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Apocryphal Testimonies about Bishop James in the Syriac work the *Exodus of Mary*

Apokryficzne świadectwa o biskupie Jakubie w syryjskim dziele *Wyjście Marii*

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Słowa kluczowe: apokryf, dziewica Maria, biskup Jakub, źródło historyczne, literatura syryjska, polemika antyjudejska

Abstract

The article analyzes some testimonies about James, the first Christian bishop of Jerusalem, which are kept in the Syriac work the *Exodus of Mary* and are not found in other sources.

Streszczenie

W artykule analizuje kilka świadectw dotyczących Jakuba, pierwszego biskupa chrześcijańskiego Jerozolimy, które znajdują się w dziele syryjskim *Wyjście Marii* i nie są znane z innych źródeł.

The article is devoted to how the figure of James, the first bishop of the Judeo-Christian community, is represented in the Syrian apocrypha the *Exodus of Mary*. It is a continuation of our investigation on this work of Syrian literature. Under the title the *Exodus of Mary*, we combine several Syriac texts describing the last days of the life of the Virgin Mary, her death, burial, the journey of the Virgin through the

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Kingdom of Heaven and the posthumous miracles performed by her (Geerard 1992, 120–124; Peeters 1910, 620–625, 626–632). We chose this title because when the author of these stories talks about the death of the Virgin Mary, he uses the Syriac word *maphqana* (lit. exit, exodus). For him, this word defines the connection between the biblical theme of Exodus and the Christian idea of death, as it is interpreted, for example, in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 9:31). The word ἔξοδος (exodus) in the Syriac translation of this place of the Gospel corresponds to *maphqana* – exodus.

Our research has revealed two main versions of this apocrypha in the Syriac script – a extensive one, called the *Five Books* in the scientific literature, and an abbreviated one – the *Six Books*. (Smith Lewis 1901, 2-115; Wright 1865, 4-51). The extensive version is primary, and we associate its origin with the formation of the apologetic program of the supporters of Patriarch Nestorius in the first third of the 5-th century (Meshcherskaya 2011, 168–186). In the *Exodus of Mary*, the figures of two famous characters of early Christian history stand out – the Apostle John, one of the 12, and James, the first bishop of the Christian community of Jerusalem. One of our articles was devoted to the role of the Apostle John as one of the main hero of this Syriac narrative (Meshcherskaya 2021, 95–104). In it, the Apostle John plays an important role in the preservation of the book about the Virgin Mary and the new finding of her by the monks of the Sinai monastery. In addition, the Mother of God entrusts it to him to spread the story of her stay in the Kingdom of Heaven (apocryphal *Apocalypse*). But, despite the significant role of John, if not the author, then the initiator of writing the work is not called him, but James. In the article we will analyze two passages in which this hero is mentioned.

„I am” passage, in which James points out his role in the literary fixation of the story of the death of the Virgin. The monks of the Sinai monastery go in search of a book about the death of the Virgin, come to Jerusalem and ask about this book, but no one can tell where it is. In

the end, they manage to find a certain book with a postscript made by James. In the version of the *Five Books* there is an excerpt in which it is said in detail about the circumstances of writing an essay about the death of the Virgin, it twice emphasizes the role of James in this event: „They found another volume on which it was written by James the bishop himself: I, James, write thus: In the year three hundred and forty-fifth the Lady Mary died off from this world (...) and I, James, the Bishop of Jerusalem, have written with my own hand writing in this volume” (Smith Lewis 1902, 17).

This section is both in the extensive, and in the short version of the apocrypha (Wright 1865, 6-7), but it is the extensive version that allows us to determine which of several biblical characters with the name James we are talking about. The extensive version is one of the early examples of compilation, when several texts dedicated to the life of the Virgin Mary are combined. The narrative in this version begins with the apocrypha of the *Protoevangelium of James*. The publication of the *Five books* is based on the text of the parchment codex acquired in Suez by the English researcher A. Smith-Lewis². This manuscript turned out to be a palimpsest. Most of the lower layer of the palimpsest is represented by the texts of the *Protoevangelium of James* and the adjacent work the *Exodus of Mary*, and the text of the first composition is incomplete. A. Smith-Lewis dated the Syriac letter of Estrangelo of the lower layer to the second half of the 5-th century or the beginning of the 6-th century (Smith-Lewis 1902, XII). When publishing the text restored by her from the leaves of the palimpsest, A. Smith-Lewis undertook the reconstruction of the full Syriac version of the *Protoevangelium of James*, for which she used the manuscript of D. R. Harris. It came from Tur Abdin (Mesopotamia), A. Smith-Lewis dated the manuscript in

² The exact origin of the manuscript – Egypt or Sinai – has not been established. Currently, the codex is in the collection of Sisters A. Smith Lewis and M. Gibson, which belongs to the Westminster Theological College, Cambridge (Cambridge Or. 1287).

1857 (Smith-Lewis 1902, XII)³. The text reproduced in her publication was on pages 94a-100b of the manuscript and corresponded to chapters I-IX of the Greek original (Smith Lewis 1902, 2-8).

In the D. R. Harris codex, the beginning of the text contains a title that defines the composition and structure of the work, which includes the *Protoevangelium of James*: „In the hope of the Holy Trinity, one in essence, we begin to write a book of the History of the Mother of God, Mary, from the day of her birth until the day of her exit from this world. May her prayer be with us! Amen, amen! (second time – in Arabic). Book the first about her parents and also about her Annunciation by the Angel” (Smith Lewis 1902, 1). Thus, it becomes clear that the *Protoevangelium* does not appear here as an independent composition, but is only the initial part of the text of the biography of the Virgin Mary. The final chapter of the *Protoevangelium* (this passage is both in the Greek version and in translations) contains information about the author of this apocrypha and the circumstances of its writing: „And I, James, wrote this book when there was a tumult in Jerusalem, when Herod died a bitter death” (Smith Lewis 1902, 12). Such authorship of James for the *Protoevangelium* is confirmed by his multilingual Christian translations and manuscripts. It is already found in the titles to the text. These titles vary, however, in almost all you can find a combination of „the birth of Mary” and the name James with various additions to it „apostle, bishop of Jerusalem, brother of the Lord”. The version of the *Five Books* extends the authorship of James not only to the story of the birth of the Virgin Mary, but also to the narrative of her death, and the designation of James as the author begins with the same phrase pronounced in the first person as in the colophon of the *Protoevangelium*.

Thus, according to the version of the *Five Books*, the *Exodus of Mary* adjoins the *Protoevangelium* not only textually, but also meaningfully,

³ Now the date has been clarified – 1856 year. Together with the collection of D. R. Harris, the manuscript ended up in Cambridge (USA) in 1905 and is in the Harvard University Library (Houghton Library) (Goshen-Gottstein 1979, Syr. 39, 51-52).

and, following it, includes in its composition not only information about James as the author of the Apocrypha, but also other stories about him. And in the *Protoevangelium*, dating from the middle of the II century, early ideas about James were reflected. In this work, he is considered one of the brothers of Jesus Christ, who were the children of Joseph, the betrothed of Mary, from the 1-st marriage (Chap. 9; 19). It is possible that James was driving the donkey on which the Virgin Mary was riding (Chap. 17) when the family was heading to Bethlehem for the census. In the New Testament literature about James, the Lord's brother, there are testimonies in the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Epistles*. In *Acts*, this is an excerpt from Chap. 12. (*Acts* 12:17), when the apostle Peter, after his miraculous release from prison, asks to inform „James and the brothers” about this, Chap. 15 tells about his leading role in the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, and in *Acts* Chap. 21 – about his relationship with the Apostle Paul. In Paul's *Epistle to the Galatians* (Gal 2:9), James is called a „pillar” – the pillar of the Church.

In the passage about the authorship of James from the *Exodus of Mary*, he is called a bishop. There is no indication in the New Testament canon that he bore such a title. But there is a source that confirms that the opinion about James as bishop of the Jerusalem Church was already quite widespread by the beginning of the 2-nd century. This is the historical work of Hegesippus, the author of the 2-nd century, *Notes*, which also came down in excerpts in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea (Eus. Hist. eccl. IV 5. 1- 3). Hegesippus refers to some written sources from which he borrows a list of Jerusalem bishops before the beginning of the Second Jewish War in the reign of Emperor Hadrian (117-138). He calls these bishops from the circumcised, lists them by name and says that the first of them was „James, called the brother of the Lord”. It is likely that the author of the *Five books* could have gathered information about such names of James from the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius. We have already assumed the use of this source for another

passage of this Syriac compilation related to the history of the Apostle John the Little (Meshcherskaya 2021, 99-104).

Only in the version of the *Five Books of the Exodus of Mary* there is another passage that precedes the story about the authorship of James and in which he is called both a bishop and a brother of the Lord:

I, Anton, the deacon, who am a native of Jerusalem. And James the bishop of Jerusalem made me a deacon. He is the one who was the first bishop in Jerusalem while the apostles were alive. I write thus with my autograph in the month of Haziran, in the year three hundred and thirty-sixth, in the third day of the week, at noon-day about the Jew husband who was a captain. And he struck James the bishop, and he died, because the Jews hated James greatly, on account of his being called the Lords brother” (Smith Lewis 1902, 17).

There are two interesting facts in this passage.

The first is the testimony that James ordained deacons. And we do not know anything about this in the New Testament writings. Although the story of how the apostles set 7 „chosen men” to help themselves to solve the socio-economic problems of Christian communities is kept in the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 6:6-7). These people are never called deacons, although their functions are defined by the Greek verb „to serve, to render a service, to help”, but just „seven”.

The second fact is the story about the death of James, which is conducted on behalf of a certain deacon Anton and is not known from other sources. There are two main version of the death of James. It is reported by two historians. The first is Josephus Flavius (Ios. Flav. Antiq. XX 9.1), which sets out a version of the Jewish tradition. He writes that James, „the brother of Jesus called Christ”, was accused by the high priest Anan II of violating the Law and sentenced to be stoned. This happened in 62/63 year. Neither the essence of the accusation nor the reason for the hostility of this high priest, who represented the Sadducee party, is clear from the story of Josephus.

The second historical source that tells about the death of James is the *Notes of Hegesippus*, which have come down to us in the *Ecclesiastical*

History of Eusebius of Caesarea (Euseb. Hist. eccl. II 23. 8-19). His story is Christianized, and in content and literary form it clearly arose under the influence of the narrative about the death of the First Martyr Stephen from the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 6:8-7). The murderers of James are called by Hegesippus scribes and Pharisees, who, knowing about the righteousness of James and his great authority among the people, asked him to speak from the roof of the temple and refute the opinion that Jesus is the Messiah. But James confessed Christ in his sermon, for this he was thrown from the roof of the temple, but he remained alive, knelt down and prayed for his murderers. Stones were thrown at him, and a certain clothier finished him off with a blow of a rolling pin for felting. James died as a martyr for the faith. It is possible that there is a hint of participation in the murder of James Paul, since it is known that he was trained as a felter, and in the *Acts of the Apostles* is a witness and participant in the murder of Stephen.

The story of James's murder in the *Exodus of Mary* differs from these two historical testimonies. It is brief, devoid of any specific facts, details, or names of James's opponents. It is possible that this story about the death of James has a folklore origin and originated in the Arab-Christian environment, since it uses a word borrowed from the Arabic language *kaida* to denote the person who hit him, which means any position of authority. If we recall that in the left part of the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre there is still a parish church of Orthodox Arabs, consecrated in the name of James, the brother of the Lord, then we can assume that the Arab-Palestinian tradition can store evidence of the most ancient period of the history of Christianity associated with his name. The story of the martyrdom of James conveys the general anti-Jewish orientation of the tragic event. And in this capacity, he complements the trend that can be traced in other sections of the narrative of the *Exodus of Mary*. From this point of view, we analyzed in detail the episode describing the debates of unbelievers and those who love Christ (Meshcherskaya 2017a, 284-287), the legend of the correspondence of

the Edessian king Abgar with Tiberius (Meshcherskaya 2017b, 270–278), the story of the acquisition of Christian relics (Meshcherskaya 2019, 9–16). All these episodes force us to admit that the *Exodus of Mary* is one of the first Christian texts in which the image of the Virgin is used in opposition to Judaism. Thus, the narrative *Exodus of Mary* shows that at the beginning of the 5-th century (as its extensive version dates), interest in James, the leader of the first Judeo-Christian community of Jerusalem, revived. We believe that in the oldest tradition of Christianity, the embodiment of which was James, the author of the *Exodus of Mary* wanted to find support for legitimizing his ideas about the Virgin Mary and the rites of her veneration offered in this work. James was a suitable figure, as he had been with her for many years and had witnessed and participated in many events of the early Christian period.

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