

Agapius
Kitâb al °Unwân
Ptolemy II and the Septuagint

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Agapius (أغابْيوس), also known as Mahbûb, was a 10th cent. Christian Arabic writer who came from Manbîj (Hierapolis) in N. Syria, known in Syriac as Mabbug.¹ His father, Constantine, was a bishop. The title of the work is usually given as *Universal History*, but العنوان means 'title' or perhaps 'epitome'.²

It seems to me a somewhat rambling compilation, but perhaps the chronological leaps are quite deliberate and, in fact, an important element in the composition, which may be based more on thematic 'links'³ rather than rigid chronology, at least in Part One. Agapius seems to be aware that his work may cause readers to wonder that his work is not meticulously chronological and says so at various points, but his main concern in the passages that follow seems to be to prove that the LXX is more accurate and reliable than the Masoretic Text (MT).⁴

The Arabic text with French translation was first published by A. Vasiliev in individual fascicules, which subsequently appeared in the following volumes of the *Patrologia Orientalis*:⁵

5 (1910) pp. 558-691 - *Part One I*

Table of contents on p. 692 for the text

7 (1911) pp. 458-591 - *Part Two I*

8 (1912) pp. 399-550 - *Part Two II*

Table of contents on pp. 548ff. of **8** for the texts in both volumes.

11 (1915) pp. 9-144 - *Part One II*

1 Syriac حَبْبُ

2 I have substituted this for the 'unvan' used by Vasiliev.

3 Franz Rosenthal *A history of Muslim historiography* (1968) p. 137 characterizes the work as scientific in its geography and fully informed on the subject of Byzantine and Hellenistic historical and cultural sources.

4 The genealogies in Gen. 5 and 11 reveal that the MT is shorter than the LXX by 1386 years. I am not competent to comment on the differences between the Hebrew and the Greek texts, but will merely refer to the considerable work of Emanuel Tov.

5 PO texts usually have two sets of numbers at the top of the page: the vol. page no. and the fascicule page no. in square brackets, and these latter, as far as I can tell, seem to be sequential: thus, the two fascicules of Part One have 272 pages and those of Part Two 287 pages. An edition of the text was published by L. Cheikho in 1912 in the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (Scriptores Arabici, 10)* by L. Cheikho

Table of contents on p. 13, where there is a numbering discrepancy of 10: thus, square bracket [148] is given in the tables content as 138, and so on.

The manuscript history is examined in **5** : 563ff. In short, Part One deals with the history of the world before Christ and the life of Christ. Part Two deals with verifiable historical events of the Byzantine and early Islamic period.

This note contains an English translation of the passages devoted to Ptolemy II and the origin of the Septuagint. The passages are from vol. 5 pp. 639-647. I break off at the point where the Torah, mutilated by Jews to serve their own ends, is said to be used still by Syrian Christians. The narrative then moves on to Constantine and his association with the Torah.

*The story of the Two-Horned Alexander the King*⁶

His kingdom was then divided among his four servants, who were his special intimates, and the book⁷ calls them his servants. One of them was Ptolemy Philadelphus,⁸ king of Alexandria, for whom, as we have mentioned, seventy Jewish scholars translated the Book of the Torah and the Prophets from Hebrew into Greek.⁹ Please let no-one think that this story comes too early and is out of place here, but it was necessary to place it earlier because the period of Tarih¹⁰ and the birth of Abraham are affected by the imperfections of age and corruption. We needed to explain and clarify the reasons that prompted Ptolemy to concern himself with and request a translation of the Scriptures and to show the scholarly community what prompted Hanan and Qîâfa, the high priests, to think about and tackle their corruption and imperfections and explain to the intelligentsia and scholarly community and researchers how the imperfections had been exposed and how study of them would reveal corrupt passages. Just look at them and examine them. It is written that a great Persian named Darius fought with the Two-Horned, who was king of Egypt for six years. Alexander was victorious: he killed Darius and appropriated his empire. He gathered his armies and brought together his soldiers and marched with them to other countries to fight their kings and seize their kingdoms until he finally arrived in Sind and seized it. He then prepared for an invasion of India and China. Before this he divided his empire among four special companions, as I said before, and continued his wars with the kings of nations until he died. When news of his death reached the governors, each one seized the country in which he had been appointed successor.¹¹ One of the governors, Ptolemy son of Arîb,¹² ruled Egypt for 40 years. Philip was king of Macedonia, Antigonus and Demetrius of Syria and the lands of Asia. Seleucus, who ruled the Orient after having conquered Syria, marched against Ptolemy in year 13 of Ptolemy son of Arîb.¹³

6 The 'Two-Horned' is a figure of Arabian folklore, about whom there is a story in the *Qu'rân* 18, 83-99 that is thought to refer to Alexander the Great: people, afraid of the two hostile powers of Gog and Magog, asked him for help against the, and he built a wall to keep them at bay. It was believed that Gog and Magog would finally breach the wall, at which time life would come to an end and the day of the resurrection (يوم القيامة) would come. Interestingly, the title of the story has almost nothing to do with the narrative following it, rather like the title *Three Musketeers* given by Dumas to a story in which the hero is the fourth musketeer.

7 1 Macc. 1, 7ff.

8 Ptolemy II (283-246)

9 A narrative that claims to record this event is preserved in a text known as the *Letter of Aristeas*, probably written in the 2nd cent. BC. It is as an historical narrative but not necessarily an objective one. The Greek text of the letter (prepared by H. St. J. Thackeray) can be read in context in H.B. Swete *Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (1917) pp. 518ff.

10 The father of Abraham, cf. Gen. 11:26ff.

11 Ar. استخلفه seems to be a reference to the Greek term διάδοχος (successor), but this latter is not a contemporaneous term but rather one 'invented' by J.G. Droysen in the 19th cent. The term διάδοχος in the Hellenistic period referred in fact to a relatively low grade official.

12 Arîb : in the *apparatus criticus* Vasiliev gives an alternative writing that has no 'pointing' on the third letter and offers no suggestion as to the meaning of the name. I wish to make a suggestion of my own to explain this name, and it is based on an observation made by Emanuel Tov and cited by N.L. Collins 'Various fathers of Ptolemy I' *Mnemosyne* 15 (1984) pp. 436-476: the word ארנבה 'hare' in occurs in various places, e.g. Det. 14. 7, for which the standard Greek word would have been λαγώς, but since it was probably felt by the translators that this might cause offence to the Ptolemy family, a circumlocution (δασύπους) was employed. The Arabic for 'hare' is أرنب, and 're-pointing' of the third letter produces أرنب (arîb). So, it is possible that some of the translation history of the LXX has found its way by a circuitous route into Ptolemy's patronym as given here.

13 Probably a reference to the First Syrian War (274-271 BC), essentially a victory for Ptolemy that extended Egypt's possessions on the coast of Syria. The Syrian king was Antiochus I.

Demetrius¹⁴ marched on Asia and took possession of Asia, Syria and Babylon, where he ruled for 32 years. He wanted to build for Alexander a monument that recalled, after his death, the benefits that he had received from him. When he had performed these wonders, he set up a calendar system named after him and he fixed the beginning from day 1 of the rule over Syria, that is year 13 of his reign.¹⁵ From the day of Adam until this year of the Two Horned One there were 5,179 years, and God willing, we will explain this later.¹⁶ This was during the 38 year reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus, for whom as we have already said the Septuagint was created. He freed up to 130,000 prisoners, of whom 30,000 were Jews.¹⁷ The first thing about him in the sacred books is that he was one of the greatest foreign monarchs.¹⁸ It is also recorded that he was comparable with Alexander in strength but superior to him in knowledge, wisdom and philosophy. His interests and pleasure were directed towards wisdom, reading and all the sciences and their secrets.¹⁹ He propagated and assembled them everywhere until he embraced them all: astronomy, astrology, geometry, arithmetic²⁰ and more besides, we have already written. It is reported of him that he collected these works and deposited them in a library²¹ he had built. He cultivated them and learned their causes²² and secrets. It is written that Ptolemy later thought about what he had assembled for his pleasure. He thought about posterity, so he assembled all the foreign captives of many nations in his kingdom. He counted them and found that there were 130,000, of whom 30,000 were Jews and granted them permission to return home. The Jews were delighted and their joy and pleasure were great, amid excessive prayers for and thanks to him.

The story of the translation of the Septuagint²³

He said to them: 'I am doing this for you. I need something from you that you may express your gratitude.' They asked him what it was. He told them: 'My envoys who accompany you, I want you to give them books of wisdom belonging to your nation.' They agreed and gave him their word. The Jews the said: 'Among us, Your Majesty, there are rare Hebrew books which no other nation has, revealed books that have come down²⁴

14 The kings bearing this name were all in the 2nd cent. BC

15 Seleucus Nicator instituted an 'era' after his victory over Demetrius Poliorkêtês at Gaza in 312. In the Arab world it was known as the era of the Two-Horned (see note 3)

16 M. Wallraff and U. Roberto (ed.) *Julius Africanus Chronographiae* (2007) T 83 pp.250ff.

17 Probably based on the tradition in *Aristeas* (4-5 and 11-27), in which 100,000 Jewish captives are said to have been brought to Egypt by Ptolemy I

18 The references to the 'king of the south' in *Daniel* 11 are generally thought to be references to the Egyptian kings.

19 On the intellectual activity of Philadelphus cf. J. Cook 'Ptolemy Philadelphus and Jewish writings' in P. McKechnie and P. Guillaume *Ptolemy Philadelphus and his world* (2008) pp. 193. His connection with India is mentioned briefly in Pliny *Natural History* c. 21 and in the edicts of Ashoka, distributed throughout India, in which he proclaimed his adherence to Buddha. His successor, Ptolemy the Benefactor, according to a story in Galen (cf. K. G. Kühn *Galen Opera* vol. 17 pt 1 pp. 605ff.) required everyone bringing books into Alexandria to surrender them that a copy might be made and the story of how he asked to borrow copies of the greatest Greek tragedies from Athens against a substantial security, which he was prepared to forfeit because he wanted to keep the originals. This was to increase the inventory and enhance the prestige of the Library founded by Ptolemy I.

20 The Arabic uses the Greek words.

21 Lit. بيت الحكمة 'house of wisdom'

22 علل can also mean 'weaknesses', which may suggest that Ptolemy read them critically.

23 السبعين الكتب العتيقة lit. 'the seventy of the old books'. For an examination of the term 'Septuagint' cf. M. Saebø (ed.) *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* (1996) pp. 84 ff.

24 نزل used here in the sense of revelation, as with the *Qu'rân*.

from heaven to the prophets. such as regulations, laws,²⁵ commandments, orders and prohibitions, and that is and that which is to come.' He admired the eloquence of the books and he liked their qualities. He gave them lavish provisions to sustain them on their return journey and ordered safe passage for them until they reached their homes, their governors and those who ruled them. He sent with them gifts and wrote to them of his request. Rejoicing at the news that had reached them, they went out to meet their companions at the nearest boundary point of their town. They read Ptolemy's letter and hastened to fulfill his request. They gathered together the books of the Torah and the Prophets²⁶ and sent them to him with a message in Hebrew letters written in gold. They also replied to his letter. When the books arrived, he found himself in a quandary because he was unable to read Hebrew. He wrote to them, informing them of this and asking for scholars and jurists to translate them for him into his language, and promised them gifts. When his letter arrived, they hastened to find people for him, eager for his promise.²⁷ After they had discussed the matter, they finally²⁸ agreed to send him six from each tribe, making a total of 72 persons to be sent to him. On their arrival he received them graciously and split them into 36 groups. There were differences among them and he appointed someone in each group to prevent them from meeting and to attend to their affairs. Once their translation work was completed, he passed it from one group to another until the Torah and Prophets were completed, Ptolemy came into possession of 36 copies in Greek and distributed them to all parts of his empire. He sent a certain number to Rome, Ephesus and Byzantium.²⁹ Throughout their stay and because of his frequent coming and going with them, he learned Hebrew and became able to read their holy books better than they could. After they had finished their work, he showered them with gifts and provisions for their travels and sent them back home with gifts for their leaders and garments for Eleazar the High Priest. In his letter he praised their work. The translators asked for a copy of their work to show off to their fellow countrymen, and Ptolemy agreed. This was a sign of eternal divine providence in his knowledge of what³⁰ was to be done by his priests Hanan and Qîâfa and their companions, a wrong against the Messiah, the time of his appearance and the period of his coming and their participation in his murder, as it is written in the Christian gospels.³¹ This latter was followed by Christ's resurrection. Some of them joined him, counting on his goodness and mercy towards them, because he brought the dead back to life, healed the leprosy and worked miracles, which alarmed their spirits, upset their reason, confounded their intelligence and brought to

25 νομός

26 The Hebrew abbreviation acronym Tanakh stands for Torah/Prophets/Writings.

27 i.e. to obtain what he had promised.

28 Not in the Arabic

29 Byzantium was the birthplace of Philo the engineer (280-221 BC), a distinguished scientist who spent much of his adult life in Alexandria, and it may be connections of this sort that persuaded Ptolemy to send a copy to the city. Ephesus was famous for its temple to Artemis, which was burned down by a deranged arsonist in 356 BC, the year of Alexander's birth, an event that prompted Plutarch to comment that Artemis was too preoccupied with Alexander's birth (μαίευσίς) to save her own temple (*Alexander* 3,3).

30 Meant to render: هذا كان تدبير الله في تقدم وسبق مما. Vasiliev understands the phrase to signal the 'end' (*arrêt*) of divine providence, presumably for the Jews. In any case, it seems to be an attempt to make a clumsy comparison between a good High Priest Eleazar and the arch-villains of the New Testament, Annas and Caiphas and possibly to signal the end of God's interest in the Jews, though this would hardly be in the spirit of *Romans* 11.

31 Lit. 'those of the Nazarene' (ذوى النصارى).

life what was obscure,³² conforming to what they had read about him in the Prophets.³³

The Jews disclose what they changed in the books

At that point they rebelled against the high priests in the matter of Christ. They made them afraid for their lives and plotted to kill them and attacked them. The high priests therefore changed their tactics to evade them and devised arguments in the question of the Messiah in order to save their lives. Their libraries being under their control, they were engaged, as we said earlier, with the Torah with a preconceived idea and observed how much time had elapsed between their epoch and that of Adam. So they cut out 1389 years from Adam and his descendants to the birth of Abraham, 100 years for each patriarch, from the years reckoned and computed before their children were born and added them to the period of their life after the birth of their children, which were not counted and have no bearing on the origin of time.³⁴

When they found Cainan son of Arpachshad, son of Shem, son of Noah, they cut his name from the Torah.³⁵ That the years have been cut from their place is quite obvious to anyone who looks at these passages and examines them according to the Torah: these passages will show they have been mutilated and cut. They did this in secret and then invited those who had rebelled against them because of how they had acted in the matter of the Messiah, claiming that his time had not yet come and that he would not appear until the last few days of the world. They said: 'We are still in the middle of the space of years in this world.' And they ordered the Torah in which the years had been altered to be brought. They made their opponents doubt and turn from what they had previously thought. They then had separate copies of the Torah made, which they placed in the hands of trusted people in their own and neighbouring countries that they might read them aloud and support their arguments in favour of mutilation and reduction. This Torah is still used today by Syrian Christians.³⁶

32 The Arabic phrases, where the noun endings form an ABAB scheme *-^cqûl/-ahûl/-^cqûl/-ahûl*, come under the heading of what is known as سجع, a sort of alliterative rhyming prose, not dissimilar to various other kinds of verse, for example Old English verse and modern 'rap' lyrics. The structure of English prevents me from imitating it.

33 Especially Isaiah, who like the other prophets uses the term 'Messiah.' Many Jews had no difficulty with the concept of a Messiah but they did have difficulty with the concept of Jesus as the Messiah. In the 2nd cent. various groups had recognized Simon bar Kochba as a 'messiah'.

34 I have tried to follow the Arabic but I am not sure that I have been successful.

35 In the MT Arpachshad's son Selah and in the LXX his son is Cainan (cf. also Lk 3, 36).

36 The OT Peshitta is based on the MT, cf. Saebo *Hebrew* p. 168.

