QUESTION:

I only recently bought Eusebius’ “Ecclesiastical History” and have flipped through it. I was shocked to see in Book 1, Chapter 13, a supposed letter from Jesus to King Agbarus! I knew I had to everything Eusebius wrote with a grain of salt, but after this, it made me realise that a grain won’t be enough. No one actually takes this letter seriously, do they? And if not, how much confidence can we place in his other testimonies of letters and documents that we no longer have access to beyond his book?

RESPONSE:

Yes indeed, this is the famous correspondence between Jesus and King Abgar of Edessa in Syria (well, famous among scholars of early Christianity at least). I have translated it anew for my book The Other Gospels. Here is what I say there about the letters (the one from Abgar to Jesus, then his response); at the end of the post I give my new translations of the two letters.

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Jesus’ Correspondence with Abgar

The apocryphal correspondence between Jesus and Abgar Uchama (= “the Black”), king of Edessa in eastern Syria (4 BCE – 7 CE and 13-50 CE) is first mentioned in Eusebius (Church History, 1. 13. 5). Eusebius claims to have found the letters in the archives of Edessa and to have translated them literally from their original Syriac into Greek. The first is a short letter from the king, acknowledging Jesus’ miracle working powers and asking him to come to Edessa to heal him of his illness and, at the same time, to escape the animosity of the Jews in his homeland. In his reply, Jesus blesses Abgar for “believing without seeing” (an allusion to John 20:29), but informs the king that he cannot come because he needs to fulfill his mission, that is, by being crucified. After his ascension, however, he will send an apostle to heal the king.

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