born in the flesh of the female arms” emphasizes the child’s human side (Leg. Aphr. 2.3; see Col 2:9). The Persian interpreters emphasize this humanity particularly strongly when they announce to the king that in Bethlehem he will find “the son of the Omnipotent, carried in bodily form in the bodily arms of a woman” (Leg. Aphr. 4.2; εὐρήσεις γὰρ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ παντοκράτορος σωματικῶς σωματικαῖς ἀγκάλαις γυναικεῖαις βασταζόμενον). In addition, Judeo-Christian idioms appear in phrases like “Christ the Son of the Most High” (Leg. Aphr. 7.3; ὁ γὰρ Χριστὸς ὁ τοῦ ὑψίστου παῖς; see Luke 1:32), as well as in Mary’s praise as “Mother of the First of all orders” (Leg. Aphr. 3.1; μήτηρ τοῦ πρώτου πάντων τῶν ταγμάτων; see Col 1:15), and as “divine and royal root that shapes the image of the heavenly and earthly king” (Leg. Aphr. 4.2; ῥίζα ἑνθεὸς καὶ βασιλικὴ ἀνέκυψεν, οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἐπιγείου βασιλείως χαρακτῆρα φέρουσα; see Isa 11:1–10; cf. Sib. Or. 8.264–69; 439–79).

Overall, no mature Christology or Trinitarian doctrine can be discerned in the Legend of Aphroditian. The Legend associates motifs that emphasize the divinity of Jesus and his mother (through identification with gods in the first part) with those that accentuate human appearance and behavior (in the encounter with Mary and the child). These conflicting aspects in christological and Mariological terms are perhaps an argument for the early origin of the Legend.

3.5 Soteriology

The theological punch line of the Legend is of soteriological character. This becomes obvious in a number of places, first by the voice that accompanies the wonder of the star (3) that claims:

Mistress Pege [Δέσποινα Πηγῇ], the Mighty Helios has sent me to announce to you and at the same time to serve you in your giving birth, for he produces a blameless childbirth for you, who is becoming mother of the first of all ranks, bride of the triple-named single

27. τέκτονα ἔχει ἐκεῖνη, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐκ λέχους, ὃν τέκει τέκτονα· οὗτος γὰρ ὁ γεννώμενος τέκτων, ὁ τοῦ τεκτονάρχου παῖς, τὸν τριούστατον οὐράνιον ὄροφον ἔτεκτόνησε πανσόφους τέχναις, τὴν τρικάτοικον ταύτην στεγότητα λόγῳ πῆξας.

28. See Manlio Simonetti, “Sabellio e il Sabellianismo,” *Studi storico-religiosi* 4.1 (1980): 7–28. The confession made by Dionysos, “We are going to be exposed as false by an acting person” (μέλλομεν ὑπὲρ ἐμπράκτου προσώπου ἐλέγχεσθαι ὡς ψευδεῖς), reminds one of the Sabellian distinction of the three προσώπα of God. Also, the designation of the Pege as “bride of the triple-named single divinity” (νύμφη τριωνύμου μονοθεῖας) points in this direction.

divinity [νόμφη τριωνόμου μονοθείας]. And the unbegotten new-born is called Beginning and End—the beginning of salvation, the end of destruction.

Here the christological formula “Beginning and End” (cf. Rev 22:13, “the Alpha and the Omega”) is recorded and interpreted in a soteriological way.

In the interpretation of the miracle by Dionysus, it becomes clear how salvation happens: “He re-creates the ancient image, and puts together image with image, and the unlike he brings to likeness” (ὁ τὴν παλαιὰν εἰκόνα ἀνακτίζων καὶ τὴν εἰκόνα τῇ εἰκόνι συντιθεὶς καὶ τὸ ἀνόμοιον ἐφ’ ὁμοίωσιν διδούς; cf. Gen 1:26–27). In the background stands the doctrine of the restoration of man’s original image of God through incarnation as a condition for the salvation of mankind. This doctrine was developed especially by Athanasius of Alexandria (in *De incarnatione verbi*) and appears here in a more narrative mode.

3.6 With the Pagans against the Jews

A fundamental question of interpretation is how pro-pagan and anti-Jewish aspects of the Legend are to be related to each other. One gets the impression that the positive reference to the pagan cult is directly linked to anti-Jewish polemics. This becomes clear in both the characterization of persons and the wording of proclamations. As already shown, the first sentence emphasizes immediately the wisdom of the Persians: “To Persia Christ was known from the beginning. For nothing escapes the learned lawyers of that country, who investigate all things with eagerness.” By contrast, in their encounter with Jewish authorities, the magi announce that the newborn Christ is “annulling your law and your synagogues” (Leg. Aphr. 7.3; ὁ γὰρ Χριστὸς ὁ τοῦ ὑψίστου παῖς ἐγεννήθη, καταλύων τὸν νόμον ὑμῶν καὶ τὰς συναγωγάς). In reply, the Jews appear unreasonable in their attempt at bribery.

However, in the interpretation of the star miracle by the Persian scholars, the end of both pagan and Jewish tradition is announced: “Out of Judah a kingdom has arisen which will abolish all the memorials of the Jews. The prostration of the gods upon the floor prefigured the end of their honor. For he who comes is of more ancient dignity and will shake those who are new in it” (Leg. Aphr. 4.2). Nevertheless, there seems to be a difference in how the respective authorities relate to this revelation. While the pagan god Dionysus proclaims his own end and that of all overthrown deities, and all of them sing of their fall as perfection, the Jewish authorities seem to resist recognizing their own end.

From a linguistic point of view, however, it is not clear whether the Legend’s closing words from the magi—“Behold then, such great things we have told you regarding Christ and we know that Christ has become our Savior. But you, by your ways, are opposed to him, all the time slandering his pain” (9.2)—refer to the Jews, Persians, or the audience of the Legend. This depends on how one interprets the prior sentence “and we reported all that we had seen in Jerusalem” (καὶ πάντα ἀπηγγέλαμεν, ἃ εἶδομεν ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ). If the place “in Jerusalem” is linked to ἃ εἶδομεν (“what we had seen”), the following sentence may mean either the Persians or the audience. However, if the location is linked to πάντα ἀπηγγέλαμεν, one has to imagine the accusatory speech not after the return of the magi in their homeland but always in Jerusalem—that is, to the Jews. It seems to me that the latter is the more plausible reading, because the magi did not actually see something worth telling in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem. If that is true, then the positive connection to the pagan cult is in fact combined with a clear anti-Jewish tendency. The promise of Dionysus that “salvation has come for the gentiles and foreign peoples, there is plenty of refreshment for the afflicted” seems to apply exclusively to pagans.

4. KEY PASSAGES FOR NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

4.1 An Anti-Jewish Alternative to Matthew 2:1–12

Like many other apocryphal writings, the Legend of Aphroditian fills a narrative gap left by the Gospels. In its second part (7–9), the Legend provides an alternative narration to Matthew's magi pericope (Matt 2:1–12) and thus contributes to contextualizing Matthew in the early Christian discourse on the magi. Interest in the tradition of the magi from the east flourished in the second and third centuries among Christians, because it offered possibilities for dealing with the non-Jewish environment more than almost any other Gospel text. At the same time, Matthew left open many questions that could be answered differently depending on the historical context and theological goal: Who were the magi? Where did they come from? Where had they identified the star, and on what knowledge could they interpret it correctly?

Few Christian authors followed the positive image that Matthew had drawn of the magi. Most of them followed an interpretation inspired by Isaiah 8:4, according to which the magi, who were identified as the "power from Damascus," had actually come to Judah with malicious intent and were converted only through the encounter with the Son of God (see Justin, *Dial.* 78.2; Tertullian, *Marc.* 3.13.8; Didymos, *Comm. Ps.* 64.1–7). Other authors refer to the biblical tradition, mostly to the prophet Balaam (Num 22–24), whose descendants were considered magicians (see Origen, *Cels.* 1.60; *Hom. Num.* 13.7.4; Justin, *Dial.* 106.4; *1 Apol.* 32.12–13; Eusebius, *Dem. ev.* 9.417–21). Only Theodot and Clement of Alexandria identify the magi as Persians independently of Balaam; Clement even ranks them among the ancestors of Greek philosophy (see Clement, *Exc.* 75.1–12; *Strom.* 1.15.7.3–4).

It cannot be clearly stated whether the author of the Legend knew the Gospel of Matthew. Since the second century, different traditions about magicians have been documented, and not all can be traced back to the Gospel of Matthew.²⁹ But if the author of the Legend knew the Gospel of Matthew, he not only supplemented but corrected it, and he did so with an anti-Jewish intention. One could say that the Legend is a pagan counternarrative to the Gospel of Matthew. The birth of Jesus Christ is revealed not by Jewish prophecy but by pagan cult, and more precisely, by Persian wisdom.

Matthew 2:1–9 simply states that "magicians from the Orient" came to Jerusalem to worship the newborn king of the Jews because of the appearance of a star. Thereupon Herod makes inquiries among the Jewish scribes and is referred by them to the prophecy of Micah 5:1, which is why he sends the magi to Bethlehem. In contrast, in the Legend of Aphroditian the magi are identified as Persians and are not dependent on the help of the Jewish scribes. They already know from the revelation in their homeland, and thanks to the star that shows them the way, where to look for the newborn king.

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, they proclaim the birth of the Messiah even before they have seen him, and they announce the end of the Jewish religion: "You are suffering from unbelief [ἀπιστίαν νοσεῖτε], and neither without an oath nor with an oath do you believe, but you follow your own thoughtless goal. For the Christ, the son of the Most High is born, annulling your law and your synagogues [ὁ γὰρ Χριστὸς ὁ τοῦ ὑψίστου παῖς ἐγεννήθη, καταλύων τὸν νόμον ὑμῶν καὶ τὰς συναγωγάς]. And for this reason, struck by a most excellent oracle, you do not hear with pleasure this name which has come upon you unexpectedly" (Leg. Aphr. 7.3).

29. Thomas Holtmann, *Die Magier vom Osten und der Stern: Mt 2,1–12 im Kontext frühchristlicher Traditionen*, Marburger Theologische Studien 87 (Marburg: Elwert, 2005).

The Jewish authorities are portrayed negatively from the outset as they try to silence the magi with gifts of money so that there won't be a riot among the people.³⁰ King Herod, who has the role of the enemy of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, plays a subordinate role in the Legend of Aphroditian in comparison with the scribes. The magi meet him only for a short conversation but do not care about him and "pay him no more attention than to an insignificant person" (Leg. Aphr. 7.5; καὶ ἀπέστημεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, μὴ προσέχοντες αὐτῷ εἰ μὴ ὡς ἐνὶ εὐτελεῖ). The role of the wicked enemy of the newborn Christ is thus shifted from Herod to the religious authorities of the Jews.

The second part of the story narrates the meeting of the magi with Mary and the child, which is only outlined in a few words in the Gospel of Matthew (2:11). When the magi question Mary, she refers to the annunciation of the birth by an angel, which is reported in Luke 1:26–38.³¹

A special focus is on Mary's appearance: she is described as dainty, with grain-colored skin, and a beautiful and simple hairstyle. Her portrait, made for the magicians by a "servant quite skilled in painting" (Leg. Aphr. 8.5; εὐφυῆ παῖδα ζωγράφον) and placed in the Persian temple after their return, serves as proof of the encounter. The description of the child Jesus emphasizes his childlike behavior: he sits on the floor, plays, and laughs, while the magi caress and praise him. Whereas Matthew mentions gold, incense, and myrrh as gifts of the magi, the original version of the Legend of Aphroditian probably spoke only of gold. Later manuscripts, however, adapted the text to match the Gospel of Matthew and added incense and myrrh.

The closing words of the Legend, discussed above, provide an alternative or a correction to the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew emphasizes that the magicians, for fear of Herod, do not return to their homeland via Jerusalem, but that they went on a different path. The Legend, in contrast, ends with a report by the magi in Jerusalem and an accusatory statement against the Jews in Jerusalem for their unbelief.

In the context of early Christian discourse on the magi, the Legend of Aphroditian is one of the few texts that grant the magi their own wisdom, independent of biblical revelation.

In the combination of the revelation to the magicians and the travelogue, as well as in some narrative and theological details, the Legend resembles a writing that only recently came into the focus of research: the so-called Revelation of the Magi, which is handed down within the framework of the Syrian Chronicle of Zuqnin. In the Revelation of the Magi, it is not Persia but the land of Shir (presumably China) that is the home of the magi, but many other motives are similar: the detailed description of the "prehistory" of the star appearance, the appreciation of pagan oracles, the emphasis on the appearance of Jesus and Mary, the motif of Jesus's polymorphism (which, however, does not appear in the earlier versions of the Legend), the reproduction of the conversation between the magi and Mary, and the missionary closing sermon of the magi on their return home.

Brent Landau suspects that the original version of the Revelation of the Magi was written in Syriac in Edessa in the second or third century and is intended to demonstrate the connection of Christianity with pre-Christian religious traditions of the Orient.³² The Legend of Aphroditian pursues a very similar intention, whereby the missionary intention

30. The mention of rioting may show a trace of knowledge of Matt 26:5.

31. But even here it cannot be clearly decided whether there is a specific reference to the Gospel of Luke in the background or only a general knowledge of the tradition of the annunciation.

32. Brent Landau, "The Revelation of the Magi," in Burke and Landau, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 19–38.

of a synthesis of pagan religion and Christianity is accompanied by anti-Jewish polemics. If the assumption is correct that the Legend was originally written in Greek, then one could regard the Revelation of the Magi and the Legend as two complementary apocryphal narratives, which in late antique Syria, a linguistically, culturally, and religiously plural world, took the biblical magi pericope as an opportunity to connect Christianity to existing religious traditions. In the Legend, however, this positive link is accompanied by an anti-Jewish tendency that is alien to the Synoptic Gospels.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bobrov, Alexander G. *Апокрифическое Сказание Афродитиана в литературе и книжности Древней Руси. Исследование и тексты*. St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1994.
- Bratke, Eduard. *Das sogenannte Religionsgespräch am Hof der Sassaniden*. TU NF 4/3. Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899.
- Bringel, Pauline. "Interprétation et réécritures dans la tradition manuscrite du Récit d'Aphroditien." Pages 285–96 in *Entré Actes. Regards croisés en sciences humaines. Réalités et représentations: les pistes de la recherche. Actes du 1er Colloque international des jeunes chercheurs en sciences humaines et sociales de Strasbourg, 10 et 11 mai 2004*. Edited by Laurent Angard. Strasbourg: Université Marc Bloch, 2005.
- Gaster, M. "Die rumänische Version der Legende des Aphroditian." *Byzantinisch-Neugriechische Jahrbücher* 14 (1938): 119–28.
- Heyden, Katharina. "Die Christliche Geschichte des Philippos von Side. Mit einem kommentierten Katalog der Fragmente." Pages 209–43 in *Julius Africanus und die christliche Weltchronistik*. Edited by M. Wallraff. TU 157. Berlin: de Gruyter 2006.
- . *Die "Erzählung des Aphroditian": Thema und Variationen einer Legende im Spannungsfeld von Christentum und Heidentum*. Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 53. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009.
- . "The Legend of Aphroditianus: A New Translation and Introduction." Pages 3–18 in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*. Vol. 1 Edited by T. Burke and B. Landau. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016.
- Monneret de Villard, Ugo. *Le leggende orientali sui magi evangelici*. Studi e Testi 163. Vatican: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1952.
- Schwartz, Eduard. "Aphroditianos." *PW* 1: 2788–93.
- Usener, Hermann. *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen: Das Weihnachtsfest*. 2nd ed. Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 1911.
- Veder, William R. "The Slavonic Tale of Aphroditian: Limitations of Manuscript-Centred Textology." *Търновска книжовна школа* 9 (2011): 344–58.